CONTENT MATTERS, FAKE OR NOT: MEDIA CONTENT INFLUENCE ON PERCEIVED INTERGROUP THREAT

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Introduction

The media is central in shaping perceptions, especially with relation to minorities.

Media coverage of ethnic minorities often makes use of stereotypes (Dixon & Williams, 2015). This has also been the case with coverage of immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers in Europe, often portraying these populations as presenting a threat to European society, security, welfare and democratic values (Kuntz et al., 2017). Perception of threat may lead to negative attitudes toward the outgroup (Stephan & Stephan, 2017). Intergroup Threat Theory distinguishes two types of perceived threats: realistic (a threat to ingroup power, resources, and safety) and symbolic (a threat to ingroup values and way of life), which can lead to negative attitudes and prejudice toward the outgroup (Stephan et al., 2009).

Recently, the media ecosystem is increasingly integrated with false and misleading content. Propaganda and disinformation campaigns disguised as news are being pushed on social media (Rainie et al., 2017; Smith, 2019), in ways that concern media experts and scholars due to these campaigns' influence on user decisions, behavior and opinions (Rainie et al., 2017). Media consumers as well believe that fake news causes high levels of confusion around basic facts and current events (Barthel et al., 2016).

We investigate how consumption of media content leads to change in perceived threat towards a geographically distant minority group, and how is such change affected when individuals are aware that the information they consumed is false.

We focus on geographically distant minority groups because in such cases, opinion formation regarding a population the individual has no direct interaction with relies

almost entirely on media portrayals of this group. However, opinion formed on a distant group can be generalized to a local outgroup, a process known as Secondary Transfer Effect (Lissitsa & Kushnirovich, 2020).

Research Questions

RQ1: How is perceived threat towards an outgroup changed after exposure to media content about the outgroup?

H1a: After exposure to negative media content, the perceived threat towards the outgroup will increase.

H1b: After exposure to positive media content, the perceived threat towards the outgroup will decrease.

Q2: How will the change of perceived threat be affected when media consumers become aware that the information they consumed is false?

H2: Media consumers who are aware that the information they consumed is false, will show minor or no change in perceived threat.

Methodology

A survey experiment was conducted among 403 Israeli participants. The participants filled out a questionnaire measuring realistic and symbolic threat towards EU asylum seekers (EUAS), based on the scales by Stephan et al. (1999). Then, after 10-14 days, participants were requested to participate in a short online activity in which they were instructed to read an article. The participants were divided into 5 groups: Group 1 read a positive article emphasizing the economic advantages in immigrants' integration in the labor market, i.e. aspects of realistic threat. Group 2 read a negative article emphasizing aspects of symbolic threat. Group 3 read the same negative article, followed by a disclaimer notifying participants that fact-check websites found the facts in the article misleading and false. Group 4 read a neutral report of decrease in asylum seeker immigration into Europe. A control group did not read an article.

After reading the article, participants were requested to fill out another questionnaire, where the same indices of perceived realistic and symbolic threat were measured, as well as participants' evaluation of the article's convincingness, reliability, professionalism, and objectivity.

Findings

Perceived threat has changed in each group in a different way. In the positive article group- only perceived realistic threat decreased significantly ($t_{(98)}$=3.81, p<.001). In the negative article group, only symbolic threat increased significantly ($t_{(93)}$=-2.66, p<.01), matching the articles' focus. In the neutral and control group- no significant differences were found in any perceived threat. Interestingly, in the group that read a negative article with a fake news disclaimer, a similar change to the negative group was found

and perceived symbolic threat increased significantly ($t_{(88)}$=-2.80, p<.01), despite participants' awareness to the falsehood of the article.

The findings are further observed by the way that participants have evaluated the articles. Apparently, participants' perceived threat towards EUAS prior to reading the articles correlated with their evaluation of the article. In other words- the articles were evaluated in accordance with participant prior opinion on EUAS. Moreover, the relationship between article type (content) and article evaluation is moderated by feelings towards **local** outgroups: Israeli Arabs, Palestinians and asylum seekers in Israel, such that negative feelings towards local outgroups directed participants to positively evaluate the negative article about European asylum seekers and negatively evaluate the positive article and vice versa, and article evaluation as well as feelings towards local outgroups mediate the relationship between content and change in perceived realistic threat.

Conclusions

Fake news concern media scholars and consumers because of its potential to shape people's perceptions, sow confusion and distort opinions. In the case of distant outgroups, fake and biased information believed to be true may be even more influential for media consumers' opinion formation on the outgroup, and consequently on similar local outgroups. Our findings show that indeed, media content has an immediate effect on perceived threat towards the outgroup. However, even when consumers are aware that the facts in the content are dubious or misleading, it still influences perception. It seems that prior attitudes – towards the distant outgroup but more importantly- towards more familiar local outgroups, serve as a lens through which media consumers evaluate content, and the question of whether the facts are true becomes negligible compared to one's own inclination and beliefs. Content itself is still influential in shaping perceptions and opinions, but content reliability, whether facts are true and authenticated, is seemingly not quite a crucial consideration, depending on media consumer's prior beliefs.

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