

ADDRESSING THE NEWS MEDIA IMAGE
IN AN AGE OF SKEPTICISM

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A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of

Journalism—Master of Arts

2018

ABSTRACT

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As the public's skepticism toward news media has been growing, we need to better understand how the public perceives news media organizations. This study employed a useful conceptual lens from the marketing literature, *image*, to build a new conceptual framework within journalism, *news media image* to in aid in this understanding. Using focus group interviewing methods, the perceptions of 44 participants (across nine sessions) living in the Midwest in the U.S. were investigated to reveal the news media image constructs perceived by the public. Through multidisciplinary literature review and group discussions, eight dimensions emerged: *news quality*, *news usefulness*, *socially responsible*, *personality*, *usability*, *transparent*, *perspective-taking*, and *news selection bias*. Results showed that participants believed that news media organizations are mostly unreliable and biased in selecting news worthy stories as the news organizations are under the pressure of making profit or political interests. However, the information provided by news organizations was regarded as being useful in getting relevant information to the participants' lives and news organizations' potential role of protecting democracy were valued by participants. Exploring how these dimensions represent people's *image* of the news media provides insight into the current American's perceptions and biases toward the news media organizations.

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INTRODUCTION

There has been growing concern about an increasing distrust of traditional news media. This distrust of the news media seems to be amplified as so-called fake news is rising, which could be a threat to democracy by preventing the public from being well-informed. Ultimately, this distrust, along with other factors, negatively influences the perceived credibility of stories produced by traditional news media organizations (Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2017). Thus, it is important to more precisely understand the public's perceived image of news media, which might help supporters of journalism identify how to address any negative perceptions held by the public.

The construct *image*, prevalent in corporate marketing and management literatures, is defined as “the net result of the interaction of all experiences, impressions, beliefs, feelings and knowledge” that people have about an object such as people, corporations, and institutions (Worcester, 1997, p. 147). Because of its impact on consumers' behaviors and attitudes, image (i.e., the perceptions about a corporation) has received much attention in marketing and management literature (Dowling, 1986; Flavián, Guinalú, & Torres, 2005; Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009). There is not, however, a similarly robust scientific infrastructure for examining image within the context of journalism scholarship despite its potential impact on credibility, authority, and readership.

Therefore, the goal of this study is to begin the concept explication process conducting by focus groups in order to identify the salient attributes of the *news media image* construct. Ultimately, this study will provide a valid and reliable measurement tool for evaluating the public's image of the news media. Understanding the news media image as perceived by the public would be a starting point, and an important task, for finding ways to regain the credibility

and authority of journalism sources. It would not only provide better understanding of the public's perceptions toward news media, but potentially also contribute to better relationships between news media organizations and the public by providing a framework for news media organizations to understand the public's perception of them—which might help news media interact with the public more favorably.

Based on established literatures defining corporate, country, and university image, this study relies on a multi-disciplinary review and defines *news media image* as the total *impression* (idea and opinion) along with the *beliefs* and *feelings* of the public towards a news organization. This study explores nine possible dimensions of the construct: news quality, news usefulness, autonomy, innovativeness, socially responsible, financial condition, aesthetics, relationship with news consumers, and personality. The focus group method was conducted with news media consumers to explore the dimensionality of the news media image. Recruitment of participants was conducted through a community paid pool, which is an online tool to reach residents in Michigan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Image

Image is believed to have the power to influence how people perceive and react to things. For example, image can influence consumers' buying intentions, satisfaction, trust, and loyalty toward a corporation and can make people favor a specific product or a certain travel destination (Andreassen & Lindestad, 1998; Flavián, Guinalú, & Torres, 2005; Landrum et al., 1999, Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009). Image scholars have developed different perspectives regarding the concept of image. These span from the total impression (or perceptions) that people have of something or someone in their minds to a sum of evaluations of the object's personality to the net result of the interaction of all experiences, impressions, beliefs, feelings, and knowledge (Dicher, 1985; Kennedy, 1977; Sung & Yang, 2008; Tran, Nguyen, Melewar, & Bodoh, 2015). This concept of image can be applied to people and organizations such as political candidates, products, brands, corporations, universities, and countries (Dicher, 1985; Dowling, 1986; Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009).

Many scholars defined image as *the overall impression* that is made on people about an entity such as corporations, brand, and retail shops, to name a few (Bromley, 1993; Dicher, 1985; Nguyen & Leblanc, 2001). Other scholars defined it as *the sum of perceptions* that people have of an entity's characteristics or attributes (Spector, 1961). Overall, an image is formulated when people come across "the various physical and behavioral attributes" of an entity and have impressions or perceptions of these attributes (Echtner & Brent, 2003; Nguyen & Leblanc, 2001, p. 228). These can be tangible, physical attributes such as a business name, architecture, and variety of products/services, but they can also be more abstract and behavioral in form such as

traditions, ideology, and communication between the corporations' employees and its consumers (Nguyen & Leblanc, 2001).

In addition, image goes beyond the impressions and perceptions of people. For example, Kennedy (1977) added “feelings” to the concept of corporate image by describing image as emotional associations with psychological conditions (Tran, Nguyen, Melewar, & Bodoh, 2015). These feelings tend to be a product of various interactions between people and entities that people create images of. Other scholars took a stance that image is a stereotype or an overall belief a person has about an entity (Martin & Erogu, 1993; Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009). These beliefs and feelings also can be referred to as an entity's physical and behavioral attributes based on individual's personal experiences, observational learning, and information from other sources (e.g., friends, parents, media) (Landrum, Turrisi, & Harless, 1999). Hence, image could have a broader definition; as Dowling (1986) summarized, it is “the net result of the interaction of a person's beliefs, ideas, feelings, and impressions about an object [e.g., corporation, country, place of destination, university, a person, etc.]” (p. 147).

In this thesis, image is defined as the total *impression* (idea and opinion) along with the *beliefs* and *feelings* of the news media perceived by the public. This study dropped the term “perceptions” since it was used interchangeably with impressions in many previous studies. Impression is developed based on consumers' direct and indirect experiences with physical and behavioral attributes of a news organization, which, in turn, creates beliefs and feelings toward a news organization.

Image Dimensions

Across image literatures, several themes of image emerged based on the various one-dimensional or multi-dimensional interpretations of the construct. In the present research, it is

expected that the structure of news media image will consist of multiple dimensions. Early scholars in this field considered that people tended to humanize corporations so that a corporation could have characteristics of a human personality (Abratt, 1989; Dowling, 1986; Newman, 1953; Spector, 1961).

For example, *corporate image* was defined based on personality dimensions such as dynamic (whether the corporation is a pioneer, flexible, active, goal-oriented, etc.); cooperative (friendly, well-liked, self-respect, eager to please customers, etc.); business-wise (shrewd, persuasive, well-organized, etc.); having character (ethical, reputable, respectful, etc.); successful (healthy finance, self-confidence, etc.); and withdrawn (aloof, secretive, cautious, etc.) (Spector, 1961).

However, later scholars, especially in the corporate image field, re-interpreted the concept of image based on people's perceptions of more *physical attributes* rather than personality characteristics. These physical attributes can be products/services that an entity provides including: product quality, product diversity, education quality, price, product reliability, and technological innovation (Dowling, 1986; Landrum, Turrissi, & Harless, 1999; Lala, Allred, & Chakraborty, 2009).

In addition, the image of an entity can also be based on abstract and general attributes such as *tradition, culture, or atmosphere*. These are behavioral and artifacts attributes rather than physical attributes that encompass the politics, culture, history, and philosophy of an entity. For example, *country image* is not only related to product characteristics but is also built on the country's political condition, historical events, culture, traditions, relationships with other countries, and labor conditions (Lala, Allred, & Chakraborty, 2009; Bannister & Saunders, 1978).

As such, Lala, Allred, and Chakraborty (2009) verified that conflict (i.e., the relationships with other countries), political structure (i.e., forms of government and policies that guide decision-making, e.g., socialist or capitalist), vocational training (i.e., level of training and education provided to workers), and work culture (i.e., attitudes, values, and beliefs that the workplace has toward the work itself) were among the dimensions of country image. In terms of corporate image, work culture (or work environment) and management philosophy have been used to define image. Examples include how a corporation leads the industry, how it treats their employees (e.g., giving them an equal opportunity), and how it projects its vision to stakeholders (Dowling, 1986).

Additional or alternative image dimensions that have been identified for corporations provide services representing factors such as *personal contacts* and *communication* (Flavián, Guinalíu, & Torres, 2005; Kennedy, 1977). These factors encompass all kinds of interactions before, during, and after using the services of a corporation. For example, the attitudes and behaviors of the employees; their appearance; their competence and professionalism; and their communication with consumers have been proven to be corporate image constructs (Leblanc & Nguyen, 1996; Tran, Nguyen, Melewar, & Bodoh, 2015).

Another category that repeatedly emerges in the image literature is the *responsibility* that an entity has for society (Dowling, 1986; Martin & Dixon, 1991; Roach & Wherry, 1972; Sun & Yang, 2008; Wilkins & Huisman, 2014). A corporation or a university that contributes to society, cares about the local community, and helps charities would give a positive impression to people. This concept of socially responsible also includes an interest in protecting environments (Tran, Nguyen, Melewar, & Bodoh, 2015).

An entity's *financial condition* or balance sheet also have been considered as attributes around which image can be formulated (Dowling, 1986). If a company has sound financial conditions or it offers regular dividend payments, then people would have a positive image of the corporation. Similarly, economic conditions or the development level of a country can affect the image formation of a country (Lala, Allred, & Chakraborty, 2009).

Visual appearances or *aesthetics* that an entity has also construct the parts of image (Dowling, 1986; Tran, Nguyen, Melewar, & Bodoh, 2015). Online appearances of an internet banking platform, the attractiveness of a university's campus, and the landscape of a country also play a role in image formation (Sun & Yang, 2008; Tran, Nguyen, Melewar, & Bodoh, 2015; Echtner & Brent, 2003).

News Media Organizations

News media, by its simplest definition, is an umbrella term for any vehicle by which news is delivered to members of the public ("News Media," n.d.). The news media or news industry includes all forms of mass media that provide news to the general public and to a target public. These news media include print media (newspapers and newsmagazines), broadcast news (radio and television), and more recently the Internet (online newspapers, web pages/sites, and news blogs, etc.).

News media organizations is, ideally, believed to have integrity (Petković & Trbovc, 2015), which is used to assess the legitimization of news organizations and can be summarized as follows: that news media operates as a "free and independent press," that is, not beholden to particular governmental/financial/political interests; that news media be transparent in terms of its own operations and interests, and explicitly makes available to the public information about its particular interests; that news media is committed to maintaining journalistic standards and

norms (such as objectivity, accuracy, and fairness); that news media not only provides factual information, but also offers viewpoints or a lens to interpret and understand information (Meyen & Riesmeyer, 2012; Seib, 2005); and, finally, that news media should be held accountable for what it reports (Deuze, 2005; Meijer, 2001; Petković & Trbovc, 2015).

When a specific news organization demonstrates its commitment to these ideal features, it has traditionally been regarded as being in service to the public interest including playing an important role in fostering the public's democratic decision-making processes (Petković & Trbovc, 2015). In western countries in particular, the news media has also been recognized as "*the fourth estate*", a requisite of democratic society that keeps the public engaged, as well as an independent counterpart and chronicler of the activities of government and power elites (Cook, 1998; Norris, 2014). News media is not only expected to report on government decisions and performance, but also to investigate social injustice and corruption/misconduct of politicians and government (Norris, 2014). Other democratic functions of news media are to provide the public "with pluralistic information, social assurance, and cultural simulation" (Deuze, 2005; Ferrucci, 2014).

Thus, news media is seen to provide information that is important, significant, and relevant to the lives of the public (Corrigan, 1990). And, since information on every event cannot be selected to become news, news organizations are considered gatekeepers (Cassidy, 2006). News media organizations also frame stories from a specific viewpoint, emphasizing specific aspects of stories and omitting others (Cassidy, 2006).

On the other hand, some scholars view that news media serves a specific aim and that aim is to make a profit (McManus, 1994). This claim reflects the commercialism aspect of news media, demonstrated by the existence of business enterprises and conglomerates in the American

news media landscape, in contrast to nations where the government controls the media (McManus, 1994; Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009). Hence, the traditional values and standards mentioned above have been continuously compromised by news organizations' fight for survival in an extremely competitive "news provider" environment (Ferrucci, 2014; McManus, 1994).

Scholars have viewed news media from various perspectives: the role of journalists, traditional journalistic values, journalistic standards and norms, and factors that involve judging newsworthiness and compromises on standards (Brand & Pearson, 2001; Meijer, 2012; Welbers, Atteveldt, Kleinnijenhuis, Ruigrok, & Schaper, 2015). It is of interest that there is a dearth of research available from the perspectives of audiences (Van der Wurff & Schoenbach, 2014; Welbers, Atteveldt, Kleinnijenhuis, Ruigrok, & Schaper, 2015). As the consumers of news, the public's views about news media organizations would certainly be different from the perspectives of scholars and/or news media professionals. Therefore, the goal of this study is to understand the public's perception of news media by identifying the dimensions of the construct, initially based on a literature review and qualitative research.

News Media Image Dimensions

Based on the review of this literature, this study will explore whether the news media image construct will consist of nine possible dimensions: perceptions of: *news quality*, *news usefulness*, *autonomy*, *innovativeness*, *socially responsible*, *financial condition*, *aesthetics*, *relationship with news consumers*, and *personality*.

News quality. Products/services can give an important cue for consumers in the formation of corporate image (Nguyen & Leblanc, 2001; Tran, Nguyen, Melewar, & Bodoh, 2015). In the context of the news media, news articles are the products/services that news

organizations provide, and people often judge news quality based on their reporting efforts. News consumers expect journalists to be accurate, fair, object, and factual (i.e., “Does this news article provide accurate and fair stories in a factual context and present full stories?”) (Hackett & Zhao, 1998; Donsbach & Klett, 1993). Since fairness, objectivity, and accuracy are traditionally used to measure the credibility of the news media, this study expects that news quality of content will be evaluated based on their perceptions of news media credibility (Appelman & Sunder, 2015). For example, credibility has been measured by the following five criteria: can be trusted, tells the whole story, accurate, unbiased, and fair (Meyer, 1988).

News Usefulness. This study suggests this dimension, one regarding people’s impressions toward usefulness. Research on news media audiences shows that news consumers also seek some usefulness concerning their products/services (i.e., news articles) when consuming news media. These are: (1) how useful the information and editorials that a media organization provides are for news consumers to understand current issues and topics, (2) how helpful the information and news stories are for them to engage in social issues, and (3) how much news consumers enjoy and like them (for entertainment or escape) (Meijer & Bijleveld, 2016; Riffe, Lacy, & Varouhakis, 2008). In other words, “how useful are the news stories?” or “what is in the story for me?” may be a baseline for news consumers to create news media image from consuming news reporting (Brants & Haan, 2010).

Autonomy. Work environment can also be an important construct of news media image. The image literature suggested various related factors such as work culture, labor conditions of a country or a corporation, a political system of a country, or management philosophy of a corporation (Martin & Eroglu, 1993; Lala, Allred, & Chakraborty, 2009; Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009).

In a news media image context, autonomy would be an image construct that is related to the work environment. Autonomy is a basic norm of Western journalism and it is believed that objectivity and fairness, two of the most important qualities of journalism, are more likely when autonomy is secured (Van der Wurff & Schoenbach, 2014). Autonomy is also linked to the concept of professionalism (Soloski, 1989). A crusading, but unrelenting journalist, who reveals the corruption of a political big-shot might be one of the most common ideological visions of professional journalists, which is also possible only when the journalist is independent from personal/political interests. In addition, this concept of autonomy may also include the political leaning of the news media. Most people believed that media is biased, and the extent of their perceptions depend on an individual's political involvement and his/her political ideology (Eveland & Shah, 2003; Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2017). As such, Republicans or Trump supporters are more likely to consider that news media produces "fake news" than are Democrats or those who oppose Trump (Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2017).

Innovativeness. This construct is related to how a news organization is perceived as using technologies and innovations effectively. Consumers can make inferences about a country or a corporation from questions such as "Does it advance technically?" (Martin & Eroglu, 1993). News organizations have adopted new technologies and interactive features such as discussion boards and user-generated content to attract and serve news consumers (Doudaki & Spyridou, 2015; Himelboim & McCreery, 2012). All of these changes may influence perceptions of the news media.

Socially responsible. Whether an entity such as a university considers its social responsibility is a commonly-asked question in the marketing literatures. Journalism research has showed that news consumers also consider the social responsibility of news organizations such

as acting as a watchdog, representing minorities, and contributing to democracy as important (Peters, 2015; Pew Research, 2012; Sander, 1999). When it comes to online news media, the value of being a good neighbor (caring for the community and offering solutions) are favored by news consumers as well (Heider, McCombs, & Poindexter, 2005).

Financial condition. Financial condition is not only evidence of an organization's performance but also it is a basis for judging its sustainability. Accordingly, the financial condition of a news organization could be considered a possible part of news media image. There is scarce research about the public's perceptions of news media organizations in terms of its financial condition; however, for the last decade, many news organizations implemented big cuts to their number of journalists (Somaiya, 2014). These layoffs might influence the image perceived by news consumers of that news organization.

Aesthetics. In marketing, the websites or buildings of corporations, brand logos, corporate names, attractiveness, campus size, and landscape of a country have been presented as ways to interpret image (Dowling, 1986; Tran, Nguyen, Melewar, & Bodoh, 2015). For example, corporations often change their name to evoke a specific image with their consumers (Dowling, 1986). Likewise, news consumers could also form an image of the news media from the appearance of websites or the layout of print editions. Journalism literature showed that newspaper readers prefer certain type of front-page designs (Siskind, 1979; Pasternack & Utt, 1986).

Relationship with news consumers. Journalism used to be a one-way communication from journalist to public; however, it has become a more interactive with the advent of new technologies, now. For example, the internet can facilitate a new interactive news reader engagement through active online participation in discussion boards or feedback from social

media comments (Cacciatore, Anderson, Choi, Brossard, Scheufele, Liang, Ladwig, Xenos, & Dudo, 2012). Considering this trend, the relationship between news consumers and news organization would correspond to the concept of personal contact and communication in the context of corporate image.

Personality. The corporate image literature started from the concept of a personalized corporation and has developed various dimensions, even dropping the term personality (Abratt, 1989; Spector, 1961). However, some researchers suggested that personality perspective is still useful because countries/corporations are often presented in human-like terms and a personality approach could provide rich meaning (D'Astous and Boujbel, 2007). Possible adjectives would differ depending on whether it is a corporation, a country, or a university. Some example adjectives that describe corporate personality are dynamic, ethical (or respectful), successful, etc. (Spector, 1961); for country image they are romantic, snobbish, religious, etc. (D'Astous and Boujbel, 2007; Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009); for university image they are pleasant, stimulating, etc. (Palacio, Meneses, & Pérez, 2002). The possible adjectives describing news media that were found in the news media literature include credible, boring, lively, enjoyable, interesting, and pleasing (Peters, 2015; Sunder, 1991).

METHOD

Following the Institutional Review Board approval at Michigan State University, focus group semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to identify how to theoretically and empirically define the image of news organizations among the public in the U.S. The focus group method is useful in gaining insights on a particular subject matter because it allows for the exploration of participants' attitudes, opinions and behaviors and for finding meanings and understandings from participants (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996; Litosseliti, 2003). Since the news media image is a multidimensional construct that the public is less likely to think of conceptually, focus groups can help to explore unexpected responses that would lead to unexplored aspects of news media image attributes.

Participant Recruitment

Data from the focus groups were collected from April 25 to June 14, 2018. The focus group participants were recruited through the community paid pool via SONA, a cloud-based subject pool software for universities, managed by a large Midwestern university. The SONA paid pool is an online tool for researchers to advertise their studies to potential participants who are residents in the designated area. Rewards such as cash or gift cards are expected in return for participation. Participants of the present study received a cash (\$20) reward for their participation while the students were rewarded with SONA class participation credit. The total number of focus groups were nine. The groups averaged 5 participants (N= 44 participants, 3-7 participants per session).

Participants were grouped by their political affiliations and for some sessions participants were purposely recruited to reach a diversity of demographic characteristics (i.e., educational levels). When comprising the groups for their political affiliation, eight focus groups met: two

sessions for Republicans; three sessions for Democrats; and three sessions for Independents. Homogeneous groups increase the likelihood that participants will share their opinions freely and openly (Schutt, 2004). Previous research shows that a majority of people believe news media tends to favor one side of an issue and they are more likely to favor news organizations that are more agreeable with their own political beliefs (Schutt, 2004; Lee, 2010). By keeping politically homogeneous groups, this study aimed to create more comfortable environments for participant discussion and provide valid results. Additionally, people who had a less advanced education were specifically recruited to ensure this subpopulation was represented and they met once (all political affiliations were represented) thereby, more closely reflecting the general U.S. population. These participants ($N=6$) had a high school diploma (including a GED), an associate degree, or took some college courses but had not graduated.

Two surveys were administered before the beginning of the focus group sessions. One used to filter and allocate participants to focus group sessions by their political affiliations and educational levels. The other survey questions collected basic demographic information as well as responses regarding their news consumption behaviors.

Descriptives

The participants were slightly older than the general U.S. population. Also, they were mostly female, were more educated, and had lower incomes than the general U.S. population. The average age of the participants was 43.3 years (the U.S. national median age was 37.9 years in 2016) and the majority (70%) were female (U.S. Census, 2017). Their education level was higher than the average educational attainment of the U.S. population: 56 percent of participants (25 participants) had a bachelor's degree or more while 32.5 percent of the U.S. population has a bachelor's degree or more (U.S. Census, 2017). In addition, 27 percent (12 participants) had

some college, 25 percentage (11) had a four-year college/bachelor's degree, 9 percent (4) attended high school, and 7 percent (3) took some postgraduate or professional schooling but had no postgraduate degree. Participant median income ranged from \$40,000 to less than \$50,000, which is slightly less than the median household income (\$59,039 in 2016) in the U.S (U.S. Census, 2017). Thirty participants were Caucasian (68%), four were Hispanic (10%), four were Asian (10%), three were Black or African American (7%), and one was Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander (2%).

In general, the data revealed a few notable items: the majority of participants were interested in news media, accessed news online (i.e., either via smartphone, computer, or tablet) and ranked international news as their preferred topic when accessing news. The majority of participants (73%) answered that they accessed news "several times a day," mostly via smartphone (31%) or computer (27%), followed by TV (18%), radio (10%) and tablet (10%). Only one participant (78, male) answered that he mostly read printed newspapers to get news. The majority of them (88%) answered that they are interested in news (from extremely interested to somewhat interested). Additionally, participants valued a range of news types from international to neighborhood news, but international news was of shared importance to most participants (34 out of 44 answered that international was the most important types of news to them). When ranking important news topics to participants, 32 percent chose "government and politics" first. "Traffic and weather" (12%) and "Your local town and city" (9%) were also followed.

Protocol

Each focus group session lasted approximately one hour and fifteen minutes. At the beginning of the session, a ten-minute survey was administered to collect demographic

information and news consumption behavioral information (see Appendix A). Data from each session were audio recorded and documented after obtaining consent from participants (see Appendix B). Additionally, the focus group protocol was revised based on feedback from a professional journalist (a reporter and subeditor), a freelancer editor and former teacher, and journalism professors from a Midwestern university (see Appendix C).

The participants were asked to discuss their impressions, beliefs, and/or feelings regarding news media organizations. During the session, the broad question of what participants think of news media (e.g. “What comes to your mind when you think of news media?”; “What is your definition or opinion of journalists?”; and “What do you think is the purpose of a news organization?") was asked first and then open discussion was encouraged.

Focus group interviews relied on a semi-structured format with 32 questions to explore whether nine dimensions of news image: news quality (e.g., “What expectations do you have when you read the news?”); news usefulness (e.g., “How useful are news stories in your daily lives?”); autonomy (e.g., “To what extent do you believe the news media is influenced by their sponsors or their owners?”); innovativeness (e.g., Which technologies do journalists use to provide news to you?”); socially responsible (e.g., “What would be the responsibilities that the news media has toward society, if any?”); financial condition (e.g., “Have you heard of some news organizations implement big cuts to the numbers of journalistic staffs recently? Did this information have an impact your image of that company?”); aesthetics, (e.g., “When you read or watch news, how important is the look and appearance (such as graphics about the news media) of media content?”); interaction with consumers (e.g., “How important is it for news media to interact with the public?”); personality (“What adjectives would you use to describe the news media in general?”) (see Appendix C). However, one of the primary goals of this research was to

observe which themes might emerge from the conversations in addition to the previously identified dimensions. Therefore, as the open discussion naturally migrated toward previously identified themes *or* novel themes, the moderator would inject specific probes and adjust questions to explore those responses.

Coding

A thematic analysis of the focus group discussion transcripts was employed to evaluate dimensions of the news media image as “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). Qualitative data was transcribed verbatim using the transcription service from Paul M. Garton Inc. and coded by the software of QDA Miner (Arora & Stoner, 2009).

For this study, first, audio transcripts were examined multiple times to identify emerging themes. Second, these emerging concepts were grouped and examined as to whether they are fitted to the a priori dimensions of this study. Third, using QDA Miner software, additional patterns undetected by the author were identified using coding similarity retrieval and text retrieval. Also, using the coding co-occurrence tool in QDA Miner, this study identified related clusters of terms and grouped relevant participant responses into broader categories. Fourth, another researcher reviewed each conceptual theme to evaluate the reliability of my thematic interpretations (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Carpenter, Cepak, & Peng, 2017). Finally, the themes that were initially identified were reexamined, adjusted, and reduced to ensure that they represented the theoretical definition of the news media image construct.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

“Image” is the collection of impressions (ideas and opinions), beliefs, and feelings that exist in the minds of the public. This study began this study by theorizing that various images of news media held by the public could be broken down into an identifiable number of dimensions and attributes that, grouped together, would encompass the public’s shared perceptions of the news media image because individuals often select specific attributes with those combined aspects representing an overall image (Abratt, 1989). Generally, the results of this study revealed that participants’ image of the news media were comprised of the public’s evaluation of journalists’ reporting practices, news quality, and affective components, or feelings, that arose from participants’ experiences in consuming news (Palacio, Meneses, & Pérez, 2002).

Overall, eight news media image dimensions emerged from the focus group results (Table 1). The mapping of the literature revealed nine possible dimensions based on theoretical definitions of news media image. The focus group results, however, indicated that the participants only fully supported four of those nine dimensions. Among the nine dimensions put forth in the existing literature (*news quality, news usefulness, autonomy, innovativeness, socially responsible, financial condition, aesthetics, relationship with news consumers, and personality*), the four dimensions supported by the participants were *news quality, news usefulness, socially responsible, and personality*. Two dimensions were modified from the literature review; The *aesthetics* and *relationship with news consumers* dimensions were supported with some modification. The terms *aesthetics* and *relationship with consumers* were replaced by *usability* and *transparent*, respectively. Two additional dimensions were identified: *perspective-taking* and *news selection bias*, which were not put forth in the literature review. The *innovativeness, autonomy, and financial condition* dimensions were not supported by the participants in this

study. Based on the present analysis, *innovativeness* fell under other proposed dimensions including *news quality* and *usability*. The *financial condition* and *autonomy* dimensions were combined with *news selection bias* because poor financial conditions and a loss of independence were believed to render news media organizations as biased when they selected stories. The eight dimensions supported by the focus group discussions were: *news quality*, *news usefulness*, *socially responsible*, *personality*, *usability*, *transparent*, *perspective-taking*, and *news selection bias*.

Participants mostly based their impressions of and judgments about news organizations based on their evaluation of news quality and its usefulness in their own lives, and the function of news media as a “community watchdog.” Participants thought that news media organizations should be independent, but they also believed that, in reality, perfectly autonomous news media organizations are highly unlikely. They expressed autonomy was not fully possible due to news organizations’ need for sponsorship and funding, and that news organizations that benefit directly or indirectly from politicians makes them beholden to them in some economic or political way. Thus, participants believed news media organizations, regardless of whether they are for-profit or non-profit, try to satisfy either the public’s wants and needs to some extent in order to obtain funding and increase consumption of their product, or to serve the interests of political elites and/or sponsors. In either case, participants felt that news organizations are biased when selecting and presenting news.

News Quality

Participants related the quality of news articles to criteria for evaluating media credibility when accessing news organizations. They believed that legitimate news organizations should provide unbiased, factual, in-depth stories, and not a mix opinion and fact. Participants (22 out of

44) identified attributes of high quality content as unbiased, accurate, factual, and fair—traditional criteria used to measure news media credibility (Kohring, 2007; Meyer, 1988).

Perceived credibility, therefore, is a central feature of news quality. The most used words to describe a quality news article were *accurate* and *unbiased*, which included separating fact from opinion. Participants explained their perceptions of accurate and unbiased news with examples of crime news:

There were 12 people. One of them got shot. The other people got arrested. That's a new thing. They want to give you the information of the story so that you can almost be there, but it should be very unbiased, to me, and very factual (#2).

Something I don't like about when the stories are active, especially in television news, is they have all these so-called experts that are weighing in, maybe former FBI, if there's a crime story, (...) and these people.... It might as well be me saying it could be this, it could be that. And opinion becomes fact, and then these news organizations, it's almost like sometimes they sort of make the news and then report it, too (...). It's supposed to be expert opinion, but it's really just people throwing stuff against a wall seeing what it might be (#20).

Participants (19 out of 44) also believed that quality news involved depth or thoroughness, which means providing all the necessary facts based on multiple sources from variety of perspectives. Thoroughness is a recently more valued quality of news media with the infiltration of new technologies such as social media into news industry and is also considered as one of the items that measures website credibility (Metzger, Flanagin, Eyal, Lemus, & McCann, 2003). This might be because current news media organizations can easily employ social media posts as their sources, or as participant #35 said, often losing the depth of reporting while they “parrot those social media posts.” Participants captured the concept of a factual, in-depth news story in the following quotes:

I think when I turn on the news, what I expect is well researched, informational. I don't think I necessarily look for the news to provide both sides because I feel like that's on me

to figure out what the other side is, or how the other side is feeling. I think it's to present facts, unless it's specifically opinions. (#38).

They're [quality news stories] the ones doing the investigating and the reporting and the researching. (...) And to me, if I don't have a lot of unanswered questions, then I think it's good reporting. I read a lot of articles where I have unanswered questions (...). There should be questions answered about the topics, not just a very brief address of whatever the story is (#18).

Participant #22 said U.S. news organizations do not sufficiently report details and provide news coverage about various aspects of human life because they focus heavily on the U.S. context (for example, only following the tweets of political figures such as President Donald Trump) in contrast to other, international news outlets abroad:

I wonder if that's unique to the United States because I have some friends that turned me on to the CBC—the Canadian news, the national. And it's so much different. It's so much more detailed—it has a much more global focus. And it's really very interesting how the Canadian news works as opposed to American or United States international news (#22).

To sum up, participants emphasized traditional media credibility measure—in particular accuracy and unbiasedness, and the Web credibility measure—thoroughly researched from multiple perspectives.

News Usefulness

Participants made judgments about news organizations based on how useful their news stories were to them personally. News usefulness is related to people's perceptions regarding how news media organizations serve their needs via news stories. The majority of participants (33 out of 44) considered news stories as “typically useful (#42)” when the information in the stories is helpful for them to make decisions about or interpret/understand events or social issues. Therefore, for them, news is useful when it provides relevant information for their lives or satisfies their interests. The following quotes illustrate their ideas about what constitutes a useful news story:

I think news stories are typically useful because it could be any number of things like there's a problem with the product. (...) And politics also changes who you might vote for, or who you might want in power (#42).

So, what I care about is, first of all, the major things that are happening in the world. The second thing is what's happening in my field. Third is what is happening near me like in Michigan or the United States. I don't care about anything that's happening in like maybe Atlanta or Toronto (#8).

News stories have been expected to focus on both perceived importance and the actual aspects of socially relevant issues (Corrigan, 1990). With the advent of the digital era, and thus in the past two decades, audiences have come to appreciate the value of relevance even more (Harcup & O'Neill, 2016).

Previous studies have shown that audiences use information that has an impact on their daily lives and relates to their personal goals, such as information that: makes a reference to their decisions; initiates a conversation with someone; and makes them feel connected to the community (Heikkila & Ahva, 2014; McCombs & Reynolds, 2002).

Based on their assessment of usefulness, participants regarded news media organizations as being helpful to understanding social issues and to “find out what's going on around me (#12)” and for participating in political activities (#42). Such information would be relevant, timely, helpful, and influential in their daily lives.

Socially Responsible

Being socially responsible refers to the idea that news media organizations are also a member of a society and they should thus seek to better society (Wood, 1991). Serving its role as a society member means that the news organization has more of a chance to be considered as a favorable and respectable member of community. Image literature showed that consumers favorably evaluate products of a corporation that performs its social responsibility well (Furman,

2010). The premise in relation to news media organizations that are socially responsible among participants (21 out of 44) was that they should contribute to building a more efficient democracy and educate the public “in a way that enables them to act as citizens” (Meijer, 2001). Participants shared a sense that news media has an obligation to contribute to democracy by acting as a watchdog (Deuze, 2005; Norris, 2014; Relly, Zanger, & Fahmy, 2014). They also believed that news media should actively gather/disseminate information and investigate important topics that the public would or could not do on their own. Hence, news media organizations ought to keep the public representatives and organizations “accountable (#6).”

I think the main role of journalism, at least in the United States, is to help me be a better citizen. (...). That carries responsibility and the responsibility is to help us with giving us the information so that, as a citizen, we can participate in democracy more. If we didn't have journalism, I think the kind of democracy we would have would be very different. We'd only have the government's information, or we would—it would be harder to get information on our own (#1).

I do agree with that because I do think the whole point of journalism is to kind of keep you involved politically because, if there are no journalists, then there's no way to get this information because we have other things to do. We also have jobs. This is your job to keep informed, so we know what's being fair and just, and we have an opinion on it and could influence it, if we need to (#3).

I think it's a way of keeping, especially higher ups accountable for what they do. Because if you imagine a world with no media, then the president could do anything he wanted, and we would have no idea (...) you would just have to believe it (#39).

Participants also believed that journalists from news organizations should investigate important issues such as the Flint water crisis in Michigan, update people on the issues, help “solve the case (#18)” somehow and make or “change history and the direction of people’s health (#20).”

This participants’ perspective regarding social responsibility of news media organizations reflects a concept of a traditional approach to news media, one that positions it as a public service (Deuze, 2005). Norris (2014) explained this role as acting as a representative watchdog

on behalf of the public, investigating the behavior of the power elite, and disseminating information about public affairs that would not otherwise be revealed to the public. By doing the above, news media is thought to “serve as effective mechanisms of accountability, triggering public outrage and effective actions by policy-makers, thereby fulfilling lofty democratic principles (Norris, 2014, p. 114).”

Personality: unpleasant and snobbish

Associating an entity’s image with people’s personalized descriptions and perceptions allows researchers to gain richer meaning and insightful interpretations (D'Astous & Boujbel, 2007). In this context, personality is a dimension whose main goal is to reveal the affective aspects of news media image (Abratt, 1989; Furman, 2010; Kennedy, 1986). When depicting the features of a news media organization, 14 participants (out of 44) described news media organizations in a mostly unpleasant anthropomorphic metaphorical way. They used terms such as “grabby,” “noisy (or loud),” and “pervasive” that can be summarized as a characteristic of a meddlesome or intrusive personality.

While news organizations might argue that some intrusiveness is inevitable to attract audiences, the extent of intrusiveness perceived by audiences might be more than journalists believed it to be (Brand & Pearson, 2001). Marketing literature considered intrusiveness as a subjective matter that causes a psychological reaction and makes people avoid interacting with something, and leads people to create negative attitudes toward it (Morimoto & Macias, 2009).

Some participants thought that news organizations are “narcissistic” or “egocentric,” which would be caused by their impressions that news media organizations are mostly trying to win a “beauty pageant (#18).” In the following conversation, participants explained why news

organizations are egocentric, saying that they reminded them of the comedian Rodney

Dangerfield:

He would tend to wear loud colors a lot of times. He could be a little on the obnoxious side and he would always complain about not getting any respect (#17). (...) But he was usually the source of his own lack of respect (#22). (...) So, the news is its own source of disrespect (#18). That's right. And [news media] can be, at times, loud and obnoxious (#20).

This type of personality is similar to the negative personality dimensions that scholars used for measuring country (national) image, such as wickedness and snobbism. Wickedness is related to traits such as immoral, vulgar, and/or offensive and snobbism has traits described as haughty, snobbish, egocentric, and/or superficial respectively—all of these have a negative effect on a country's image (D'Astous & Boujbel, 2007). Similarly, news media organizations' personality could be summarized as extremely unpleasant (i.e., wicked) and snobbish.

It is noteworthy that mostly negative traits arose when participants of this study described news media organizations in human-like terms. In contrast, more amiable descriptions were used for a corporation or a country personality rather than negative ones, such as successful or dynamic (for corporate or brand) and sincerity or assiduousness (for country) to name a few (Aaker, 1997; D'Astous & Boujbel, 2007; Spector, 1986).

This might reflect the fact that news media organizations are losing the public's favor as well as their trust. Or otherwise, it might be because the public imposes on news media organizations tougher standards than on countries or corporations due to the idea that news organizations "should" serve public interests, for example, as a fourth estate. News organizations have been tested about whether they are doing their job well. The long-standing claims that news media organizations have been losing the public's trust might be caused from this tougher standard as well (Burgoon, Burgoon, & Buller, 1986).

Usability

Usability is a dimension that combines *aesthetics* and *innovativeness* as put forth in the literature review. Aesthetic and innovative factors are related to website design and technologies respectively, and they are complementary to each other. These two factors directly influence consumers' experiences of a website, for example, and can provide a more comfortable and accessible user experience (Yang, Linder, & Bolchini, 2011). Thus, aesthetics in terms of design, and innovativeness in terms of technology can be categorized under the dimension "usability." The term usability was originally used in marketing literature to measure the quality of a website provided by organizations that market themselves online (Wang & Senecal, 2009). Perceived usability is defined as "how well and how easily a user can interact with an information system of a device or a website" (Wang & Senecal, 2009, p. 99). It is an important determinant of visitors' online purchases and intentions to revisit by formulating favorable impressions on the device or a website, and further, on the products or services presented on it (Wang & Senecal, 2009; Swaid & Rolf, 2007; Yang, Linder, & Bolchini, 2011).

Focus groups showed that participants cared about usability when they consume news. For example, they talked about paywalls and how the paywalls prevent them from getting "a deep understanding of the issue (#7)." Font size, line spacing, and well-organized interfaces were important to keep the participants engaged with a website or news article, as illustrated by the following conversation: "Style matters. [To improve] usability (#40). Yes, because I won't consume it if I can't—if it isn't easy [to access]. It has to be somewhat easy (#42)."

Some participants talked about discomfort with too much information or too many news stories that news organizations delivered at a time. They felt overwhelmed by the amount of information and thought that they "need to take a break from it sometimes because (...) it's just

too heavy (#9).” A few of them thought the way in which news organizations disseminate news was bothersome: “Everything is breaking news and it is really annoying (#5)” and “the video playing is always going to be annoying (#3).” Advertising placed right beside news stories was also considered a hindrance to accessibility (Swaid & Rolf, 2007; Yang, Linder, & Bolchini, 2011).

Besides accessibility, some scholars included readability in the elements of usability (Mustafa & al-Zoua’bi, 2009). Participants of this study also regard attributes that are related to readability as important. Readability in terms of news media involves the overall evaluation of the content itself such as having no typos, being well-written, being succinct, and/or written in an entertaining way—in sum, the easiness of understanding a story:

For me, the main thing is, it should be written well enough that I'll be able to actually understand it. If I get to the second graph or third graph [sic], and I'm having trouble figuring out what is going on here, then I'm disappointed (#1).

Currently news organizations use more technologically diverse tools and platforms to provide reports and disseminate news on the Internet (Himmelboim & McCreery, 2012; Westlund, 2013). News consumers continuously demand higher usability—which includes well-organized interfaces, easier accessibility within websites and any other news platforms that they consume news from, and how news articles are presented in terms of readability (Abdullah & Wei, 2008; Swaid & Rolf, 2007; Urban & Schweiger, 2014).

So far, audience research in the news media field has little paid attention to the importance of audiences’ experiences on news platforms and the feelings built by these experiences. However, considering the incorporation of technologies into news disseminating tools, people’s experiences on news platforms including websites should become considered as a measure of news media image.

Transparent

In developing measurements related to news media image, the concept of being transparent was picked up from the focus groups and replaced the originally suggested dimension of *relationship with news consumers*. This term replacement can be justified by the recent trend of the news media industry in which transparency “toward the audiences,” rather than in relation to sources, has become more valued in the digital era (Meier, 2009).

Participants in the study (15 out of 44) judged news media organizations based on transparency. They suggested that news organizations could maintain transparency by providing information on funding streams (#5), admitting (and correcting) mistakes and errors (#2), providing links to original documents to verify the truth of news stories (#1), and explaining and sharing the processes of reporting ongoing or dramatically changing issues (#22). Participants thought that transparency was important because it is not only able to increase the perceived credibility of a news organization, but it also helps people notice the intention or background in which the news story was written:

I've seen a difference unfortunately with the school shootings on the different stations that have repeated on it in the different areas. Some of them very clearly will state at the top this is an ongoing story. And then, at the bottom, they'll list any corrections that they have had to make as they've updated. (...) It's been helpful to follow the story and follow the narrative of it. So, I always appreciate that when they say right up front, we are updating as we receive more for the people that want to have what they know right now (#21).

The good thing is what the public radio does here, is they tell you up front that they're being paid by Enbridge. So, (...) you'll listen to more carefully [and] say, "Hmm, are they skewing things here for Enbridge or not?" (...) I don't have any expectation of independence [of news organizations] (...) [because even nonprofit news organizations, they] still rely on financial resources to deliver news as the same as for profit (#1).

The participants' ideas about transparent news media organizations are mirrored by Meier's description of the newly-emerging newsroom in the digital era (2009). This new type of

newsroom is more capable of addressing the public's complaints, providing an open assessment of sources, and correcting errors. It should also have a greater potential of communicating the self-interests of news organizations such as sponsorships and political endorsement, and/or news gathering and reporting processes (Meier, 2009, p. 3; Petković & Trbovc, 2015; Rupar, 2006). Being transparent in terms of the relationship with consumers (i.e., audiences) could offer a better chance at being perceived as more favorable and reliable, which in turn helps build a successful relationship with consumers (Ghzaïel & Akrou, 2012; Kang & Hustvedt, 2014).

In sum, the dimension of being transparent represents how participants perceive news media organizations that are transparent toward and interactive with their audiences. This concept involves being transparent about their own interests (politically and financially), their sources, and news making processes, and it also involves being honest about errors and mistakes.

Perspective-taking

Perspective-taking was a newly-identified theme that arose from participants who mostly expressed the value of dedicated journalists. The term of perspective-taking refers to the ability of journalists and news providers to “put oneself in another person's place” and empathize with others (Long & Andrews, 1990, p. 126; Todd, Bodenhausen, Richeson, & Galinsky, 2011). A perspective-taker is able to treat others as human beings who deserve respect (Long & Andrews, 1990). In the context of news media, it is the ability to treat sources, interviewees, people who are reported in the stories, and audiences as human beings deserving of respect, and it also is the ability to be sensitive to the feelings of those who might be affected by news coverage.

Participants (20 out of 44) confirmed the value of perspective-taking, as in the following comment in which one participant criticized the coverage by news organizations on the suicide case of Swedish DJ Avicii:

They reported it inappropriately and studies show that if people see other people are killing themselves and they're already on the border of wanting to, then they might - that might push them over the edge. So, they reported it very inappropriately and they got chewed out for it somehow (#16).

Studies in communication research show that people put more weight on the ways “in which the news was delivered” and on determining how messages are delivered—especially when the outcome is deemed to be unpleasant (Patient & Skarlicki, 2010, p. 557). Similarly, participants of this study tended to care more about how news organizations treat the people that they interview and how they avoid unnecessary, sensational, or negative coverage when the information is negative and unfavorable:

About 10 years the *Detroit Free Press*, the front-page story in the middle of the winter, a very cold winter, there was a homeless guy that they found dead (...). You could see from his waist, his legs were sticking out of the water and his waist - and he was (...) just frozen, hanging out of this water that he apparently fell into. And I thought to myself, seriously, you put that on the front page. I questioned whose decision that was (#14).

A perspective-taker, in general, is more likely to abstain from automatic and hasty expressions caused by racial bias (Todd, Bodenhausen, Richeson, & Galinsky, 2011, p. 2017). As such, participants thought that news organizations should respect audiences’ decision-making abilities and thus should not “brainwash anyone (#10)” or “impose [their] opinion on the people (#24).”

Some participants especially admired the compassion and empathy that journalists exercise and insisted that they “feel the event, rather than just reporting it (#28).” One participant was impressed with journalists’ dedication and empathy when they do live reports at the risk of their own lives:

So many dangerous events. And they [journalists] can't even leave. They told everyone to evacuate, and the poor news journalist has to stay right to the end, telling the other

people, "Leave. Leave while you can. We have to stay here." And I just think they're very brave (...) [it's] being a part, feeling a part of it. I think it's empathy (#26).

Interestingly, participants also portrayed journalists as being empathetic, but they also described impartiality or objectivity as important qualities of news reporting during group discussions. Research on impartiality and fairness of the judiciary system suggested that empathy could not be contradicted with impartiality because to take another's perspective means to think from "the perspective of everybody," which leads to thinking impartially toward everybody (Okin, 1990). In sum, the perspective-taking dimension embraces ideas such as compassion, empathy, and self-sacrifice and the new organizations' ability to recognize possible negative or harmful effects as a result of reporting, which gives news organizations the opportunity to refrain from producing sensational or hideous news coverage.

News Selection Bias

News selection bias is the second dimension newly identified by the participants who assessed the fairness of coverage that news organizations provide. News selection bias refers to select news worthy stories in a biased manner. It can be further detailed as gatekeeping bias (the preference for selecting stories), coverage bias (the relative amount of coverage), and/or statement bias (the favorability of coverage toward a specific party or side) (D'Alessio & Allen, 2006). News organizations select what they report using their own filtering and judgment process because of "resource constraints, editorial guidelines, ideological affinities, or even the fragmented nature of the information at a journalist's disposal" (Bourgeois, Rappaz, & Aberer, 2018, p. 535). Participants (37 out of 44) expressed their beliefs that news organizations are biased when they select and provide a certain view or type of information:

Some stories will get rejected, and some stories will get accepted, or altered, so they're kind of more appealing to the public (...) (#3).

In my opinion the public news media has lots more resources for news, but the problem is that they may only report some of them and with a biased opinion (#8).

In particular, participants identified that the lack of autonomy can facilitate news selection bias. Being autonomous is one of the essential attributes of free press, and it refers to the freedom of journalists to work as they please without being affected by interested parties (Deuze, 2005; Mellado & Humanes, 2012). Participants felt that news media organizations can be easily compromised and less autonomous through relationships with politicians, sponsors (advertisers), or owners. For example, one participant said that when “[news media] get[s] acquired [by companies], they lose their independence a lot of times (#5).” A frequently mentioned example by participants, that ownership/sponsorship results in the deterioration of the autonomy of news media organizations, was the recent incident when Sinclair Broadcast Group made its local news anchors read identical comments about false news (Snider, 2018). Others also believed that political leanings make the news media less autonomous:

I feel like something is behind the news. Like politicians. Something is behind them. Asking them to make news this way. Maybe some other news is some other way (#9).

If you're employed by a certain company that has a specific political point of view in mind, you might as a journalist not write your own thoughts but try and like conform to the company that you're perpetuating their view (#13).

The most pessimistic participants opined that media has already lost its autonomy, as one participant (#7) said: “American news media is not a free news media anymore.” As such, participants “feel like [an] independent press is clearly favorable, but it's just not always the reality (#6).”

A market-oriented environment, which prioritizes indulging audiences’ needs and desires, also was blamed for facilitating news selection bias (D’Alessio & Allen, 2006). Scholars suggested that in the last two decades of the twentieth century, news organizations have

succumbed to the pressure of emphasizing making profits or increasing ratings/readership, sometimes sacrificing quality reporting (Underwood, 1993, p. 83).

Mirroring this idea, participant #12 said that news organizations are “willing to sacrifice integrity to get more viewers” and “that’s how problems begin with news.” Another participant also said that news organizations prioritize specific news items depending on the number of clicks received:

They're always trying to sell something, whether it's a political candidate; or whether it's the newspaper themselves because if people stop reading the news, they stop getting revenue and they shut down (...). They obviously can't include all the information, (...) (#16).

Participants lamented that news organizations are forced to follow public sentiments and “leave out (#13)” stories, which makes everything “black or white (#4)” and reinforces “their own beliefs and then they just keep in a feedback loop of information (#8)” and creates a polarized environment.

For these participants, U.S. news organizations were viewed as biased, under the influence of political parties, owners, advertisements, and the desire to boost ratings and readership to win competition. Taken together, these factors threaten their role as public service providers. Autonomous news organizations, which are free from the influence of power and finances, are considered more favorably and more deserving of “the honor” of providing real journalism (#2).

CONCLUSION

The results of the present study consistently show that a central feature of how people understand news media organizations is that they view it as a monolithic whole entity, rather than focusing on specific, individual sources or channels. Image perception is not a rational, cognitive judgment or evaluation, but rather a more affective, peripheral cue for understanding the needs and wants of news consumers (Burgoon, Burgoon, & Buller, 1986). Participants in this study often referred to “the media in general,” and they referenced predetermined expectations or conceptions of the news selecting and reporting processes as being shared by all members of the news media (Cook, 1998, p. 3). The results of this study added additional empirical evidence and confirmed the assumption of previous news media consumption surveys and focus groups: People use “some mental schema” to engage in discussions about the media in general (Tsfati, 2002; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003, p. 268). This mental schema can be interpreted as the “news media image” in the public’s mind, which was used by the participants of this study when they provided and described their ideas and feelings about news media organizations.

This study presents an additional way of interpreting how news organizations are perceived by the public, which will be a more practical understanding tool for professionals and scholars in the news media industry. First, the premise that people think of “the news media in general” could be an important indication of the recent and growing skepticism about the media industry. In other words, when the public perceives news media organizations, they formulate overall “attitudes” toward the news media rather than a specific evaluation of concepts, such as credibility (Otto, Thomas, & Maier, 2018). The utility of image, which is directly related to people's attitudes and can predict their behaviors, has been demonstrated in previous marketing

literature and would also provide an effective approach for explaining this skepticism (Dowling, 1986; Kennedy, 1987, Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009).

Second, the concept of news media image might help form a social consensus concerning the tension between the orientations of “news as a product” and “news as a service” within news organizations and among journalists (Ferrucci, 2014; McManus, 1994). News organizations that consider news as a product focus on the wants or needs of potential consumers (Ferrucci, 2014; Martens, 1996). On the other hand, news organizations that consider news as a service concentrate their attention on how to contribute to society and, further, to democracy (Deuze, 2005; Martens, 1996). When understanding and interpreting news organizations collectively, participants used these two perspectives and sometimes mixed the two of them. They understood that these two perspectives can cause tension within news organizations, but they still wanted news organizations to pursue their roles as protectors of democracy. The participants wanted news media organizations to investigate and disseminate information on behalf of the public and hoped that this information makes politicians and power elites accountable and the information is relevant to their lives.

Third, a news organization better acquainted with the overall concept of news media image might discover that this additional measure of audiences’ perceptions helps to (1) further articulate corporate objectives and directions, (2) strategize competitive positions and market conditions, and (3) communicate to its stakeholders including consumers (Dowling, 1986; Marken, 1990, p. 21). The management of news organizations could also “allocate resources” so they can reach an optimizing result when being perceived by the public (Fill & Dimopoulou, 1999, p. 202).

As such, understanding and improving their image helps news media organizations receive the public's favor as well as regain its trust so that they can achieve their two aims—making a profit and providing information to make a better society. Also, this study sheds light on audience perspectives that have scarcely received attention, but recently have garnered attention due to the growing competitive and interactive environment of news media (Deuze, 2003; Ferrucci, 2014).

Additionally, this study contributes to the extant image literature by examining the theoretical structure of news media image. By incorporating the concept of image that is prevalent in marketing literature into the context of news media, this study aims to enlarge the horizon of journalism as well as marketing and management literature. This study suggests that including image as a broader concept, in addition to measuring credibility, could add relevance to the measure of “the totality” of the public's perception of news organizations (Burgoon, Burgoon, & Buller, 1986, p. 780). For example, the dimensions of both usefulness and socially responsible used in this study suggest that the public wants the news to be personally relevant to them and that people view news media organizations' affiliation and engagement with the larger community as being very important.

Without news media organizations that are favored by and relied on by the public, democratic decision-making processes could not be possible. If news media organizations better understand the public's perceptions and improve their news media image, then the public will be able to rely more on fact-based news rather than other alternative forms of news, such as fake news or other news-like content on social media. This is an indispensable condition of a healthy society where “power is vested in the public and exercised by them” through legitimate decision-making processes (Merriam-Webster, 2018).

LIMITATIONS

The eight dimensions in this study are hypothetical and should be tested and verified in future surveys and factor analyses to determine the public's most representative dimensions and relevant items. When determining the relative importance of dimensions and items, it would be possible to identify the key attributes that news organizations could consider developing, using, or more clearly addressing in formulating a better image (Fill & Dimopoulou, 1999).

A few concepts around news media image were not clearly articulated and may not be mutually exclusive. As such, responses of participants were sometimes placed under multiple dimensions. For example, avoiding sensational or hideous news coverage (under the perspective-taking dimension) overlapped with the notion of downgrading news quality for boosting ratings and clicks (under the news selection bias dimension) or immoral personality (under the personality dimension).

A few contradicting concepts were also found that hindered clearer conceptualizations. These contradictions included: participants said they preferred terse briefings rather than detailed news stories but also said that they want detailed, thoroughly researched stories; they thought news media organizations as being unpleasant and egocentric but admired the journalists' dedication to news reporting; and they believed that news media organizations were objective but empathetic as well. In addition, when asked about their opinions, ideas, or feelings toward news media organizations, participants sometimes seemed upset and replied with their news consumption behaviors rather than perceptions. This might be because they did not know what answers they should give due to unfamiliarity with the concepts. Questions that focus more on their "experiences" rather than "perceptions" could be a solution to this problem, considering image is formulated from people's direct and indirect experiences (Dowling, 1986).

Another limitation is the representativeness of the sample. Since this study investigated the perceptions of only 44 people living in a Midwestern area of the U.S., the findings may or may not reflect public perceptions in the same way when larger populations are studied.

FUTURE STUDIES

A comprehensive concept articulation related to media image construct is crucial to further validate and develop this model and thus to solve the conceptual limitations mentioned in the previous section. Particularly, a few items that belong to news selection bias, personality, and perspective-taking should be defined more cogently. Future studies should consider what would be the most effective questions for group discussions. Besides asking about their “experiences,” as previously mentioned, alternative approaches might be explored for the best group discussion results.

Scholars demonstrated that image is useful in understanding and explaining the consumers’ perceptions (and further attitudes) and/or predicting their behaviors (Dowling, 1986; Nguyen & Leblanc, 2001; Wilkins & Huisman, 2014). Considering that its impact on a corporation’s sales has been utilized the most, it is desirable to demonstrate how the news media image affects people’s actual news media consumption. If this image judgement does not affect “whether people use the media,” then negative or positive image would have trivial meanings (Burgoon, Burgoon, & Buller, 1986). Further studies may reveal that some attributes are more powerful than others in alienating any specific driving force to make people react, such as trust, satisfaction, and/or loyalty (Nguyen & Leblanc, 2001; Wilkins & Huisman, 2014). For example, participants were quite skeptical about judgments made in relation to news organizations’ news selection, but they expressed satisfaction and gave much credit to the relevancy of information provided by news organizations.

In addition, further studies could identify any discrepancy between the actual image people hold of news organizations and the desirable image news organizations want to project to people. The degree of matching (i.e., “congruency”) between the desirable image and image

perceived by the public would be important to news organizations because people tend to remember information that is congruent to their prior schemas better than incongruent information (Wan & Schell, 2007, p.25). Understanding this gap also could give deeper insight into how the public views an entity (Wan & Schell, 2007). Thus, in the news media context, it would not only give more explanations on the origin of any skepticism or distrust toward news media organizations but also would communicate methods of image improvement to news organizations.

Overall, this study suggests a possible way in which news organizations might gain and maintain the public's trust and attention by providing a way to understand the public's perception of news media image. The lens of image, hopefully, could provide an opportunity to discuss "the news media organizations" that our society and the public need for a fair and democratic world.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Survey Questionnaire

APPENDIX A

Survey Questionnaire

Study Title: Addressing News Media Image in a Time of Fake News

Investigators:

Dr. Serena Carpenter, PhD, carp@msu.edu, The School of Journalism, Michigan State University

Soo Young Shin, shinsoo2@msu.edu, The School of Journalism, Michigan State University

PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

The purpose of this research study is to explore the news media image as perceived by the public.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION FOR BEING IN THE STUDY

This survey is conducted as a part of focus group discussion. You will participate in about 75 minutes of group discussion on a specific day after completing a short About Me survey.

POTENTIAL RISKS

There are extremely little, if any, psychological or social risks associated with this research study. Your participation is requested in the interest of social science and will be of academic value. If you feel any discomfort for any reason, you may withdraw your consent at any time before or after the focus group discussion. If you withdraw from the study before its completion, we will not use any of the data you provide.

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

The data for this research study is collected anonymously. All information collected in the study is strictly confidential, and your name will not be identified at any time. Your survey answers for the research study will be collected and stored on a separate secure website. Information that is printed out will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in a locked office. Only the principal investigator and the researchers, as well as the MSU Human Research Protection Program (HRPP), will have access to the research records. Your confidentiality will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. Research records will be kept for at least three years after the close of the study. The results of this study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but the identities of all research participants will remain anonymous.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS STUDY

If you have concerns or questions about this study, you may contact the researchers (Soo Young Shin, shinsoo2@msu.edu). If you have questions or concerns about your role and rights as a

research study participant, would like to obtain information or offer input, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program at (517) 355-2180, or if you would like to speak directly with me, at e-mail address shinsoo2@msu.edu.

Demographics¹ and News Consumption Behaviors

1. What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary
- Prefer not to answer
- Prefer to self-describe (please describe) -----

2. What is your age?

_____ years old

3. Do you consider yourself a(n):

- (1) Republican
- (2) Democrat
- (3) Independent

4. In general, what do you think is your political orientation?

- (1) Very conservative
- (2) Conservative
- (3) Moderate
- (4) Liberal
- (5) Very liberal

5. Which candidate did you vote for in the last presidential election?

- (1) Donald Trump
- (2) Hillary Clinton
- (3) Gary Johnson
- (4) Jill Stein

¹ Questions are modified from Pew Research Center's demographic questions. Retrieved from <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2015/03/Demographic-Questions-Web-and-Mail-English-3-20-2015.pdf> on Feb, 6, 2018.

- (5) Evan McMullin
- (6) Darrell Castle
- (7) Rocky De La Fuente
- (8) James Hedges
- (9) Mini Soltysik
- (10) Tom Hoefling
- (11) I didn't vote/have no voting right
- (12) I prefer not to answer

6. What is the highest level of education you have completed or the highest degree you have received?

- (1) Less than a high school diploma
- (2) High school graduate or GED (includes technical/vocational training that doesn't count toward college credit)
- (3) Some college (community college, associate degree)
- (4) Four-year college degree/bachelor's degree
- (5) Some postgraduate or professional schooling, but no postgraduate degree
- (6) Postgraduate or professional degree, including master's, doctorate, medical, or law degree

7. How would you describe yourself?

- (1) American Indian or Alaska Native
- (2) Asian
- (3) Black or African American
- (4) Hispanic or Latino
- (5) Mixed Race
- (6) Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- (7) White or Caucasian
- (8) Other _____

8. Last year, in 2017, what was your total family income from all sources, before taxes?

- (1) Less than \$10,000
- (2) \$10,000 to less than \$20,000
- (3) \$20,000 to less than \$30,000
- (4) \$30,000 to less than \$40,000
- (5) \$40,000 to less than \$50,000
- (6) \$50,000 to less than \$75,000
- (7) \$75,000 to less than \$100,000
- (8) \$100,000 to less than \$150,000

(9) \$150,000 or more

9. How often do you access news (meaning an entire article or listen to an entire whole segment)? News means national, international, regional/local news and other topical events accessed via radio, TV, newspapers or online.²

- (1) Several times a day
- (2) Once a day
- (3) Several times a week
- (4) Once a week
- (5) 2-3 times a month
- (6) Once a month
- (7) Less often than once a month
- (8) Don't know
- (9) Never

10. How interested, if at all, would you say you are in news?³

- (1) Extremely interested
- (2) Very interested
- (3) Somewhat interested
- (4) Not very interested
- (5) Not at all interested
- (6) Don't know

11. Which of the following types of news are most important to you (select all that apply)?⁴

- 1) International news
- 2) National news
- 3) State news
- 4) City/Community news
- 5) News about your neighborhood

² Questions are adopted from Digital News Report survey conducted by Reuters Institute and University of Oxford in 2014. Retrieved from <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2014/survey-questions-2014/>

³ Questions are adopted from Digital News Report survey conducted by Reuters Institute and University of Oxford in 2014. Retrieved from <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2014/survey-questions-2014/>

⁴ Questions are adopted from Digital News Report survey conducted by Reuters Institute and University of Oxford in 2014. News types are from topline questionnaire of 2016 Pew Research Center's American trend panel survey.

12. Which of the following news topics are the most important to you? Please rank your top three choices by writing “1”, “2”, “3” beside your choice.⁵

- (1) Government and politics
- (2) Traffic and weather
- (3) Sports
- (4) Business and the economy
- (5) Science and technology
- (6) Your local town and city
- (7) Environmental and natural disasters
- (8) Crime and public safety
- (9) Foreign or international issues
- (10) Health and medicine
- (11) Schools and education
- (12) Social issues
- (13) Lifestyle topics
- (14) Entertainment and celebrities
- (15) Art and culture

13. How often do you...⁶

(1) Multiple times per day (2) Once per day (3) Often, but not daily (4) Rarely (5) Never

- a) Read any newspapers in print?
- b) Listen to news on the radio?
- c) Watch local television news?
- d) Watch national evening network television news (such as ABC World News, CBS Evening News, or NBC Nightly News)?
- e) Watch cable television news (such as CNN, The Fox News cable channel, or MSNBC)?
- f) Get news from a social networking site (such as Facebook or Twitter)?
- g) Get news from a website or app?
- h) Websites/apps of other news outlets or technology companies such as BuzzFeed, Google news, or Apple

⁵ Questions are adopted from topline questionnaire of 2016 Pew Research Center’s American trend panel survey. News topics are from Martens, T. A. (1996). The news value of nonprofit organizations and issues. *Nonprofit Management & Leadership*, 7, 181-192.

⁶ Questions are from topline questionnaire of 2016 Pew Research Center’s American trend panel survey; however, the Likert-style questions are changed by the author.

14. In the last week, which would you say has been your main platform for accessing news?⁷

- (1) TV
- (2) Radio
- (3) Printed Newspapers
- (4) Computer (Desktop or laptop)
- (5) Smartphones
- (6) Tablet (e.g., iPad, tab, etc.)

⁷ Reuters Institute and University of Oxford, (2014); Ahlers, D. (2006). News consumption and the new electronic media. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 11, 29-52.

APPENDIX B

Consent Form

APPENDIX B

Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research study. Researchers are required to provide a consent form to inform you about the research study, to convey that participation is voluntary, to explain risks and benefits of participation, and to empower you to make an informed decision. You should feel free to ask the researchers any questions you may have.

Study Title: Addressing News Media Image in a Time of Fake News

Investigators:

Dr. Serena Carpenter, carp@msu.edu, The School of Journalism, Michigan State University
Soo Young Shin, shinsoo2@msu.edu, The School of Journalism, Michigan State University

PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

The purpose of this research study is to explore the news media image as perceived by the public.

LENGTH OF STUDY

Participants will complete the discussion only once and the procedure will take about one and a half hours.

PROCEDURE OF STUDY

This study consists of two parts. First, you will complete a few general survey questions in terms of your demographics and news consumption behaviors. This part will take about 10 minutes. Then, an audio-recorded group discussion will be conducted with other 6 to 13 other participants, which will take about one and a half hours. We will also ask questions what you think about news media image, including questions that will help us to better understand the public's perceptions toward news media organizations.

POTENTIAL RISKS

There are extremely little, if any, psychological or social risks associated with this research study. Your participation is requested in the interest of social science and will be of academic value. If you feel any discomfort for any reason, you may withdraw your consent at any time before or after the focus group discussion. If you withdraw from the study before its completion, we will not use any of the data you provide.

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

The data for this research study is collected anonymously. All information collected in the study is strictly confidential, and your name will not be identified at any time. Your survey answers for

the research study will be collected and stored on a separate secure website. Information that is printed out will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in a locked office. Only the principal investigator and the researchers, as well as the MSU Human Research Protection Program (HRPP), will have access to the research records. Your confidentiality will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. Research records will be kept for at least three years after the close of the study. The results of this study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but the identities of all research participants will remain anonymous.

YOUR RIGHTS TO PARTICIPATE, SAY NO, OR WITHDRAW

Participation in this research project is completely voluntary. However, the audio taped focus group section is very important. So, if you do not want the discussions to be audio taped, you will not be able to participate in this study. You may choose not to answer specific questions or to stop participating at any time. If you withdraw from this project without completing all the steps listed above, you will not be eligible for the \$20 reward for your participation.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION FOR BEING IN THE STUDY

There are no costs associated with participation in this study. Upon completion of the general survey and the focus group discussion, you will receive \$20 as a token of appreciation for your participation.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS STUDY

If you have concerns or questions about this study, you may contact the researchers (Soo Young Shin, shinsoo2@msu.edu; Dr. Serena Carpenter, carp@msu.edu). If you have questions or concerns about your role and rights as a research study participant, would like to obtain information or offer input, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program at (517) 355-2180, or if you would like to speak directly with me, at e-mail address shinsoo2@msu.edu.

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

Your signature below means that you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study and agree to audio-tape the focus group discussion.

Printed name of the Participant: _____

Signature

Date

APPENDIX C

Focus Group Protocol

APPENDIX C

Focus Group Protocol

1-1. Start Discussion

START WITH A BROAD, GENERAL CONVERSATION. (20)

(* lists each keyword on the whiteboard or any available place)

Script

(*Speak only to the group. Not individuals.)

Now, we are going to do a focus group discussion about people's perceptions of the news media. Think about the news media in general and your everyday ways of getting information from news media. The purpose of this discussion is to determine different perceptions that people have about the news media.

(Introduce the concept of what "news media image" is. Scripts were changed depending on people's reactions. I used various metaphors to explain what image is and how it can be formulated. But, I tried to make it short.)

To pursue my goal, I am using a concept of image. Every entity can have its image, for example, an image of a mother is caring, supporting etc. A company also has an image such as being innovative, trendy etc. Today, we are going to discuss what your own concept of this image will be when you think of news media. It can encompass your opinions, ideas, feelings, impressions, beliefs, etc.

I would like to start our discussion with a short but broad question.

1. What comes to your mind when you think of news media?

- ⇒ After I asked this question, then, I let people talk. I based the order of my inquiry in a responsive manner, guided by the natural flow of participant conversation.
- ⇒ The first topic that participants discussed was different from group to group, some of them started with "what news media is"; some started with "how I consume news media"; some started by comparing the media at present versus the media in the "old days." Then I jumped into the conversation when their

topics moved to the dimensions that I have identified from the literature review and asked the questions below.

- ⇒ Some questions were not asked if participants had already mentioned and discussed them.
- ⇒ If there were dimensions that were not identified during discussions, then related questions were asked. However, if it seemed that participants did not understand the concept, then I moved on to the next topic.

(From questions 2 to 7, I modified questions or skipped some of them depending on the discussion.)

1. What is your definition of a journalist?
2. What is your opinion of journalists? (If they named different types of journalists, then I asked, “What is your opinion of this different type of journalist?”)
3. What is your general impression of the news media?
4. What do you think is the purpose of a news organization?
5. What are your perceptions of the news media in the U.S.?
6. What do you think about the state of journalism in the U.S.?
7. What are the news media doing to meet the public’s information needs?

FOCUSED TOPIC DISCUSSION. (35)

(*Refer to list created before the focus group to make sure all dimensions were discussed. **Be sure to ask for elaboration on concepts and what they mean by them.**)

(questions sometimes were replaced by more indirect forms since some participants were upset when being asked directly.)

1. (Quality) What expectations do you have when you read (or view) the news?
 - a. Do news stories frequently meet your expectations (if not, please elaborate)?
 - b. How important is the accuracy of a news story to you? What about the fairness of a story? Or its credibility (or objectivity)? How do you determine what the quality of a news article is? **(Probe: accurate, fair, factual, providing full story, credible, and trustful).**
2. (Usefulness) How useful are news stories in your daily lives? In what ways are news stories useful to you?
 - a. How well-informed are you because of the news? **(Probe: giving me information, keeping me engaged in societal issues, giving me fun and enjoyment).**

3. (Work environment/culture) News organizations are companies with work environments and work cultures. What are your assumptions about journalists' work environments?
 - a. Do you associate any particular work environment with journalism?
 - b. (Work environment/culture) What kind of values do you think news organization should keep?
 - c. (Work environment/culture) To what extent do you believe the news media is influenced by their sponsors? Government officials? How do these groups affect news stories or news reporting?
 - d. (Work environment/culture) In your view, how does the news media interact with the public? How does the news media use feedback from the public? (**Probe: Autonomy, professionalism, political leaning, etc.**)
4. (Innovativeness) In what ways do journalists use innovations?
 - a. Which technologies do journalists use to provide news to you? (Or, participants might think that technology is not important for it to be a news organization?)
 - b. (Innovativeness) To what extent do you believe a news organization should use new technologies to present the news? To interact with their audience?
5. (Socially responsible) What contributions to society do you believe the news media should make?
 - a. What would be the responsibilities that the news media has toward society, if any? (**Example: Acting as a watchdog, represent minorities or their own social/ethnic groups, contributing to democracy, and caring for the community issues and offering solutions, etc.**)
6. (Financial condition) What do you think about the financial situation of a news outlets, such as revenue or earnings?
 - a. Would you judge a news organization depending on its financial condition? (or, have you heard of some news organizations implement big cuts to the numbers of journalistic staffs recently? Did this information impact your image of that company?)
7. (Aesthetics) When you read or watch news, how important is the look and appearance (such as graphics about the news media) of media content?
 - a. (Probe: graphics, layouts, front/home-page appearances, etc.)
 - b. Do these things impact your image of news organizations?
8. (Relationship with consumers) There are many ways that the public can interact with news media such as "letters to the editor" or discussion boards on website. What are your perceptions regarding how the news media interacts with people? How important is it for news media to interact with the public?
 - a. (Relationship with consumers) How important for you is that news media admits mistakes in reporting? Shows their reporting processes openly?
9. (Personality) What adjectives would you use to describe the news media in general?

1.3. Suggestions and Closing Discussion. (10)

Are there any other factors I should consider in order to understand your perceptions of the news media?

1-4. Close the Focus Group (5)

Thank participants, give them contact information for further follow-up if requested.
Provide rewards.

PHASE 3: INTERPRETING AND REPORTING THE RESULTS

Summarize each meeting and transcribe the notes or audio recording of the focus group.

Table 1: Summary of News Media Image Dimension

Dimension	Results	Respondents (numbers, %)
News Quality	Supported	32 (73%)
News Usefulness	Supported	33 (75%)
Autonomy	Combined with news selection bias	
Innovativeness	Combined with usability	
Socially Responsible	Supported	21 (48%)
Financial Condition	Combined with news selection bias	
Aesthetics	Combined with usability	
Relationship with consumers	Replaced by transparent	
Personality	Supported	14 (32%)
Usability	Modified	27 (61%)
Transparent	Modified	15 (34%)
Perspective-taking	Newly-identified	20 (45%)
News Selection Bias	Newly-identified	37 (84%)

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