Examining Audience Trust of Official Source and Whistleblower Information Disclosure in News Stories

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The use of whistleblowers as sources is an important part of journalistic practice. Does news media's reporting on information disclosed by whistleblowers affect audience trust — an already shaky relationship that has been strained over the past few decades? This study performed a 2 x 2 between subjects online experiment to test audience trust in whistleblowers and official sources, manipulating the source (official source/whistleblower) and gender (male/female) of a single news story. Preliminary findings include self-identified conservatives trusted whistleblowers more than official sources, while liberals reported the opposite. Also, considering the predominant historical use of males as official sources in stories, women were found to be overall more trustworthy than men in nearly all conditions. This research is a work in progress, though limitations and opportunities for future research are also discussed.

Keywords: editing, journalism, associate editing, articles, editor, publishing

The year 2020 may be remembered for a cavalcade of bad news, as contentious elections, COVID-19, severe weather, and racial injustice dominated the news media and attention spans of most Americans. Eyes and minds were glued to TVs and other digital screens as one contentious or negative news story drowned out another in what seemed like record time. In time, it may appear as if few had the ability to fully process the near-constant

procession of pessimism and controversy in the news.

Easily overlooked, however, is the role whistleblowers played in the disclosure to the public of important information regarding these major issues. At first glance, news media in 2020 frequently sourced valuable, provocative claims to individuals who revealed the information at great personal and professional risk. In June 2020, for example, a congressional committee heard testimony from Rick Bright, the former head of the Centers for Disease Control, who claimed he was demoted because he would not endorse the use of hydroxychloroquine, a COVID-19 treatment that was shown to be ineffective in early clinical trials. He faced intense political pressure from President Donald Trump's administration, he said, and was told to endorse the use of the drug and downplay the danger of the virus. Bright then filed a whistleblower complaint against the administration and later resigned from his government position (Watson, 2020). In September, Dawn Wooten, a nurse at a Georgia facility run by the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement facility, filed a whistleblowing complaint alleging that the agency forced hysterectomies on female detainees and deprived many people at the center of proper medical care. Also in September, a whistleblower complaint was filed to the House Intelligence Committee, alleging that the complainant, Brian Murphy, faced retaliation for refusing to alter intelligence reports for political gain. Murphy was demoted for his actions (Shuham, 2020).

These are just three examples of reporting on whistleblower disclosures in the news media, a practice that has been important to journalism, especially during the past several years. But how do audiences respond to news articles that contain this information? Whistleblowers frequently disclose controversial information that often causes at least public discussion, if not public outcry. Does news media's increasing reporting on information disclosed by whistleblowers affect audience trust — an already shaky relationship that has been strained over the past few decades? Considering these questions, the purpose of the paper is to investigate how whistleblower information affects audience trust when compared to information from more traditional journalistic sources. Using an online experiment, this research sought to uncover if audience members are more or less likely to believe controversial information if it comes from news stories using traditional sources, as opposed to news stories that use whistleblowers—a type of source that, when used, can bring significant ethical complications to journalism practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Journalists' use of sources to convey, explain, and interpret newsworthy information is an oft-studied aspect of academic studies of both media effects and journalistic practice. How journalists select sources for news stories, the types of sources they choose, and the frequent use of the same or similar types of sources affect how audiences interpret events and process issues of public interest. These sources, and the information they provide, create attributes by which audience understand important information through the explanation of facts presented by the sources themselves. These attributes or frames serve as "a central organizing principle" that offer an orderly way to interpret the social world (Gamson et al., 1992). Thus, the practice of source selection can also be understood as the establishment of framing devices in news stories, in that sources relay their own interpretations of facts and their opinions surrounding those facts.

Journalists and dependence on "official" sources

Journalism can be viewed as a cultural and social practice in which both newsmakers and audiences construct and contextualize the profession, thus also legitimizing what practices qualify as

journalism (Carlson, 2016). One common cultural practice in journalism is the preferred use of official sources, with most journalists generally leaning less on unofficial sources in day-to-day news coverage (Speer, 2017). In news stories, official sources typically take the form of experts, spokespeople, public relations professionals, officials, or individuals who otherwise have direct involvement with a topic (Franklin & Carlson, 2010). Official sources are traditionally attributed by name and profession in news stories, lending perceived credibility and factual accuracy to a journalist's presentation of information. Expert sources may provide important context to developing events, for example, providing audiences additional perspectives by which to be an informed citizen in a complex social ecosystem. Changes or developments in notable events, such as war or other conflicts, may shift media frames to the use of other types of official sources—a journalist may interview a foreign official that is on an opposing side of a conflict, for example—but seldom do these changes lead to an increase in the use of unofficial sources (Speer, 2017).

Typically, these official sources are authorized to provide information to journalists by their employer or organization. This approved information, therefore, often takes the form of facts that may benefit an organization's practices or claims, thus building frames that steer journalists' and audiences' interpretations of facts in specific ways. For example, frame-building processes from governments and politicians can trickle into media coverage, influencing not just what news is created and affecting salience, but also how it is structured along with what context is provided, thus affecting how audiences perceive the world around them and weigh the benefits or costs of public policy (Bedingfield & Anshari, 2014). Specifically, Bedingfield and Anshari (2014) found a noticeable uptick in stories framing former presidential candidate Mitt Romney as a "vulture capitalist" after the Barack Obama campaign pushed the same narrative during the 2012 presidential campaign. Governments and politicians often spend a considerable amount of time, money, and effort in guiding how journalists decide what to cover and how information is presented. Simply framing a candidate in way that benefits one candidate over another in a political race can have profound sway in the outcomes of elections. The use of official sources, then, creates a practical and beneficial cycle in the routine operations—official sources can provide information that benefits their organization, and journalists are able to do their work by publishing information in a competitive, deadline-driven environment. The journalist's relationship with these traditional forms of sources is a mutually dependent relationship.

Whistleblowers as disruptors of news routines

In our swift and ever-present media climate, audiences expect journalism and the free press to serve as a critical eye on government, as well as an expert voice that guides them through the complexity of relevant social issues (Wurff & Schoenbach, 2014). These substantial expectations often take the form of journalists taking a more adversarial role against hegemonic institutions. One way for journalists to perform this role is by using unofficial sources in news content to disclose issues of public importance. These types of sources may appear in news stories as whistleblowers, leakers, or as other "non-official" roles that often do not have explicit permission to disclose information to the press. These types of sources may often go unidentified in published stories, with their identities known only to the reporters and a select few in newsrooms. Sources may be attributed in news stories as "administration officials," for example, or as simply just a "source." This practice, while increasingly common, raises significant ethical issues and can harm the news media's trust relationship with audiences, as it decreases transparency and opens the industry to criticism for hindering credibility (Duffy & Freeman,

2011). Without proper vetting or rigorous standards, the act of publishing information without identifying attribution can be easy for journalists to abuse.

The journalistic routine of relying on most types of official sources—and even some types of unidentified sources—often promotes narratives beneficial to institutions and maintains a sense of stability. Whistleblowers, however, are a distinct type of unofficial source that not only disrupt the newsgathering routines of journalists, but often disrupt the agenda-setting process of the press as well. Whereas leakers of information or other unnamed sources may disclose information for a variety of reasons, whistleblowers often primarily disclose information to expose wrongdoing or unmask secret information that is of significance to the public interest (Latan et al., 2017; Waytz et al., 2013). When whistleblowers disclose information to an external source, they often do so at great risk to their own well-being; whistleblowers can face significant retaliation for their actions, with repercussions ranging from loss of employment, legal punishment, and social ostracization (Casal & Zalkind, 1995; Domfeh & Bawole, 2011; Lim et al., 2017). To distinguish whistleblowing revelations from other types of disclosure, Jubb (1999) outlined six characteristics that make whistleblowers distinct as communicators of information:

1. Whistleblowers take a deliberate action of disclosure.
2. Whistleblowing disclosures become part of the public record.
3. A whistleblower has privileged access to the disclosed information.
4. The disclosure illustrates significant illegality or wrongdoing.
5. A specific target is implicated in the disclosure.
6. The disclosure is made to an external entity.

These traits differentiate a whistleblower from a typical leaker, for example, as a leaker of information may indeed deliberately speak to the press (an external entity), but it may be for the purpose of promoting a specific narrative beneficial or critical to an organization, not to disclose wrongdoing. Also, whistleblowers disrupt news routines by reversing the typical relationship of a journalist and his or her official sources. Journalists tend to spend a significant amount of time cultivating relationships with official sources to build a steady incoming stream of newsworthy information. Whistleblowers, conversely, often initiate the relationship with a journalist with the offer of potentially newsworthy information (Waters, 2020).

Framing effects of source use

When it comes to issues of public concern, how journalists frame salient attributes of issues can have a considerable influence on audiences, thus guiding public opinion to support or reject policies and customs that are under discussion. Even in smaller news markets, community news plays a significant role in influencing civic engagement (Yamamoto, 2011). Also, audiences that are exposed to partisan news under a conflict frame, or a framework that reports on an issue as a dispute between two or more parties, report higher levels of polarization (Han & Federico, 2017). Specifically, how journalists frame public issues over time affects audience attitudes on issues and party self-identification, thus influencing political party competition in the United States (Wagner & Gruszczynski, 2016).

Importantly, when subjects such as regulation or policy disputes become the primary foci for journalists, politicians can become the predominant sources for journalistic output (Zukas, 2016). With this reliance on politicians as sources, specifically in the United States, policy discussions and controversy are thus frequently framed within contexts that affirm and reinforce American values and

institutions. Media frames in the United States reflect political dogma when it comes to foreign policy, showing wariness towards Islam, for example, and promoting narratives that support democratic values (Guzman, 2016). News sources that challenge traditionally perceived American values of patriotism and virtue may be framed negatively by media. For example, Leavey (2017) found that a former American solider's involvement with the Occupy Wall Street movement was frequently framed as unpatriotic or untrustworthy and was trivialized as an aberration. Further, an analysis of media frames of the Fort Hood shooting in 2009 and the Navy Yard shooting in 2013 found that news media predominantly framed both shootings differently—as a terrorist act and a crime, respectively. Both were performed by single actors, yet both stories were contextualized under the meta-narrative of the United States' War on Terror, thus continuing a misleading narrative that the nation is constantly under attack (Morin, 2016)

Journalists often frame the causes of problems under the lens of the individual, and solutions under the lens of institutions. For example, campus sexual assault was frequently framed by newspapers, regardless of political leaning, as a problem by which victims' individual behavior was a cause, and universities could perhaps be the creators of a solution to the issue (Li et al., 2017) Reinforcing this idea of individual responsibility is the media's frequent use of individual exemplars, as journalists consistently refer back to them in stories, as they provide a simple reference point from which audiences can refer (Yan & Liu, 2016). A simple example of this is the routine references to Edward Snowden and his NSA disclosures whenever the issue of mass surveillance or privacy is broached. Snowden is indeed an exemplar as a whistleblowing journalistic source, as his revelations undermined U.S. surveillance policies and caused a significant amount of controversy.

Trust in news media

The 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer, an annual report that measures trust in institutions, found that trust in news media was at an all-time low, with most of the study's 33,000 respondents across the globe reporting that news media intentionally attempts to mislead the public. Additionally, the report found that most respondents do little to verify information or pursue information that challenges their existing beliefs (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2021). Though linked with the economic and political turmoil of the past two decades, these facts are sobering for the journalism profession, which places great value on earning the public's trust. Journalists who report a high recognition of their role in society also express greater displeasure in their views of audience reactions and involvement, indicating that the journalist-audience relationship may not improve anytime soon (Scherr & Baugut, 2016).

Audience members' perceptions of bias in their news leads to less news consumption overall, though these perceptions do not necessarily affect audience trust in a news source (Weeks et al., 2015). Social endorsement of news content may, in fact, be a stronger predictor of news story selection than political affiliation (Messing & Westwood, 2012). Regardless, news consumers more often perform selective exposure to news content, preferring to seek out media that confirms their preexisting beliefs, and social media algorithms that tailor content to one's behavior strengthen the likelihood one will encounter only agreeable news (Bakshy et al., 2015). Both liberals and conservatives, then, are locking themselves in echo chambers of their own creation.

An interesting problem arises, however, when the drop in news media trust and news routines collide. Political conservatives report a higher preference to defer to authority than liberals, generally preferring obedience to defiance (Frimer et al., 2014). Journalists, however, rely on voices of authority as part of their news routines. Trust in media is somewhat higher (57%) when media reports use named

sources versus media reports with unnamed sources (48%), according to Edeleman (2021). This finding, however, does not appear to account for whistleblowers, who are distinct as a journalistic source, as they are non-routine and often identified. Therefore, the use of whistleblowers as named sources, which is a disruption to journalistic practice (specifically the dependence on official sources) could lead to higher trust in the story's claims among audience members. Though overall trust in news may be low, liberals show overall higher trust in media and may be less likely to trust a whistleblower's claims even though they are a symbol of defiance to authority. Conversely, conservatives may report lower trust for official sources, which is linked to higher respect for authority. Thus:

H1a: Conservatives will report higher levels of trust in whistleblowers than official sources in news content.

H1b: Liberals will report higher levels of trust in official sources than whistleblowers in news content.

H2: Individuals with high deference to authority will be associated with lower trust in a whistleblower than an official source.

Gender's influence on use of sources.

Finally, gender plays a significant role both in trust in news content as well as whistleblowing intentions and perceptions. Journalists frequently base the approach of a story on what was said by a source. Journalists, then, have some freedom in choosing sources, but often that freedom is restricted by the relevance of a source to the topic being covered. For example, a journalist may use a company executive when covering a specific business. These executives are more frequently male (Armstrong, 2006). Women have been routinely underrepresented as sources in news content, especially in roles of authority or power (Zoch & Turk, 1998). Additionally, journalists are more likely to use sources who share their gender. In other words, male reporters are also more likely to select males as sources, and vice-versa (Armstrong, 2004).

Regardless of gender, whistleblowers take significant risks when choosing to disclose to an external entity, facing retaliation from an organization and significant damages to their private lives and well-being (Lim et al., 2017). In whistleblowing and disclosure contexts, however, gender may play a role in the intention to reporting misdeeds. Specifically, being female has been reported to have a moderating role in whistleblowing intentions, as men may be more likely to take the risks of reporting improper actions (Puni & Hilton, 2020; Sims & Keenan, 1998). Further research on the link between whistleblowing and gender has returned mixed results, with some studies showing little to no relationship and others showing a moderate connection between the two variables (Antinyan et al., 2020; Culiberg & Mihelič, 2017). Much previous research has found little distinction, in gender and reporting intentions, for example, but intention is not action (Tilton, 2017). Considering the gap in the literature surrounding journalistic sources, media trust, gender, and whistleblowing, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3: Female whistleblowers will be reported as more trustworthy than male whistleblowers.

H4: Female whistleblowers will be reported as less trustworthy than female official sources.

H5a: Male participants will report higher levels of trust in male whistleblowers than female whistleblowers.

H5b: Female participants will report higher levels of trust in female whistleblowers than female whistleblowers

METHODS

This research used a 2x2 between-subjects online experiment to test the hypotheses, manipulating the source (official source/whistleblower) and gender (male/female) of a single news story. The information presented in the story was identical, regardless of source type or gender. The development of the stimulus materials followed Tankard (Tankard, 2001), who suggested that the consistent features of news materials, such as headlines, leads, and other structural components of news stories, are key symbols of journalists' frame formation of a topic. In online environments, these elements, including others such as suggested headlines and related content can reinforce and underpin news frames of editorials, even if the relevance for an individual is low (Yan & Liu, 2016).

To increase the realism of the experiment, a real news story was altered for each of the four conditions. The work selected was a 2003 MSNBC online story, "Air Marshals pulled from key flights" (Meeks, 2003). The story concerned a federal air marshal, later identified as Robert MacLean, who spoke to MSNBC, alleging that the Transportation Security Administration would no longer be placing air marshals on international and cross-country flights. The policy change was a result of budget issues, despite a credible increased threat of airline hijackings less than two years after the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. The reporting received public attention and MacLean was eventually fired from his job after being a source in other news stories. MacLean sued the TSA, arguing that he qualified for whistleblower protections under federal law, and he was eventually reinstated in his original position. MacLean was later terminated again in 2019 for message board posts critical of the TSA (Clark, 2019). This article was selected for several reasons: First, the topic concerned public airline safety and terrorism, both of which are issues of significant public concern. Second, as the story was first printed in 2003, it is unlikely that participants would be aware of or remember the controversy that was generated at the time. Therefore, participants would be familiar with the general issues, but they would be less salient and politically relevant as nearly two decades have passed.

The original story was manipulated to four conditions: a male official source, a female official source, a male whistleblower, and a female whistleblower. Male and female names were selected by an online random name generator. Headlines, leads, and supplemental information were altered for each of the conditions to indicate who disclosed the information. For example, in the official source conditions, the headline read "Official: Air Marshals to be pulled from key flights." For the whistleblower condition, the word "official" was changed to "whistleblower." In addition to textual changes, a primary photograph and caption naming and showing the male or female primary source for the article was included. The stories were also condensed to shorten participants' reading time. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions and, following the informed consent, asked to read the story in his or her condition. Following this, participants were asked a series of questions regarding their political leanings and trust in the story that they just viewed.

Participants

This study recruited 120 participants from Amazon's Mechanical Turk for an initial analysis. Following the administration of the study, the data was cleaned of participants who answered with the same answers on every question and participants who spent too little time on each page. After this cleaning, only 2 participants were removed, leaving 118 participants remaining for the analysis. Of the participants who qualified, their mean age group was 25-34 years old (SD=1.07). There were more

females (51.7%, n=61) than males (47.5%, n=56), with one participant identifying their sex as "other." Most participants reported having a high school diploma or more (See Table 1). For the manipulation check, participants were asked for the level of agreement with a general statement of individual trust: "I have confidence in the knowledge and skills of the source of the story (1=not at all to 5 =very much). A one-way between subjects ANOVA was conducted to compare the differences between the four conditions (male official, female official, male whistleblower, and female whistleblower). There was a significant difference at the $p < .05$ level for the four conditions, indicating a meaningful difference between the four conditions, $F(3, 114) = 2.52$, $p < .05$.

Measures

To measure overall trust in media, this study used an adapted version of Moorman et al.'s (Moorman et al., 2018) multidimensional measures of trust and integrity. The questions were revised from their original purpose to measure trust in organizational contexts. Also, several questions were excluded from the study as they were irrelevant to the topic. The final scale consisted of six items (α=.86). Demographic measures such as sex, age, race, education level, political affiliations were also collected. General political affiliation was determined using a 7-point slider scale measuring extremely liberal (1) to extremely conservative (7). Additionally, a condensed, 15-question version of the Right-Wing Authoritarian (RWA) scale (α=.75) was used to determine participants' overall views on deference or defiance of authority (Zakrisson, 2005). The experiment was conducted online using Qualtrics, and all data analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics software version 26.

Results

Hypothesis 1a posited that, overall, conservatives would report higher levels of trust in whistleblowers than official sources in news content. Conversely, H1b speculated that liberals would report higher levels of trust in official sources than whistleblowers. Independent-samples t-tests were conducted for both analyses, with H1a measuring overall trust (male and female conditions) in whistleblowers between conservatives and liberals. H1a was supported, as a significant but slight difference was found indicating higher trust among conservatives (M=3.56, SD=.95) for whistleblowers than liberals (M=3.28, SD=1.41); $t(2)=.58$, $p<.05$. Hypothesis 1b anticipated the opposite result—that liberals would trust official sources more than conservatives. Results indicated that this may be the case, as liberals (M=3.61, SD=.92) reported a higher level of trust than conservatives (M=3.33, SD=1.01), but the results were not statistically significant; $t(27)=.73$, $p<.30$.

Hypothesis 2 said that individuals with high deference to authority will be associated with lower trust in a whistleblower than an official source. Using the RWA scale to measure one's deference to authority, the hypothesis was not supported, though results were not found to be statistically significant. Participants who reported a level of RWA above three on a five-item RWA scale composite were considered to have high RWA. Independent sample t-tests indicated that high-RWA individuals reported a higher level of trust in whistleblowers (M=3.61, SD=.97), than official sources (M=3.49, SD=.93); $t(26)=.1.05$, $p<.24$.

H3 and H4 were concerned with the relationship between gender and source use in news content. In an independent sample t-test, regarding trust levels between female and male whistleblowers, H3 posited that female whistleblowers would be found to be more trustworthy than female official sources. This hypothesis was supported, indicating that females (M=4.12, SD=.62) were more trustworthy than males (M=3.45, SD=1.07) when reporting the same information; $t(58)=19.75$, $p<.001$. H4 predicted that

female official sources would be considered lest trustworthy than male official sources, as official sources in news tend to be predominately male (Armstrong, 2006). An independent sample t-test found that H4 was not supported, as female official sources (M=3.64, SD=.19) were found by a slim margin to be more trustworthy than male official sources (M=3.44, SD=.18); t(56)=.78, p<.56). These results, however, were not found to be statistically significant.

Finally, hypothesis 5 looked for a relationship between participant gender and source gender, with both statements predicting higher trust for one's own gender. Specifically, H5a indicated that male participants will report higher levels of trust in male whistleblowers than female whistleblowers. An independent sample t-test found that H5a was not supported, as male participants reported higher trust in female whistleblowers (M=4.28, SD=.40) than male whistleblowers (M=3.39, SD=1.28); t(16)=2.9, p<.05) On the other hand, H5b posited that female participants will report higher levels of trust in female whistleblowers than male whistleblowers. This hypothesis was not supported, as female whistleblowers (M=3.92, SD=.83) were indeed found to be more trustworthy among other females than male whistleblowers (M=3.50, SD=.93), though the results were found to be statistically insignificant; t(28)=.68, p< .42).

To summarize, self-identified conservatives trusted whistleblowers more than official sources, a somewhat surprising result considering conservatives reported low trust in media over the past few years (Jamieson & Albarracín, 2020; Mourão et al., 2018). Also surprising was that liberals generally supported official sources more than whistleblowers, considering their higher inclination to not defer to authority (Frimer et al., 2014). Importantly, higher RWA was not found to be a significant indicator of trust of either whistleblowers or official sources, though a mean difference leaning towards higher trust in whistleblowers was found. Considering the predominant use of males as sources in stories (Armstrong, 2006), that women were found to be overall more trustworthy than men in nearly all conditions counters the view of males as being held in higher regard as authority figures, at least in these contexts.

Table 1

Participant Demographics by Group

Condition	n	Gender (% Female)	Ideology, *M* (SD)
Male official	29	48.3%	3.90 (1.68)
Male whistleblower	28	57.1%	4.15 (1.79)
Female official	29	62.1%	4.14 (1.55)
Female whistleblower	32	40.6%	4.59 (1.66)

Note: The ideology scale was 1 (extremely liberal) to 7 (extremely conservative).

DISCUSSION

This study examined the use of whistleblowers as journalistic sources and the levels of trust audiences allocate to them compared to official sources. These results were preliminary, and more work needs to be done, but initial results show several interesting findings regarding how audiences view whistleblower coverage in news media.

First, some of these initial findings indicate at least some counterintuitive audience views of whistleblowing coverage. There is a stereotypical view of conservatives and the media, which may lead

one to predict that they may generally be skeptical of whistleblowers who take acts of defiance against authority that disrupt organizational routines. A possible explanation for this is that whistleblowers' disruption of journalistic sourcing routines, when combined with an overall decreasing trust in mainstream news among the public, may lead to higher levels of trust exactly because of the disruption of news routines. In other words, any action that disrupts the traditional newsgathering processes may be viewed as a positive by some audience members, in that it overturns the agenda setting functions of an increasingly untrustworthy press. Under this lens, some in the audience may see this as an uncovering of some truth that news media may otherwise ignore.

Next, the consistent finding of higher trust in female sources, whether official or whistleblowing, is an interesting result that deserves further consideration. Women are presented in news less frequently as authority figures. Women have also been found to be less inclined to disclose whistleblowing information (Sims & Keenan, 1998). Whistleblowing can be viewed as an act of dissent in this regard, as the whistleblower exposes previously unknown knowledge with a goal of uprooting organizational misdeeds or unethical behavior. If this is the case, that female whistleblowers are, in fact, found to be more trustworthy, then their willingness to come forward at great personal sacrifice is something to be commended.

An important consideration needs to be made, however, regarding the materials used for the experiment. In the manipulated news stories, all primary sources indicated a problem with an issue of national security—a topic that could explain the higher levels of trust among conservatives in several hypotheses. Choosing a news story regarding an act of disclosure that is difficult to politicize is no easy feat, especially in a polarized media climate. NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden, for example, is commonly framed as either a hero or traitor in the news and on social media, depending on the news outlets or contributor's political bent (Opt, 2015; Qin, 2015). The used of a story more than 10 years old was an attempt to mitigate this factor, but more work may need to be done regarding the type of story used and trust levels. Additionally, the images in each of the conditions were all of white individuals, as race was not manipulated in this phase of the study. Further research needs to be done to determine if and how race plays a factor in whistleblower and official source trust.

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