

“Is It the Message or the Messenger?”: Conspiracy Endorsement and Media Sources

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Abstract

Public opinion literature on conspiracy theories mainly focuses on individual and contextual factors predicting people's beliefs in conspiratorial news. However, little research to date has considered the role of the source of the news, and its interaction with the news content, in explaining people's receptivity to those narratives. By employing a survey experiment on a sample of U.S. citizens, we test whether the conspiratorial/debunking content of a news and the type of media outlet publishing it (mainstream/independent) affect people's perceptions of the news plausibility. Respondents are asked to evaluate the plausibility of a news headline supporting or debunking a well-known conspiracy theory (chemtrails), attributed to a mainstream media outlet or an independent blog. Results show that (1) conspiracy believers are more likely to believe in the conspiratorial account than in the debunking account and (2) the effect is stronger when the news comes from an independent source rather than a mainstream one.

Keywords

motivated reasoning, conspiracy theories, experimental design, online media trust, United States

In recent years, public belief in conspiracy theories has gained increasing scholarly attention (see Oliver & Wood, 2014; Uscinski, 2018). Although not a new phenomenon (see Uscinski & Parent, 2013), the diffusion of conspiracy stories appears to be more politically relevant today than ever before. In a 2011 survey, Oliver and Wood (2014) show that about 20% of a sample of U.S. citizens believe that government officials were involved in the 9/11 terrorist attacks, one of 10 believes that vapor trails left by airplanes contain chemicals sprayed in a government-led clandestine program (the so-called “chemtrails”), and almost one quarter of the sample believes that former President Barack Obama was not born in the United States. The widespread belief in such stories contrasts with the increase of educational level and generalized scientific knowledge in the general public (Plencner, 2014). Moreover, research shows that conspiracy endorsement is connected with several relevant political phenomena, such as vote for antiestablishment and populist

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parties (Castanho Silva et al., 2017; Mancosu et al., 2017; van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019), nonnormative political participation (Imhoff et al., 2020), and even engagement with petty crime (Jolley et al., 2019).

A conspiracy story can be defined as an explanation of political or social events focused on “secret arrangement[s] between a small group of actors to usurp political or economic power, violate established rights, hide vital secrets or illicitly cause widespread harm” (Uscinski et al., 2016, p. 58). Scholars studying this phenomenon have focused mainly on explaining why people believe in such conspiracies. Psychological research has repeatedly shown that endorsing specific conspiracy theories is often a symptom of a general *conspiracy mentality*, namely “the idea that authorities are engaged in motivated deception of the public” (Wood et al., 2012, p. 768). Fewer studies have looked at how conspiracies spread among the public. Here, research mostly confirms that the main channel is the Internet and specifically a galaxy of independent websites, blogs, social media pages, and profiles that contribute to constructing a conspiracist narrative, presenting alternative interpretations of social and political events (see Stempel et al., 2007; Zollo, 2019).

In this study, we investigate the effect of individual predispositions and media sources on people’s propensity to believe in nonpolitical conspiracy theories. We build on the literature on media consumption and trust in media sources, showing that people tend to regard news resonating with their prior political beliefs as more accurate (see Jones, 2004; Sloothus & de Vreese, 2010; Taber & Lodge, 2006). This pertains to both the content of the news and its source. It has been shown that Republicans are more likely to perceive a news content in which Democrats are depicted in a negative light as plausible (Knight Foundation, 2018). Moreover, research shows that people are more likely to consider a news as accurate when it is published by an outlet renowned to have a political leaning that is consistent with their own (Jakesh et al., 2018). Given that most conspiracies are spread through alternative media outlets like blogs, we ask whether the source from which people get their news plays a role in their possible acceptance of conspiracy theories, conditional on their preexisting attitudes.

In a survey experiment conducted via Amazon Mechanical Turk, we ask a sample of North American respondents to rate the plausibility of a news story, which is randomized with respect to its content (endorsing or debunking a known conspiracy theory) and the outlet on which it is published (a mainstream media source or an independent blog). We also measure the respondents’ conspiracy mentality and a set of sociodemographic and political characteristics. Our results show that conspiracy believers are more prone to evaluate as plausible the news supporting a conspiracy narrative than the one debunking it. In addition, we find that conspiracy believers are significantly more likely to evaluate the same conspiracy-endorsing story as more plausible if it comes from an independent blog than from a mainstream media.

Background

Uscinski and colleagues (2016) define a conspiracy theory as “a proposed explanation of events that cites as a primary causal factor a small group of persons (the conspirators) acting in secret for their benefit, against the common good” (p. 2). Belief in conspiracy theories is widespread among the Western public (Darwin et al., 2011; Oliver & Wood, 2014; Swami et al., 2014; Uscinski et al., 2016; Wood et al., 2012). Moreover, conspiracy belief has been shown to be resistant to corrections and debate. By employing Facebook data, Zollo and colleagues (2017) show that people endorsing conspiracy theories tend to maintain their beliefs even when exposed to attempts of “debunking,” namely, providing counterarguments that reveal the (usually blatant) logical and empirical inconsistencies of such theories. In this respect, endorsing conspiracy theories means, to some extent, embracing an epistemology that is resistant to alternative views and explanations (Soukup, 2008).

But why do people believe in conspiracy theories? One line of research (more common in social psychology) focuses on the relationship with several psychological traits, implicitly assuming that conspiracy belief can be understood as a symptom of a psychological disorder (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Darwin et al., 2011; Swami et al., 2010, 2011). Other studies focus on the role of sociopolitical factors, in particular the marginal social or political status of many conspiracy believers (Darwin et al., 2011; Mancosu et al., 2017, 2020; Oliver & Wood, 2014; van Prooijen et al., 2015). However, one of the most robust findings in the literature is that the best predictor of believing in *one* conspiracy theory is believing in *other* conspiracy theories. This association holds even when people are asked to evaluate conspiracy stories that logically contradict each other (Wood et al., 2012) or stories that they could not possibly know about—being specifically designed for ad hoc psychological experiments (see, for instance, Swami et al., 2011). Such empirical evidence has led scholars to define belief in conspiracy theories as a distinct psychological trait, the conspiracy mentality. Empirically, the identification of a common latent factor behind the belief in different conspiracy theories has allowed researchers to build generic conspiracy belief scales, such as the one by Bruder et al. (2013), which proved to be highly correlated with specific conspiracy theories and to be reliable across cultures (see also Brotherton et al., 2013). What are the characteristics of this mentality? As discussed above, the elements that all conspiracy narratives share, no matter their topic, are the idea that a small group of people, usually members of elites with incredible powers, are acting in the shadows in order to enslave, harm, or deceive ordinary citizens. As Wood et al. (2012) argue, the general belief behind the acceptance of these narratives could be the one of a “deceptive officialdom,” that is, “the idea that authorities are engaged in motivated deception of the public” (p. 768).

Another body of research looks at the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and the media. When it comes to patterns of diffusion, previous studies show that conspiracy theories spread mainly via social media and independent blogs (Stempel et al., 2007; Warner & Neville-Shepard, 2014). These kinds of sources compete with professional media with respect to the accuracy of the news, but some of them also report fake news, conspiracy theories, and unsubstantiated claims of different kinds (Davis, 2009). Empirical evidence confirms this expectation: Stempel and colleagues (2007) show, for instance, that users of alternative media, such as blogs and independent media sources on the Internet, are more likely to believe in the 9/11 conspiracy theory than users of mainstream media. Additionally, Warner and Neville-Shepard (2014) show that exposure to news stories endorsing (or debunking) particular conspiracy theories (the “Birther” and the “9/11” conspiracies) reinforces (or reduce) the subjects’ belief in those theories. Hence, like any other accurate or inaccurate news, the chances that a conspiracy narrative is adopted by the public depend to a large extent on media coverage.

However, the mechanism linking belief in conspiracies to media consumption remains unclear. The research discussed above shows that (1) users of independent media are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories than users of mainstream media and that (2) independent sources are more likely to report conspiracy theories than mainstream sources. Yet the fact that some people believe in conspiracies reported by blogs might be due to audience self-selection. Given the presence in the population of a dispositional trait such as the conspiracy mentality, it is unclear whether media coverage of conspiracy stories is likely to affect everyone or whether those who are predisposed to believe in conspiracies are more likely to trust what news they find on alternative media.

Much research shows that people’s acceptance of new information is conditional on their prior attitudes: Individuals are more likely to accept information confirming what they already believe and reject information contradicting it (see Flynn et al., 2017; Leeper & Slothuus, 2014). This effect is called *motivated reasoning*: When people acquire new information, they do not just want to reach objectively accurate conclusions, but they also seek to remain consistent with their preexisting attitudes and social identities (Kunda, 1990). To do so, they engage in different types of biased

information processing, like paying special attention to some pieces of information and devaluing others (see Taber & Lodge, 2006). Motivated reasoning is not only triggered by the content of a piece of information but also by its source. Individuals are more likely to accept information coming from in-group than from out-group sources (Goren et al., 2009; Lupia & McCubbins, 1998), and they are more likely to express trust in in-group than in out-group media outlets (Lee, 2010).

Literature providing empirical evidence of motivated evaluation of the content and source of a message is vast. Slothuus and De Vreese (2010) show that framing strategies adopted by political parties—for example, presenting issues from different angles or emphasizing certain pieces of information and silencing others (Druckman & Nelson, 2003)—are more persuasive to their supporters than to their opponents. Individuals, thus, tend to align with a certain political narrative on the basis of previously held beliefs. A recent experiment carried out by the Knight Foundation (2018) shows that the same news, published by a renowned Republican/Democrat outlet, produces significantly different evaluations of reliability, according to the partisan leaning of the person evaluating the news content. Jakesch and colleagues (2018) show that when experimentally compared, both the source and the content of the news are driven by mechanisms of motivated reasoning: Democrat-consistent news content and source tend to be perceived as more accurate among Democrats and less among Republicans (and vice versa). Moreover, the same study shows that the effect of the source is smaller than one of the actual content of the news.

How does this apply to belief in conspiracies? The motivated reasoning framework predicts that people will accept new information based on the congruence of (1) its *content* and (2) its *source* with their own preexisting attitudes. First, the content is more likely to be accepted when it is congruent with one's prior attitudes. People will thus tend to evaluate information that resonates with their attitudes and habits of consumption as more accurate. Hence, we expect that more “conspiracy-minded” individuals will tend to evaluate a conspiracy-endorsing news story as more accurate than people who are low in conspiracy mentality. Moreover, the opposite should occur for a debunking news story. Given that conspiracy mentality can be conceptualized as a continuous trait, we formulate our first hypothesis as follows:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Greater conspiracy mentality is associated with higher perceived plausibility of a conspiracy-endorsing news story and with lower perceived plausibility of a debunking news story.

Second, based on the motivated reasoning framework, a message is more likely to be accepted when it is perceived as coming from an in-group source. Hence, the outlet publishing the news story should also have an effect on its perceived plausibility. However, in this case, unlike much previous research, we do not focus on the partisan leaning of the outlet (whether liberal or conservative), but on media type, that is, whether it is a mainstream or an alternative news source. On the one hand, conspiracy-minded individuals should be more reluctant to accept news coming from mainstream media, which they might perceive as embroiled with the same powerful organizations that are conspiring (see Stempel et al., 2007). On the other hand, they should perceive alternative news sources as providers of more authentic content, less controlled by the powerful elites controlling the information to which the people are exposed. Hence, we formulate the second hypothesis as follows:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Greater conspiracy mentality is associated with higher perceived plausibility of a news story coming from an independent source and with lower perceived plausibility of a news story coming from a mainstream media source.

Finally, a further point of interest is how content and source *interact* with each other. Is a conspiracy-endorsing news more likely to be accepted when it comes from a mainstream or an alternative media source? Are there any differences in this respect between people who are higher or

Table 1. The Experimental Design.

Factor 2: News Source Type		
Factor 1: News content	(1) Conspiracy-endorsing, mainstream (<i>n</i> = 501)	(2) Conspiracy-endorsing, alternative (<i>n</i> = 501)
	(3) Debunking, mainstream (<i>n</i> = 512)	(4) Debunking, alternative (<i>n</i> = 488)

lower in conspiracy mentality? Previous research does not offer enough material to develop any theory-driven hypothesis regarding the interplay between the content and the source of a news; however, two phenomena are the most likely candidates to occur. One is *accentuation*: Conspiracy believers will be even more likely to believe in a conspiracy-endorsing story when it comes from a blog than from an official media source. In this view, the content of the news is further legitimized by this source when the two are coherent. This also implies that people who score low on conspiracy ideation will be even less likely to believe in a conspiracy-endorsing news when they see it coming from an alternative source. On the other hand, we might observe a *suppression* effect: The type of source might counterbalance the content of the news. In this case, a conspiracist individual will be more likely to believe in a debunking story when it comes from an alternative media source, and more skeptical toward a conspiracy-endorsing story found on a mainstream media outlet. Likewise, people with low conspiracy mentality might be more open toward a conspiracy-endorsing news when this comes from what they perceive to be a legitimate source. While not all combinations are equally likely to occur in nature (for instance, while there are many blogs devoted to debunking conspiracy theories and fake news, there are hardly any legitimate news sources endorsing unsubstantiated conspiracy theories), we believe that the interplay between source and content is an interesting aspect, which may cast some light on the process of motivated news belief.

Data and Methods

We test our expectations using an online survey experiment ($N = 2,002$) based on a Mechanical Turk sample of people living in the United States.¹ The interviews were fielded between April 29 and May 13, 2019. In the experiment, respondents are randomly shown a single image comprising a news headline and the first sentences of what resembles an online article. The experiment is a 2×2 factorial design, in which respondents are asked to evaluate (on a 0–10 scale in which 0 means *not plausible at all* and 10 means *completely plausible*) the plausibility of a news story from one of the four conditions defined in Table 1.

Factor 1 refers to whether a story is a conspiracy-endorsing or debunking news. The topic is the same for both news, namely the chemtrails conspiracy theory. In order to avoid deceiving our respondents, the news reported are stories that actually appeared in mainstream outlets (and, plausibly, also shared or reported by independent outlets).² The conspiracy-endorsing news (Conditions 1 and 2) does not directly affirm the presence of a conspiracy but rather suggests the possibility that such conspiracy might exist and that there is evidence supporting the theory (the news is entitled “Are ‘chemtrails’ really a hoax? A video might question the official version”). The debunking story (Conditions 3 and 4) denies categorically the possibility of the conspiracy (the story is entitled “Scientists just say no to ‘chemtrails’ conspiracy theory”).³

Factor 2 refers to the type of outlet, which is conveyed both in the wording of the introductory statement and in the template of the image reporting the story. The wording is randomized as follows: “Please consider the story below, published by *a mainstream media outlet/an independent blog*: To the best of your knowledge, how plausible is the claim in the above headline, on this scale?” An example of the template of the story is presented in Figure 1.

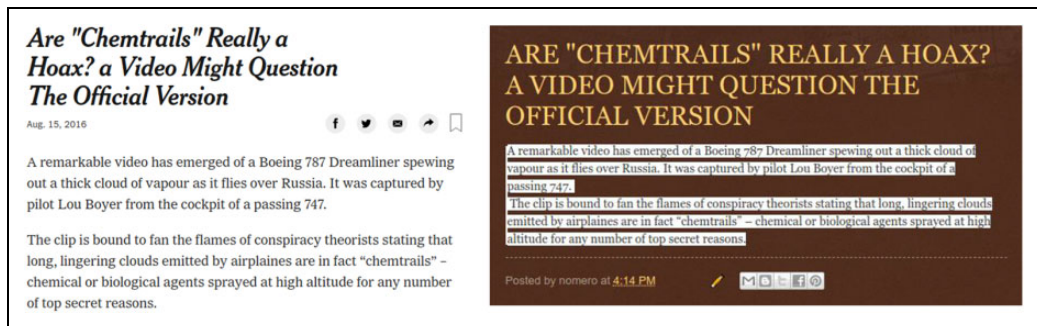


Figure 1. An example (Conditions 1 and 2) of the different template between the mainstream media outlet (left) and the independent blog (right). Note. For full size images of the four treatments, see Online Appendix 1.

As Figure 1 shows, the mainstream outlet is designed with *The New York Times*-like template, while the independent blog treatment is designed in a way that is typical of the automatic template generators of blog platforms—a cue of an unprofessional/hobbyist work.

The four key variables of our analysis are the dependent variable, namely the *plausibility of the news* (see above), the two treatment variables (namely, whether a respondent has been exposed to the conspiracy-endorsing/debunking story published in a mainstream/independent outlet), and a measure of conspiracy mentality. The scale is constructed by employing a 6-item battery asking the respondent to evaluate, on a 7-point scale, how much they believe that different statements are true or not (1 meaning *definitely not true* and 7 meaning *definitely true*). The battery, asked before the experiment to avoid possible issues of endogeneity with the dependent variable, is based on Bruder et al.'s (2013) measure of conspiracy mentality. The items are listed below:

- (1) Events that superficially seem to lack a connection are often the result of secret activities.
- (2) Government agencies closely monitor all citizens.
- (3) For strategic reasons, women are prevented from participating in politics.
- (4) For strategic reasons, the government permits certain terrorist activities to occur which could otherwise be prevented.
- (5) Politicians usually do not tell us the true motives for their decisions.
- (6) There are secret organizations that greatly influence political decisions.

The scale presents a particularly high Cronbach's α ($\alpha = .84$), thus reassuring us of the internal consistency of the battery.⁴ The items in the battery have thus been averaged, producing a 1–7 variable, in which 1 means considering *all the items definitely not true* and 7 means *considering them definitely true*.

In addition, we added a set of controls to the models. Although we are dealing with a randomized design, we are interested in the association between conspiracy mentality and our outcome variable, and conspiracy mentality has been shown to correlate with some sociodemographic characteristics of the individuals. For this reason, in the models, we control for age, gender, educational level ("no college," "until BA," and "more than BA"), interest in politics ("not at all interested/slightly interested" and "somewhat interested/very interested"), ethnicity ("White," "Hispanic or Latino," "Black or African American," "Native American," "Asian/Pacific Islander," and "other"), and trust in the media (a 0–10 scale in which 0 means *no trust at all in the media* and 10 means *complete trust in the media*).⁵

To test our hypotheses, we fitted three ordinary least squares (OLS) models. Model 1, fitting the two-way interaction between the two factors (and including controls), shows the levels of

Table 2. OLS Models for the Plausibility of a News Story.

Independent variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	Coefficient (SE)	Coefficient (SE)	Coefficient (SE)
News (conspiracy-endorsing)	−1.96*** (.19)	−7.38*** (.48)	−6.83*** (.69)
Outlet (alternative)	−0.57*** (.19)	−0.24 (.48)	0.29 (.66)
Conspiracy mentality (CM)	0.36*** (.06)	−0.23** (.09)	−0.15 (.10)
News × Outlet	0.27 (.27)		−1.08 (.95)
Outlet × CM		−0.04 (.10)	−0.20 (.14)
News × CM		1.23*** (.10)	1.07*** (.15)
News × Outlet × CM			0.32 (.20)
Gender: male	0.13 (.14)	0.11 (.13)	0.11 (.13)
Age	−0.03*** (.01)	−0.03*** (.01)	−0.03*** (.01)
Education: until BA	−0.23 (.16)	−0.18 (.15)	−0.19 (.15)
Education: more than BA	−0.50** (.21)	−0.49** (.21)	−0.50** (.21)
Ethnicity: Hispanic (ref. White)	0.31 (.34)	0.15 (.33)	0.14 (.33)
Ethnicity: African American	−0.11 (.26)	−0.09 (.25)	−0.07 (.25)
Ethnicity: Native American	2.21*** (.82)	1.91** (.79)	1.89** (.79)
Ethnicity: Asian	−0.93*** (.34)	−0.89*** (.33)	−0.91*** (.33)
Ethnicity: other	0.37 (.52)	0.35 (.50)	0.39 (.50)
Interested in politics	−0.05 (.16)	−0.04 (.15)	−0.04 (.15)
Trust in the media	0.07*** (.03)	0.06** (.03)	0.06** (.03)
Constant	6.27*** (.45)	8.79*** (.52)	8.55*** (.57)
Observations	2,002	2,002	2,002
R ²	.13	.19	.19

Note. Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.1$. ** $p < 0.05$. *** $p < 0.01$.

plausibility of the four treatments in the sample. Model 2 provides the direct test of our two hypotheses: Both the news content and the source are interacted independently with conspiracy mentality. Finally, Model 3 includes a three-way interaction—the two-way interaction of Model 1 interacted with the Conspiracy Ideation Scale—to explore the interplay between content, source, and conspiracy mentality.

Results

Table 2 shows the result of the three models. Model 1 shows descriptively the way in which the two factors of the experimental design interact. Both the content and the outlet have a negative significant effect on the outcome variable. The respondents rate the conspiracy-endorsing news story as less plausible than the debunking one and the news coming from an independent blog as less plausible than the news coming from a mainstream source. The interaction between the two factors, on the other hand, is not significant.

A prediction table (Figure 2) helps us in assessing more clearly the perceived plausibility of the four treatments in the sample. The figure confirms that the debunking news is regarded as much more plausible than news suggesting that the chemtrails conspiracy is true. This result is consistent with Oliver and Wood (2014), who show that the chemtrails conspiracy theory is one of the least believed in the American public opinion (with about 10% of American public opinion accepting it as plausible, see Oliver & Wood, 2014). The debunking news (published by a mainstream or independent outlet) is perceived as about 1.5 point more plausible than the news endorsing the conspiracy. For what concerns the role of the outlet, we can see that, in the whole sample,

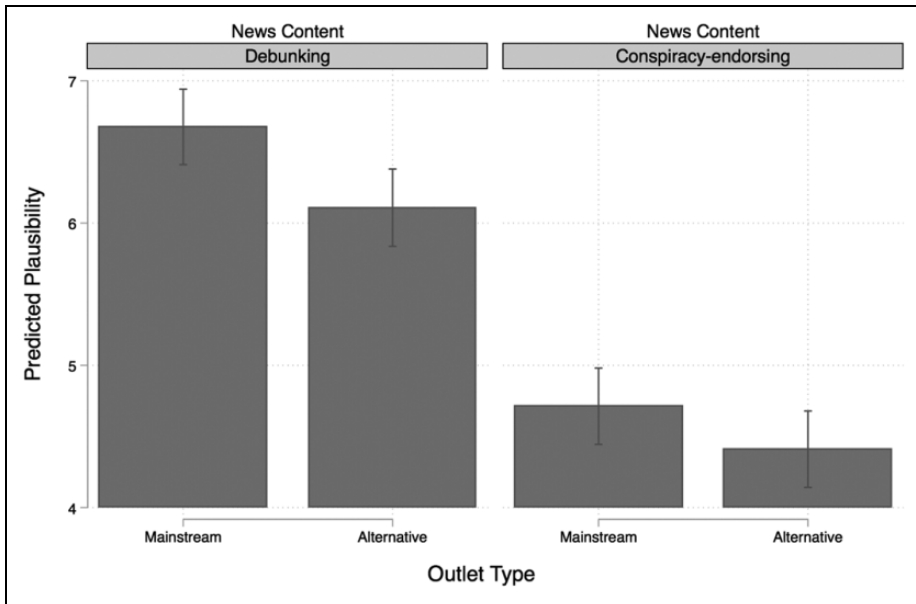


Figure 2. Predicted levels of plausibility of the four treatments (Table 2—Model 1).

independent media are considered significantly less reliable than mainstream media, but only for what concerns the debunking news. The difference between the two types of outlet is not significant when respondents evaluate the conspiracy-endorsing news.

Our hypotheses are focused on how the perceived plausibility of the news in the treatments is associated with the respondents' degree of conspiracy mentality. We test these associations in Model 2. The model only interacts the news content and outlet with the conspiracy mentality, without investigating how content and outlet interact with each other: This counts as a direct test of our two hypotheses. To have a clearer assessment of the results, we report in Figure 3 the average marginal effect of the two treatments over the full scale of our index of conspiracy mentality. A positive value of the marginal effect means that a certain group tends to believe more in the conspiracist story with respect to the debunking one (left panel) or in the story published in the alternative outlet with respect to the mainstream outlet (right panel), whereas negative values mean the opposite.

As the left panel of the figure shows, there is a strong interaction between the content of the news (conspiracy-endorsing and debunking) and the degree of conspiracy mentality of the respondents. People who score very high in conspiracy mentality (6 and 7 on a scale from 1 to 7) tend to consider the conspiracy-endorsing news as equally or more plausible than the debunking news. All the others, however, tend to regard the debunking news as more plausible. This confirms our H1: Greater conspiracy mentality is associated with higher perceived plausibility of a conspiracy-endorsing news story and, by symmetry, with lower perceived plausibility of a debunking news story. The right panel, on the other hand, tells a different story. Our expectation was that more conspiracy-minded individuals would perceive any news coming from a blog as more plausible than any news coming from a mainstream outlet. However, the flat line in the figure suggests that conspiracy mentality does not moderate the source effect of a news. The news story tends to be evaluated as slightly less plausible when they come from a blog than when they are shown in a mainstream media layout as suggested already in Figure 2; however, the plausibility is independent from the individuals' degree of conspiracy mentality. Hence, we cannot confirm our H2.

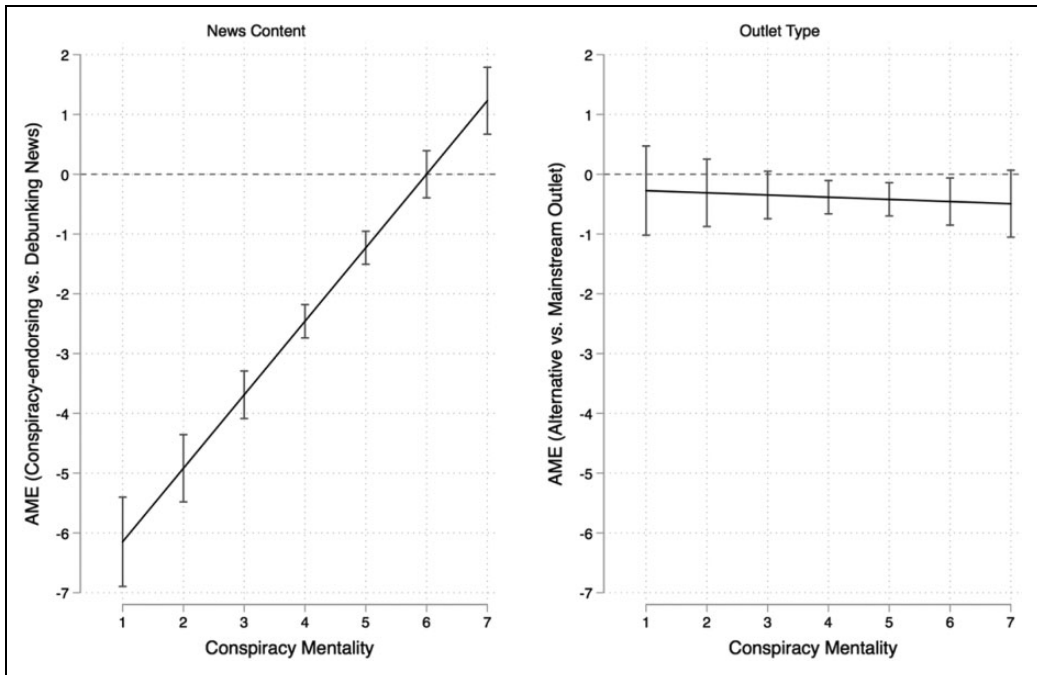


Figure 3. Average marginal treatment effect (news type and outlet) by conspiracy mentality (Table 2—Model 2).

But how do the content and the source of a news interact with each other? And how is their effect received by more or less conspiracy-minded individuals? We explore these questions by introducing a three-way interaction between the two factors of the experiment and the scale of conspiracy ideation. Results are reported in Table 2, Model 3. As the table shows, results are in line with what we could expect from the (lack of) interaction effect between the two treatments in Model 1 and the two separate interactions with conspiracy mentality in Model 2. The only strong and highly significant coefficients in the model are the main effects of the conspiracy-endorsing news, which is regarded as much less plausible than the debunking news, and the interaction between news content and conspiracy mentality, confirming that more conspiracy-minded individuals find the conspiracy-endorsing news as more plausible. However, three-way interactions are difficult to interpret, and the very complex structure of the model might hide patterns that are not visible by looking at the coefficient only. Hence, we visualize in Figures 4 and 5 the results that we deem of most interest: the marginal effect of the conspiracy-endorsing news (vis-à-vis the debunking news) on the two outlet types for respondents of high (Figure 4) and low (Figure 5) conspiracy mentality.⁶ A positive value on the *y*-axis means that a certain group tends to believe more in the conspiracist story with respect to the debunking one, whereas negative values mean the opposite. We define *high conspiracy mentality* the maximum value in the Conspiracy Mentality Scale (7) and *low conspiracy mentality* the minimum value (1).

As Figure 4 shows, conspiracy-minded people tend to believe more in the conspiracy-endorsing story than in the debunking one only when it is published on an alternative source (the independent blog). When confronted with a conspiracy story published by a mainstream outlet, the difference in perceived plausibility with the debunking story is not significant to the 5% threshold ($p = .103$). An *F* test carried out on the difference between the two average marginal effects shows that the difference is significant to the 5% threshold ($F = 4.2$; $p = .04$).

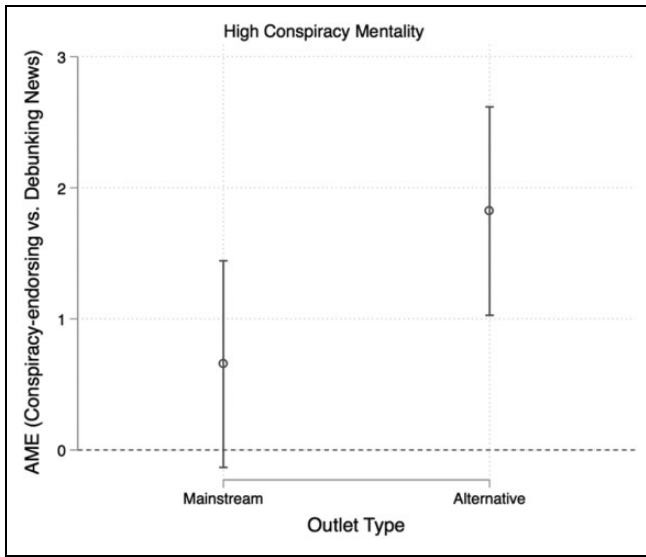


Figure 4. Average marginal effects of conspiracy vis-à-vis debunking stories’ plausibility for respondents of high conspiracy mentality (seven on the Conspiracy Mentality Scale, Table 2—Model 3 coefficients).

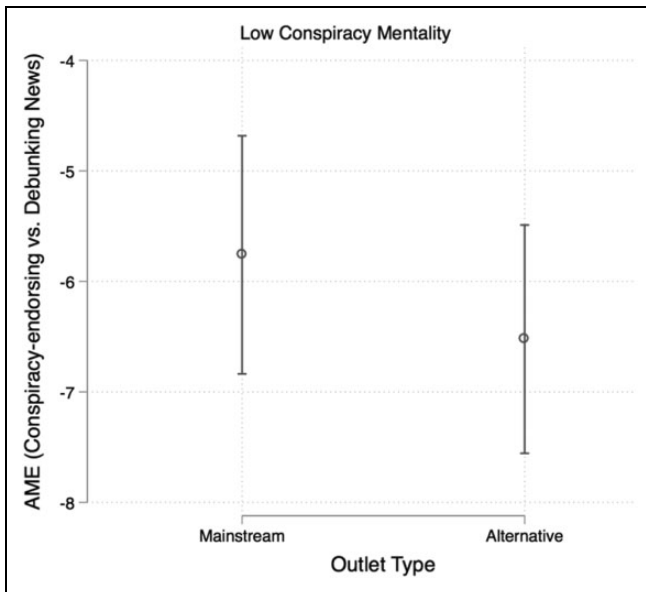


Figure 5. Average marginal effects of conspiracy vis-à-vis debunking stories’ plausibility for respondents of low conspiracy mentality (one on the Conspiracy Mentality Scale, Table 2—Model 3 coefficients).

The result is different for what concerns people of low conspiracy mentality. First, as Figure 5 shows, those respondents tend to regard as much less plausible the conspiracy-endorsing story than the debunking one (the difference for both source types is around six points, this result is also visible in Figure 3). Second, although the difference in perceived plausibility between conspiracy-endorsing and debunking news is slightly higher when people are exposed to the mainstream outlet than when

they are exposed to the independent media, a systematic test shows that this difference in marginal effects is not significant (the F test conducted to test the difference of these two marginal effects leads to an $F = 1.0$ and a $p = .32$).

Our latter results show that while people of low conspiracy mentality tend to devalue the conspiracy news irrespective of the outlet publishing it, the outlet is relevant for more conspiracy-minded individuals: For them, a conspiracy-endorsing news coming from a mainstream media outlet is not significantly more credible than a debunking news. However, the difference in marginal effect between mainstream and alternative outlets is significant (at the 5% threshold) only for *very* conspiracy-minded people. For an individual scoring 5 in the scale, the difference predicted by the model becomes nonsignificant. In other words, the source effect seems to hold only for hard-core, extreme conspiracists.

Discussion

In the academic debate, the interest in conspiracy theories, their diffusion, and belief among the public has increased over the last few years. Although the spread of conspiracies mainly unfolds by means of casual information collected on the Internet (and especially on independent media outlets), few studies have been conducted to assess the ways in which conspiracy believers evaluate the plausibility of a conspiracy theory online. The present work focuses on the ways in which people evaluate news contents differently, depending on their permeability to conspiracy ideation (the likelihood of accepting that invisible forces constantly plot to control and eventually enslave common citizens). The article aims at assessing the effect of two relevant components of a news story, manipulated experimentally: on the one hand, the content of a news story, whether conspiracy-endorsing or debunking, and on the other, the source of the news story, whether a mainstream or an independent news outlet. Results show, consistent with previous literature, that people scoring high on the Conspiracy Mentality Scale are more likely to believe in the conspiracy story than to the debunking one, and the opposite is true for nonconspiracy-minded respondents. This result is consistent with the motivated reasoning argument applied to news trustworthiness, according to which news stories that resonate more with one's previous beliefs are more likely to be considered as reliable (Slothus & de Vreese, 2010; Taber & Lodge, 2006; Vegetti & Mancosu, 2020). Our results also show that the outlet plays a tiny role in the evaluation of news reliability. We have hypothesized that a conspiracy-endorsing news might resonate more with conspiracy-minded individuals when published by an alternative news source, being one of the main tenets of conspiracy ideation the fact that independent media are less controlled by the fraudulent elites that are deemed to plot conspiracies (the idea is also confirmed by previous observational evidence stressing that conspiracy belief correlates with exposure to blogs and nonmainstream sources in general, see Stempel et al., 2007). Results show that a conspiracy-endorsing news story is evaluated as more plausible by extremely conspiracy-minded people, but *only* if it is published by a bogus independent blog, rather than a mainstream media. In other words, a significant gap in plausibility emerges for conspiracy-minded people only when they are exposed to a combination that strongly resonates with their previous experiences (a conspiracy-endorsing story published by an independent source). This result is particularly relevant if we consider that the stories concern a conspiracy that is, in general, one of the most difficult to be accepted even by conspiracists: the chemtrails conspiracy, which is believed by a 10% of Americans (a rather small percentage if compared with other theories, see Oliver & Wood, 2014). On the other hand, the outlet effect is not significant for what concerns people of lower conspiracy mentality (who were hypothesized to believe more in the mainstream media, no matter what). In this case, we witness an asymmetry between respondents given their degree of conspiracy mentality: For those who score high in this trait, the nature of the outlet might be directly ingrained

with the conspiracist narrative, while the outlet appears to be less important for nonconspiracist people. Also in this case, thus, preexisting beliefs are able to organize and affect our outcome.

We think that the most relevant implication of our results is that Internet outlets, and the news they publish, do not affect all people the same way: Consistent with the motivated reasoning framework, conspiracy-minded individuals are more likely to be convinced by what, in some way, they already believe in. This leads to question, for instance, the effectiveness of the proposed ways to control social media platforms: Erasing conspiracy-endorsing contents from those platforms is unlikely to decrease the degree of belief in those theories, just because the mechanism that makes a theory plausible implies some form of *ex ante* individual predisposition.

This study presents also some limitations, mainly due to the design of the experiment used to produce our evidence. First, the experimental design only tests how different treatments affect the perceived plausibility of a single conspiracy theory, the chemtrails, without looking at other possible theories that populate the world of conspiracists. Although this might be perceived as a drawback of the design, it allowed us to test our hypotheses in a fairly conservative situation (i.e., a conspiracy theory that is not much believed in general). Finding an effect among (extremely) conspiracy-minded people, thus, is an even more relevant result. Second, the factorial design implies that some respondents have been confronted with the very unlikely scenario in which a conspiracy theory is endorsed by a mainstream news outlet. Obviously, this combination is a quite rare occurrence in nature. However, offering insights over rare but not impossible events is an advantage of controlled experimental designs. Nothing excludes that in the future, the “click economy” will lead mainstream news outlets to push more or less conspiratorial content. However, we must stress that we did use a news that has been actually published by a mainstream newspaper (namely, *The Daily Telegraph*, see Note 2 for the link). Third, what we called a “conspiracy-endorsing” treatment only suggests the presence of a conspiracy or, at least, puts into question the official version that sees the conspiracy as a hoax. This strategy has been employed to maximizing the effect of the news content—since we know that conspiracy theories are sustained by casting doubt on accepted wisdom and official narratives (see Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). However, this does not tell us anything relevant about other possible strategies of presenting conspiracy theories in the media. Finally, we measure individuals’ degree of conspiracy mentality by using a slightly modified version of the battery by Bruder et al. (2013), which focuses on political/government actors, whereas conspiracy thinking can address corporations and nongovernment actors too. While this is probably an imperfect way to measure conspiracy mentality, there is evidence (see Swami et al., 2017) that this battery correlates fairly well with more generic batteries of conspiracy ideation, such as the one by Brotherton et al. (2013).

Notwithstanding these issues, we think that the results presented here are able to shed new light on the ways in which people perceive conspiracy-endorsing news online, further corroborating the presence of mechanisms that resemble those of partisan motivated reasoning, in realms that are quite far from politics.

Data Availability

The data were collected autonomously by the authors. The data necessary for replication of study results are publicly available without restriction on the corresponding author’s GitHub repository (<https://www.github.com/morenomancosu>).

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Software Information

All the analyses in the article have been performed with statistical package Stata (<http://www.stata.com>), Versions 13 and 14. The do-files necessary for replication of study results are publicly available without restriction on the corresponding author's GitHub repository (<https://www.github.com/morenomancosu>).

Supplemental Material

The supplemental material is available in the online version of the article.

Notes

1. The sample was stratified to contain only people residing in the United States. The only additional stratification variable employed was the gender of the respondent. The Turkers have been paid 0.80 USD for a less-than-10-min interview (to comply with the \$6/hour threshold suggested in Otani & Schwartz, 2018).
2. The conspiracy-endorsing story is based on an actual story appeared in *The Daily Telegraph* (see <https://tinyurl.com/y3wbab8e>, last visit: January 22, 2020), and the debunking story is based on *The New York Times* article (see <https://tinyurl.com/y3g9mka9>, last visit: January 22, 2020).
3. For a list and design of the four stories, see Online Appendix 1.
4. The scale originally contained seven items, the last one being "Many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never informed about." An item-test item-rest correlation analysis, however, shows that including the item in the scale lowers the α by about .03 points. For this reason, this item has been dropped from the calculation of the scale.
5. Descriptive statistics for the variables employed in the models are shown in Online Appendix 2 (located in the Online Supplement to this article).
6. See Online Appendix 3 (located in the Online Supplement to this article) for the predicted values for both the figures, which present no substantive differences with the argument that the marginal effects tell us.

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