

Passive news reports may lead readers to feel they can't find the truth

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Passive news reporting that doesn't attempt to resolve factual disputes in politics may have detrimental effects on readers, new research suggests.

The study found that people are more likely to doubt their own ability to determine the truth in politics after reading an article that simply lists competing claims without offering any idea of which side is right.

"There are consequences to journalism that just reports what each side says with no fact checking," said Raymond Pingree, author of the study and assistant professor of communication at Ohio State University.

"It makes readers feel like they can't figure out what the truth is. And I would speculate that this attitude may lead people to tune out politics entirely, or to be more accepting of dishonesty by politicians."

The study appears in the current issue of the [Journal of Communication](#).

While some disputes in politics involve subjective issues where there is no right or wrong answers, some involve factual issues that could be checked by reporters if they had the time and the desire, Pingree said.

"Choosing among government policies is simply not like choosing among flavors of ice cream. Policy questions quite frequently center on facts, and political disputes can and often do hinge on these facts, not only on subjective matters," he said.

For example, when opponents of Obama's health care bill claimed it contained provisions for "death panels" that would determine who is worthy of health care, reporters could check the text of the bill to see if such a provision existed, Pingree said.

Pingree noted that many critics have condemned the media for playing too passive a role in factual disputes, but this is the first study to look at how such reporting actually affects readers, at least in terms of politics.

To find out how passive reporting affects audiences, Pingree conducted an experiment with 538 college students. All of the students were asked to read one of four versions of a fictional news story about a fictional health care bill under debate in the House of Representatives.

The stories were nearly identical and set up two factual debates about the bill. In one dispute, opponents of the bill claimed that its cost will be far higher than the estimated \$200 million and in the other, opponents claimed that the bill is redundant with Medicaid and will create unnecessary bureaucracy.

Two versions of the article simply mentioned the dispute, while the other two provided facts that showed which side was correct.

After they read the article, the participants answered a variety of questions, including three that probed whether they felt they could, in general, find the truth in matters of politics. For example, one question asked how much the participants agreed with the statement "If I wanted to, I could figure out the facts behind most political disputes."

Results showed that people interested in the health care issue who read the passive article felt they were less able to find truth in politics, compared to those who read the article resolving who was right in the debate.

"We're just beginning to explore this issue," Pingree noted. "But it is noteworthy that just reading a single news story about a single topic can affect how people feel about their own ability to find truth in politics."

The issue of "he said/she said" journalism is especially critical today because many media outlets are understaffed and news cycles are faster than ever, meaning that reporters often have less time to check facts, he said.

Pingree emphasized that he is not being critical of all journalists. Many still do a good job of resolving factual disputes when they can.

"But I think it is clear that this happens less than it used to. As a result, there may be people out there who feel like there is no such thing as a political fact, or at least that they can't figure out what it is," he said.

"That may make it easier for people to just quit following politics at all, or to accept dishonesty in politicians."

Pingree said the results suggest that readers want reporters to tell them when the facts support – or don't support -- one side or the other.

He noted that there are now journalistic websites such as PolitiFact.com that are dedicated just to resolving factual disputes in politics.

"It is interesting that there are now institutions within journalism dedicated to resolving disputes. A few decades ago, that was seen as the role of all journalists. Journalists didn't see themselves as stenographers, but as judges, keeping the lawyers honest in the court of public opinion. We don't see that as much anymore."

Provided by The Ohio State University

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