1 Introduction

While misinformation has always been a part of the media ecosystem, the 2016 election was an inflection point for its prominence in public discourse. A 2017 *Time* magazine cover asked, in stark red letters, "Is Truth Dead?" A 2016 *Economist* cover heralded the advent of "Post-truth politics in the age of social media." News magazines were not the only ones paying attention. In the wake of the election, "post-truth," "misinformation," and "fake news" were each named "word of the year" by (respectively) the Oxford Dictionaries, Dictionary.com, and Collins Dictionary (Funke 2018*a*). Local and national news outlets reported on these decisions, and in doing so called even more attention to the issue of misinformation (Diaz 2018; Italie 2018; Strauss 2018). Wrote Emily Jacobs at the *New York Post*, "the word-of-the-year decision comes as social media companies, and the American people, grapple with the now-global struggle surrounding 'fake news'" (Jacobs 2018). The often hyperbolic media attention garnered by these (relatively inconsequential) "word of the year" decisions aptly illustrates the mainstream media's earnest attention to the phenomenon of misinformation (Tsfati et al. 2020).

Despite these initial concerns that exposure to misinformation was widespread, empirical assessments have consistently shown a pattern of low average exposure. For most people, misinformation is a tiny fraction of their information diet (Guess, Nagler and Tucker 2019): for example, Allen et al. (2020) find that "fake news" comprises just 0.15% of Americans' daily media exposure. But while many Americans may have relatively little *direct* experience with misinformation, the intense media coverage of the issue likely provides them with a great deal of *indirect* experience, painting the "pictures in their heads" that shape not only how they conceive of the problem, but also who they hold responsible for it (Lippmann 1922; Iyengar 1994).

This Elements investigates how media coverage of the misinformation phenomenon shapes public beliefs and attitudes, including media trust. I show that exposure to news coverage of misinformation has the surprising effect of *increasing* trust in mainstream media, and in particular print news. Drawing on data from a content analysis and three experiments, I argue that this unexpected pattern is a direct result of how the media frame responsibility for misinformation: as largely the fault of social media. News coverage of misinformation paints a picture of often-toxic social media platforms where anyone can post "fake news" and gatekeeping is nonexistent. This coverage shapes Americans' beliefs not only about who is to blame for misinformation, but also who can best protect them against it. Print media – with its professional standards and

commitment to checking sources – is perceived as a bulwark against the post-truth chaos of social media.

1.1 The News Media's Fascination with Misinformation

Journalists see misinformation and "fake news" as an especially serious problem partly because it has the potential to directly undermine their work, and these concerns in turn inform the nature of their coverage. A 2022 Pew survey of working journalists shows that they are even more concerned than the American public about made-up news: 71% of journalists say it is a "very big problem," compared to 50% of the public (Gottfried et al. 2022). In addition, 58% report having had conversations with colleagues about misinformation at least several times a month over the past year.

Journalists' concern over misinformation is not only a topic of water-cooler conversation – it has also inspired a number of conferences focused on strategies for both combatting and covering "fake news." For example, in 2019, the American Press Institute convened "Truth-Telling in the Modern Age: Strategies to Confront Polarization and Misinformation" with representatives from media institutions both local (e.g. the *Knoxville News Sentinel*, the *Boston Globe*) and national (e.g. *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*). In 2021, the Shorenstein Center at Harvard hosted a "News Leaders Summit" with participants from outlets ranging from CNN and the Associated Press to Buzzfeed and *The Atlantic*, with the stated goal of "bring[ing] together small cohorts of news and media leaders to tackle the problem of misinformation-at-scale and media manipulation within the industry." Also in 2021, the BBC hosted a conference entitled "Trust in News: The View from the Frontline Fighting Disinformation," featuring speakers from Reuters, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), and Facebook. While conferences that bring together journalists to talk about an emerging issue can be both helpful and informative, it is worth noting the unusual amount of attention paid to misinformation in particular, especially compared to other novel issues that have emerged over the last decade.

Why is misinformation of such intense concern to journalists, especially given social science research suggesting that absolute levels of public exposure to "fake news" are relatively low (Allen et al. 2020; Guess, Nyhan and Reifler 2020)? There are several potential explanations. First, misinformation runs counter to one of the core normative commitments of journalism: to ensure a functioning democracy by creating an informed public. To the extent that misinformation has the ability to change behavior or attitudes (including vote choice), it has the potential to threaten democracy. As Richard Hasen put it

in *The New York Times*, "False information about Covid-19 vaccines meant to undermine confidence in government or the Biden presidency has had deadly consequences" (Hasen 2022). While these concerns are real, they may also be heightened by journalists' own self-identity and perception of their roles. Analyzing at how journalists covered misinformation during November of 2016, Carlson (2020) characterizes their response as an "informational moral panic" in which they "cast fake news as polluting the information environment, sowing confusion, and undermining legitimate news."

Of course, the "fake news" headlines circulating on social media (e.g. "Pope Endorses Donald Trump") are just one type of misinformation. Another critical, and arguably more influential, source of false claims is political elites. During the 2020 election, former President Donald Trump's false claims about election fraud had measurable impacts on public trust in elections (Berlinski et al. 2023). When deciding how to cover claims like these, journalists are faced with several difficult choices. First, there is the choice of whether to cover these false claims at all. On the one hand, reporting on elite statements is part of their mission. On the other hand, repeating false claims – even if only to correct them – has the potential consequence of ensuring that they reach a broader audience than they would otherwise (Tsfati et al. 2020). McClure Haughey et al. (2020) note this tension in interviews with journalists on the "misinformation beat," describing their struggle to "[weigh] the risk of amplifying a marginal and problematic narrative into the mainstream against the danger of ignoring it."

Then, even if they do decide to repeat the false claims, they face the choice of how to cover them: by correcting them directly (i.e. using their authority to explicitly state that the claim is false, sometimes referred to as "journalistic arbitration") or by offering a competing perspective (i.e. quoting a different politician making a competing claim; sometimes referred to as the "he-said, she-said" approach). Each of these approaches comes with both costs and benefits. While journalistic arbitration can be more effective at reducing belief in misinformation (Thorson 2018), it also has the potential to threaten a news source's credibility if a reader sees this arbitration as evidence of political bias (Shin 2023).

Journalists' concerns over misinformation are thus multifaceted. First, they worry that exposure to misinformation may threaten democratic functioning by creating a misinformed public. Second, they perceive that the act of correcting misinformation may also erode trust: because elites are a major source of false claims, journalists are faced with the thorny problem of how to accurately cover these false claims while also avoiding accusations of bias. Finally, the use of "fake news" as a rhetorical strategy deliberately wielded to undermine journalistic authority poses a more existential threat. Given this constellation

of ethical and practical worries that directly affect their livelihood and identity, it is perhaps unsurprising that journalists are uniquely attentive to the problems of misinformation – and that this attention may influence both the volume and nature of their coverage.

In addition, as technological changes facilitate new entrants to the media marketplace (including both social media and niche partisan outlets), journalists are faced with increasing pressure to capture audience attention (Munger 2020; Nelson 2021). If coverage of "fake news" is particularly compelling to potential readers (as measured in clicks, views, or engagement), then journalists may feel pressured to cover the topic even in spite of ethical qualms.

1.2 Public Perceptions of Misinformation and "Fake News"

This Element takes on two related questions: How do the media cover misinformation, and what effects does this coverage have on the public's beliefs and attitudes? While the previous section lays out some of the factors that may shape journalists' conceptions of "fake news" and misinformation, this section discusses how the public views these phenomena.

Just as media attention to misinformation has grown over the last decade, so has the issue's perceived importance among the public. And indeed, many people are both deeply concerned about misinformation and convinced that it is omnipresent. Americans estimate that about 39% of the news in TV, newspaper, and radio is misinformation, along with 65% of the news on social media (Gallup 2018). Two-thirds say that made-up news has caused "a great deal of confusion" about the basic facts of current events (Barthel, Mitchell and Holcomb 2016). In a cross-national survey, 64% of Americans reported that they were very or extremely concerned about "what is real and what is fake on the internet when it comes to news," substantially more than the average (54%) across the twenty-five countries surveyed (Newman 2018). Among the 64% of Americans who think that social media has a "mostly negative" effect on the way things are going in the United States today, a plurality cite misinformation and made-up news as the primary reason (Auxier 2020).

The tandem rise of media attention to and public concern over misinformation is consistent with a long literature showing the agenda-setting power of media: from issues ranging from the environment to crime, the more the media covers an issue, the more people see it as important (McCombs and Shaw 1972; McCombs 2005). However, the association alone is not sufficient to show that media coverage of the topic has influenced public opinion. A plausible alternate explanation is that *direct* exposure to misinformation has led people to see it as a problem. If people are regularly encountering misinformation in their day-to-day life, they may come to see it as a major threat.

At the same time that concern about misinformation has risen, trust in media – and political trust more broadly – has declined. Since 1972, Gallup has asked, "In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the mass media – such as newspapers, TV and radio – when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly?" In the 1970s, around 70% of people reported that they trusted the mass media a great deal or a fair amount. By 2022, this number had fallen to just 22%, with the decline largely concentrated among Republicans (Brenan 2022).

The fact that as self-reported exposure to misinformation has increased, trust in media has decreased is not in and of itself evidence of a causal relationship between the two. However, many scholars have raised concerns that either direct or indirect exposure to misinformation might have effects beyond simply belief in false claims. A 2018 assessment of the dangers of misinformation published in *Science* warns that "[b]eyond electoral impacts, what we know about the effects of media more generally suggests many potential pathways of influence, from increasing cynicism and apathy to encouraging extremism" (Lazer et al. 2018). Tsfati et al. (2020) emphasize that "many people may hear about fake news stories through mainstream news media," and point to the need for experimental research examining the effects of this coverage not only on belief, but also on related attitudes such as media trust.

In addition, there are several reasons to believe that Democrats and Republicans may respond differently to news coverage of misinformation. Substantial research shows that there is a large partisan asymmetry in misinformation in the information ecosystem. Statements made by Republican politicians are more likely than their Democratic counterparts to be found "false" by fact-checkers (Ferracioli, Kniess and Marques 2022), Republicans are more likely than Democrats to visit "fake news" websites (Guess, Nyhan and Reifler 2020), and conservatives see more misinformation on Facebook than liberals (González-Bailón et al. 2023). In addition, starting in 2016, then-candidate Donald Trump began using the term "fake news" as a catch-all critique of any news coverage with which he disagreed, and this rhetoric may differentially shape how Republicans respond to either misinformation or coverage of the phenomenon (Van Duyn and Collier 2018; Farhall et al. 2019). Given these concerns, as well as the discrepancy in media trust between Democrats and Republicans, throughout this Element I explore partisan differences in responses to news coverage of misinformation.

1.3 Overview of Studies

This Element explores the nature and effects of media coverage of misinformation using a multi-method approach. First, a content analysis analyzes

more than 800 articles about the misinformation phenomenon published in four major media outlets. These articles all explicitly explore the issue of misinformation, with headlines like "How Do We Get to Herd Immunity for Fake News?" and "YouTube Bans All Anti-Vaccine Misinformation." The content analysis shows not only that news headlines focused on the misinformation phenomenon have increased over the past eight years, but also that in these articles, journalists overwhelmingly characterize misinformation as a problem endemic to *social* media (e.g. Facebook and Twitter).

Next, I draw on existing theory to formulate hypotheses about how exposure to misinformation coverage might impact beliefs about the prevalence of misinformation as well as media and political trust. I also present the results of a pretest examining potential partisan differences in perceptions of this coverage. In the pretest, participants are asked to evaluate whether twenty headlines (including eight about misinformation, all based on real headlines) are biased against Democrats, Republicans, or neither. The pretest yields two major findings: neither Republicans nor Democrats perceive news coverage of misinformation as having more partisan bias than political coverage more generally, and the term "fake news" does not elicit more perceptions of partisan bias than the term "misinformation."

Both the pretest and the content analysis directly inform two survey experiments. In the first, participants are randomly assigned to view a series of headlines about either misinformation, or elections, or to a pure control condition. I find that exposure to the headlines about misinformation (e.g. "Google Announces Plan to Combat Spread of Fake News") has no effect on political trust, but increases trust in media. The second experiment replicates and extends that finding, showing that making news coverage of misinformation more salient increases trust in print media, and decreases trust in social media. Finally, a third exploratory study offers an explanation for this counterintuitive effect on media trust: exposure to news about misinformation increases the salience of professional journalistic norms such as relying on credible sources and validating facts, and reduces concerns about biased coverage.

2 Media Attention to the Misinformation Phenomenon

While substantial research has tracked the rise of journalistic fact-checking initiatives designed to debunk specific falsehoods (Graves 2016; Graves, Nyhan and Reifler 2016; Amazeen 2020), we have fewer systematic investigations of how the media have covered the larger phenomenon of misinformation and "fake news." This section briefly summarizes some of the existing work looking at journalistic responses to misinformation.

Carlson (2020) examines how the media coverage of "fake news" in November of 2016, the month following Donald Trump's victory, exemplifies an "informational moral panic." Using qualitative textual analysis, he draws out four major themes. The first focused on producers of misinformation, in which journalists drew explicit contrasts between their own motivations (to inform the public) and those of misinformation producers (to make money). The second theme showcases the role of social media platforms in facilitating the spread of "fake news" and enabling a "free-for-all" information environment that makes it impossible for consumers to tell fact from fiction. The third theme also critiques the internet, this time for the extent to which its click-driven profit model allows platforms to financially benefit from the spread of misinformation. Finally, the fourth theme excoriates gullible social media users for believing and sharing unverified information. Social media plays an outsize role in three out of four of these themes, both as a conduit for misinformation and as an existential crisis for traditional media. As Carlson explains, "the threat accorded to ["fake news"] by journalists reflects a fear that digital media channels only pollute the media environment, with an irresistible psychological and emotional draw that runs counter to standard objective news."

Drawing on a sample of articles about "fake news" published in Denmark during 2019, Farkas (2023) reaches a similar conclusion. Journalists, he argues, frame misinformation as evidence of the critical importance of the news media: "In the face of rapid technological change and financial hardship, fake news affirms the need to preserve the authority of established journalism as a societal knowledge gatekeeper." A more recent analysis of US coverage of deepfakes again finds a similar theme: while focusing on the "worst-case" scenario of deepfakes (a massively misinformed public), journalists also reify their own status as a bulwark against these threats (Wahl-Jorgensen and Carlson 2021), even in the face of increasing evidence that deepfakes may not be uniquely persuasive (Barari, Lucas and Munger 2021). Finally, Egelhofer et al. (2020) track journalists' use of the term "fake news" over a three-year period in eight major Austrian newspapers, including references to "fake news" as a type of misinformation (57% of articles), as a label to attack the news media (22% of articles), and as a synonym for anything false (43% of articles). The plurality of articles that mentioned who was responsible for counteracting "fake news" named social media (26%).

Despite employing quite different methodologies and different samples, these studies suggest a common theme in the media's treatment of the misinformation phenomenon. First, even though "fake news" circulates through a range of channels, including email chains, interpersonal conversation, text chats (e.g. WhatsApp) and mainstream media (including cable news), the media

consistently portray social media as the primary bogeyman in their discussions of "fake news." And second, the mainstream media often explicitly contrasts the information free-for-all of social media with their own more systematic approach to fact-checking and verification.

2.1 Content Analysis Design and Procedure

This section presents the results of a content analysis designed to identify both themes in media coverage of misinformation and changes in the volume of coverage over time. The content analysis was conducted in two waves. The first wave, collected in 2019, examined media coverage from 2015 to 2018. These results informed the design of the experimental treatments. In 2023, the content analysis was updated to include data from 2019 to 2022, providing a comprehensive overview of media coverage that spans two presidencies and the COVID-19 pandemic. This date range was selected because it encompasses the rise of the "misinformation" phenomenon. *The Washington Post* aptly illustrates this dramatic shift in focus. In the thirty-five years prior to 2015, the words "misinformation" or "fake news" appeared in only 21 total *Washington Post* headlines – about one article every eighteen months. In the eight years that followed, these terms appeared in 200 headlines: about one every two weeks.

To systematically analyze media coverage of the misinformation phenomenon, I use the NexisUni and ProQuest databases to generate a list of all news articles whose headlines used the terms "misinformation" or "fake news" published in *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, the *USA Today*, and the Associated Press between January 1, 2015, and January 1, 2019 (Phase 1) and between January 2, 2019, and December 31, 2023 (Phase 2). The first three publications have the highest circulations in the United States, and the AP provides content for local news outlets across the country.

I distinguish between these two phases of data collection and coding because the first set of articles was coded by two research assistants in 2020, and the results directly informed the design of the experiments in the following chapters. The second set of articles was coded by a different set of research assistants in 2023, with the goal of bringing the content analysis up to date and integrating coverage of the COVID pandemic. More information about inter-coder reliability for both phases is available in Section 2.1.4.

Selecting news articles that use the phrase in the *headline* (rather than only in the body of the text) ensures that the articles are about the larger phenomenon of misinformation, and avoids articles in which misinformation is mentioned only in passing and/or as a synonym for any kind of false