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**Credibility in context: Addressing audiences, objectivity, and branding  
in contemporary news credibility research**

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**Credibility in context: Addressing audiences, objectivity, and branding  
in contemporary news credibility research**

**by**

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**Thesis**

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## **Dedication**

To my three brothers, whose competitive spirits continue to inspire me to run faster, work harder, and be better.

## **Abstract**

### **Credibility in context: Addressing audiences, objectivity, and branding in contemporary news credibility research**

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This study employs an experimental design to test the effects of branding, presence of opinion, and gender on news credibility. A history of credibility theory in social science research is explored in order to contextualize investigation of truth and objectivity in the contemporary fragmented news landscapes. The goal is to contribute to the academic methodologies employed in the exploration of credibility in news as well as make practical suggestions to news makers. Results of the empirical methods in this thesis showed that belief in the news organization from a pretest was positively correlated with the credibility ratings of the individual story conditions but previously held beliefs about story topic were not. Neutral stories were rated higher in terms of credibility than those with opinion statements regardless of brand or belief in the news institution. A scale for personal acceptance of opinion in news is proposed to provide credibility theorists a way to unobtrusively measure predilection for opinion news. While no differences in gender were found using the newly-proposed scale, an individual's propensity to trust was positively correlated with acceptance of opinion in news.

Audience specialization in news should lead to specialized studies of credibility, particularly the roles of gender information processing in relation to objectivity, opinion, and credibility.

## Table of Contents

List of Tables .....	viii
List of Figures .....	ix
Chapter 1 Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2 Literature Review .....	7
Credibility .....	7
A Credibility Snapshot.....	7
Measuring Credibility .....	9
Dimensions of Credibility .....	11
Objectivity and News .....	15
Audience Fragmentation .....	15
Studies of Objectivity.....	17
Accepting Opinion, Rejecting Objectivity .....	22
Cognitive Processing and Gender.....	25
Chapter 3 Method.....	29
Chapter 4 Results .....	36
Hypothesis 1 .....	36
Hypothesis 2 .....	38
<i>New York Times</i> Condition .....	40
<i>Fox News</i> Condition.....	40
<i>MSNBC</i> Condition .....	41
Research Questions .....	45
Chapter 5 Conclusions and Future Directions .....	47
Appendices A-I News Story Conditions .....	59
References.....	77

## List of Tables

Table 1:	Trends in News Believability by Brand .....	9
Table 2:	Credibility Factors, Gaziano & McGrath .....	13
Table 3:	Believability of News Brands Pretest .....	34
Table 4:	Independent and Dependent Variable Scales .....	37
Table 5:	Analysis of Covariance for Credibility by Belief in Life in Prison for Juveniles- <i>New York Times</i> .....	41
Table 6:	Analysis of Covariance for Credibility by Belief in Life in Prison for Juveniles- <i>Fox News</i> .....	43
Table 7:	Analysis of Covariance for Credibility by Belief in Life in Prison for Juvenile- <i>MSNBC</i> .....	45
Table 8:	Credibility by Story Condition and Gender .....	49



## List of Figures

Figure 1:	News Organization Accuracy .....	8
Figure 2:	Bias and Objectivity on Political and Social Issues in American News.....	20
Figure 3:	Mean Ratings for News Organization Believability Pretest.....	35
Figure 4:	Mean Credibility Scores by Experimental Conditions.....	39
Figure 5:	Credibility Ratings Among Social Democrats for <i>Fox</i> “Anti-Life in Prison for Juveniles” Condition.....	42
Figure 6:	Credibility Ratings Among Social Republicans for MSNBC “Anti-Life in Prison for Juveniles” Condition.....	44
Figure 7:	Credibility Ratings Among Social Republicans and Social Democrats for MSNBC “Anti-Life in Prison for Juveniles” Condition.....	44
Figure 8:	Credibility of Conditions Separated by Brand Believers and Non- Believers Pretest .....	47

## ***Chapter 1: Introduction***

News credibility in America is in a dangerous free-fall. The Pew Center for People and the Press data reveals that credibility has hit a two-decade low (2009), and negative opinions of the news media are at an all-time high (2011). The American public is increasingly finding news organizations to be inaccurate, biased, and less trustworthy in their coverage. The low regard the public holds for the American news media should be taken very seriously considering the “heightened role” the media plays in modern democracy (Jones, 2004). However, how credibility is being measured across time and medium is far too disparate. Pew often uses a single survey question (believability) to define credibility. While it has often been noted in the realm of mass media research dating back to 1950 that credibility is synonymous with believability (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; K. A. Johnson & Wiedenbeck, 2009; Severin & Tankard, 2001), this simplistic understanding of this axiom of journalism is problematic.

Current mass communication research by and large conceptualizes credibility as a series of dichotomous components including trust, accuracy, depth, bias, objectivity, etc. While much historic and contemporary literature relates the evolution of measuring credibility within the mass media, studies rarely account for the legitimacy an individual might place on the different components, especially objectivity and acceptance of bias or opinion in his or her news. A one-sided story can still invariably be found credible by an individual under certain circumstances. While objectivity and bias continue to be prominent components in credibility studies, there is also research to indicate that bias

may improve credibility in some cases, and that opinionated news with the admission of bias increases perceived transparency resulting in a more positive audience reaction.

Bias and lack of complete objectivity are not seen as an ultimate evil.

“Where objective news strives to present both sides of a story, it also places unproductive restraints on political inquiry and expression; partisan media, though one-sided, open the door to alternative ideas and, in doing so, encourage more critical and engaged politics” (Feldman, 2009).

To further complicate matters, positive response bias appears to be a real problem in such research, where a positive response to all items on a credibility matrix corresponds with a positive credibility score. It is a “check the box” mentality (in paper surveys) and a “yeah, yeah, yeah” mentality in phone surveys.

Large-scale studies such as those conducted by Pew and Gallup and even smaller research projects at the university level cannot commit the time and resources into asking the “why” and instead focus on the “what”. As a result, few studies explore *how* an individual processes news in terms of credibility. The cognitive process of credibility assessment on an individual level is an important avenue of research that is currently neglected. Additionally, there is little research done into the cognitive processing of credibility perceptions by gender. While the field of advertising as well as psychology have vast literatures on gendered information processing, less has been done in the journalism discipline, and what has been done has focused on news information seeking and audience segmentation, specifically the history of hard versus soft news. In terms of

academic research, the focus has mainly been on men and women as subjects of the news, shadowing women as news makers as well as consumers (Herzog, 1941; Lavie & Lehman-Wilzig, 2005; Radway, 1985; Press, 1991). Since credibility perception is universalized, little research explores credibility on a humanistic, individual level. Research in the field of advertising and psychology tell us that men and women process and evaluate information differently; women have often been portrayed as more subjective and intuitive, valuing subjective criteria, while men value objective criteria (Broverman et al., 1968). Additionally, Meyers-Levy & Maheswaran (1991) found that women utilize more elaborate message processing techniques than men. Along with information and message processing, information transmission is contingent on gendered differences, as in the Haas 1979 study that reported that female language is interpretive, subjective, and evaluative, while male language tends to be selective and concentrates on available objective facts. However, a proposed selectivity model was supported by Daley and Smith (1995) that showed that men do not always favor objective claims and that women favor objective and subjective claims similarly, until risk (in this case, in advertising) is increased; then they favor objective claims (Daley & Smith, 1995). According to selectivity models (Meyers-Levy, 1989; Meyers-Levy & Maheswaran, 1991; Meyers-Levy & Stemthal, 1991), men process information on a selective level rather than comprehensive level. Women, on the other hand, tend to employ a comprehensive strategy of information processing that attempts to synthesize all available information. Men rely more on cues that tend to be particularly salient or readily available in context. This thesis expands credibility theory into the realm of information

processing by gender by looking at specific differences between genders in terms of preference for objective (opinion-based) versus subjective (fact-based) claims.

There are also a number of feminist scholars that criticize the use of “objectivity” as the ultimate tenant of journalism, since a search for objectivity is “antithetical” to a feminist perspective of the world (Lavie & Lehman-Wilzig, 2005); the concept of objectivity, indeed, is rooted in patriarchal origins. If one thing is clear, it is that credibility perceptions cannot be categorized as gender-free. Considering the complex ways of processing information as well as the varying importance that women and men place on objectivity versus subjectivity in that processing, why are all components in credibility models given equal weight and importance if males and females (or simpler still, *individuals*) potentially value and process various components of credibility *differently*? Is objectivity in news an inherently “male” concept, and what does that mean for subjectivity (in the form of opinion) finding a home in the core news product? By asking and proposing answers to these questions, this thesis will contribute to the dearth of information on the intersection of gender and credibility theory.

This thesis also provides an in-depth literature review on credibility constructs and models used in mass communication research, spanning both journalism and advertising disciplines, in an attempt to put credibility in an historical and ultimately humanistic context. An experiment was conducted to explore the relationships among previously held beliefs on news story topic, news brand believability, acceptance of opinion in news, gender, and credibility. Participants read one of nine news stories, where opinion statements (both pro-issue and anti-issue) towards life in prison for

juveniles were manipulated along with news organization branding. By exploring these links, the conception of objectivity *as* credibility is challenged and conventional credibility theories are tested. A core news product devoid of ideological branding and one-sided opinion is just as important to a free press and society as the freedom to express personal opinion through the mass media. Audience fragmentation teeters dangerously between promoting free, engaging thought and encouraging preferential close-mindedness. Individuals should be able to freely comment on the news media as well as have access to diverse content, but a credible and unbiased source for news should be available to lend significance to freedom of expression. In the current fractured news media market of cable and online news where selective attention and exposure are commonplace, it is important to explore biased, opinion-laden news and its relationship to audience members, which should be of great interest to journalists trying to earn the trust of those audience members.

This thesis looks at the evolution of credibility studies in modern journalism and bridges the components of the familiar constructs of credibility, such as objectivity and bias, and places them in the context of a fractured news media market where individualized choice among a set of “I want it now”-style consumers is unexceptional. It is the goal of this thesis to contribute an updated conceptualization of the common components of credibility to the body of academic literature as well as make practical suggestions to journalism decision makers across the United States. As credibility ratings for major news organizations continue to plummet and news consumers relay mixed messages about what they want in terms of balanced news coverage that is free from

opinion, relying on outmoded information-gathering techniques and credibility scales to measure the media landscape is perilous, as is ignoring how women and men process/engage with core and/or supplementary opinion-based news products. Credibility is an evolving concept with an historical context and this should never be neglected.

## ***Chapter 2: Literature Review***

### **CREDIBILITY**

#### **A Credibility Snapshot**

There is little to no debate about the inherent relevance of credibility to American news media as an institution. However, credibility of the news media across mediums has been in a free-fall since the Watergate era of watchdog journalism. Woodward and Bernstein of the Washington Post are often credited for invigorating the public regarding the watchdog function as well as inspiring a generation of investigative reporters in the modern era. After the Nixon controversy settled, trust in government was inversely related to trust in newspapers; newspaper credibility was up, trust in government institutions was down. In the mid 1970's, 30% of Americans reported having a "great deal" of confidence in the press as an institution (Jones, 2004). The 1980's saw a drastic drop in credibility as well as a rise in the theory that credibility declines were responsible for and/or related to the downward trend of household newspaper penetration (Meyer, 1988). According to the Pew Research Center for People and the Press, only 33% of respondents believe all or most of the news reported by the survey's most credible source, *60 Minutes*. A recent 2011 Pew study on news organization perceptions also found that a full 66% of respondents felt that news stories are often inaccurate, a number that has nearly doubled since 1985 when Pew first asked the question (Pew, 2011). Belief in the ability of news organizations to "get the facts straight" has also rapidly declined since 1985 (see Figure 1).



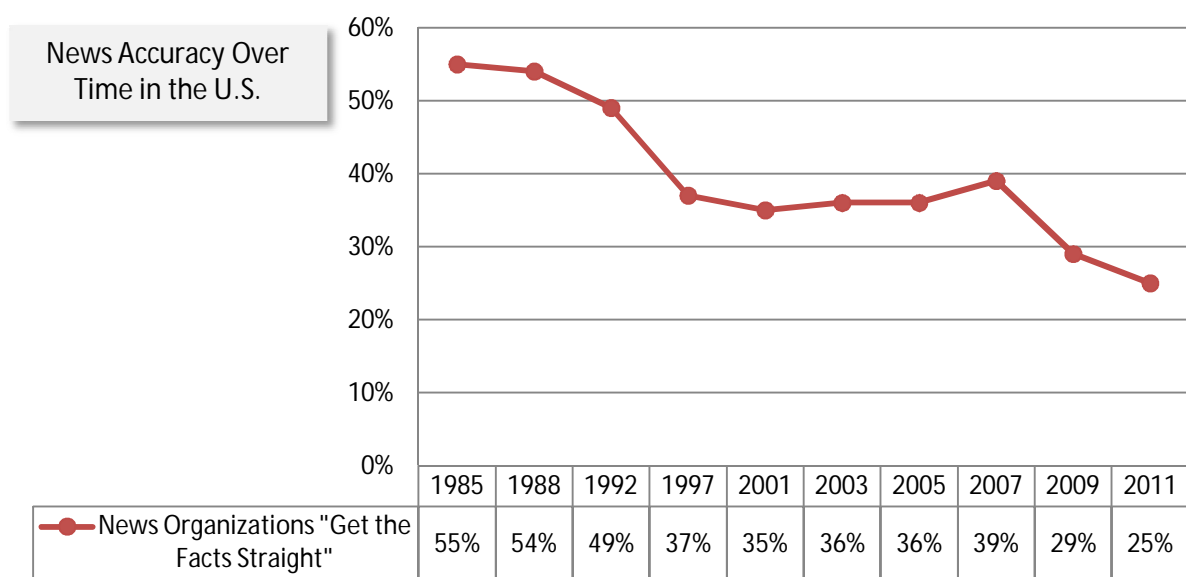


Figure 1: News Organization Accuracy. Data Source: Pew, 2011.<sup>1</sup>

In 1974, public opinion polls showed that 68% of the population had trust and confidence in the news media (Gallup, 2009). While there has been little change in credibility ratings since 2000 (see Table 1), credibility continues to fall; American news outlets have become incredibly polarized in terms of credibility. While *Fox News* was rated as the fifth most-believable news outlet and *MSNBC* was eighth, 41% of Republicans rated *Fox News* as credible, but only 21% of Democrats did. Thirty-four percent of Democrats found *MSNBC* credible but only 13% of Republicans agreed. The *New York Times* was also rated relatively low in credibility, with only 20% of respondents reporting they could believe all or most of the news reported therein.

<sup>1</sup> These graphs are elaborated by the author using Pew Research Center for The People and the Press data, 2011. Pew does not bear any responsibility on the conclusions and visualizations hereby presented.

Interestingly, local daily newspapers fared similarly to the *New York Times*, with 21% being rated as credible.

NPR was the only news outlet to improve credibility since 1998; both *CNN* and the *Wall Street Journal* have suffered double-digit-percentage declines in credibility. It is unknown what if any effect the recent scandal involving secretly taped comments at an *NPR* fundraiser, the firing of conservative analyst Juan Williams, and the resignation of *NPR* President and CEO Vivian Schiller will have on future credibility ratings of *NPR*. In terms of Internet news, Pew found that these outlets were viewed with more skepticism than print and broadcast, with less than a fourth of online news sources garnering credible ratings.

Table 1: Trends in News Believability by Brand

Outlet	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010
<i>New York Times</i>	--	--	21%	20%	18%	20%
<i>Fox News</i>	26%	24%	25%	25%	23%	27%
<b>MSNBC</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>24%</b>	<b>22%</b>

*Source:* Pew, 2010. Percents reflect how much the audience can believe “all or most” of what organization says

### Measuring Credibility

As noted by Kohring and Matthes (2007), research into media credibility has fallen under three methodological categories: source credibility, comparing credibility across different mediums (e.g. television, radio, online), and factor analysis studies that attempt to identify different dimensions of credibility. This study seeks to contribute to the theory of credibility by taking a multi-disciplinary approach that bridges different

avenues of credibility research. Scholars note the important distinction between “source” credibility and “message” credibility. Source credibility can be understood as a person, organization, or the means of transmitting the message rather than the message itself (Johnson & Wiedenbeck, 2009), and the different aspects of source credibility appear to be the most important when assessing information (Eastin, 2001; Fogg, et al., 2002). Source credibility in a digital age can be as macro as an institution such as the *New York Times* or as micro as the lone political blogger. McQuail (2005) said, “It is the quality of the source rather than the information that matters” (p.201). This important distinction must be made in research that includes variables that measure branding; branding in the form of a logo is a visual source credibility cue and is employed in this current study as a manipulation.

Quality of the source credibility also has been shown to vary across medium; Newhagen and Nass (1989) found that the audience determines credibility by assessing the individual presenting the news while newspapers are assessed as larger institutions. Additionally, as Hovland et. al observed in 1954, we are dealing with “perceptions”. Credibility is *perceived* by the receiver of a message, not comprised of specific objective criteria (Jones, Moore, Stanaland, & Wyatt, 1998). Here, we can distinguish between “actual” credibility and “perceived” credibility. “Actual” credibility can be described as a set of objective fact-based criteria and should be further distinguished from perceived credibility. For example, this current study explores bias and objectivity as observable (and manipulatable) variables in news stories; this study seeks to influence perceived

credibility with a variety of manipulations. This study does not manipulate fact-based claims that would address “actual” credibility.

### **Dimensions of Credibility**

A rich and complex history of research into media credibility has not rendered anything approaching a standardized scale for measuring the concept. It has been empirically measured with as few as one item (see Pew, 2009 and 2010), but defended by others as a multidimensional concept with numerous components (e.g. Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Jacobson, 1969; Johnson & Wiedenbeck, 2009; Lee, 1978; Munter, 1986; Whitehead, 1968). Often, semantic dissimilarities are overcome and “trust” and “credibility” research are interchanged. Some of the earliest measurements of media credibility began in the 1950’s when the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research began measuring credibility in various polls, where, as previously noted, credibility was treated as synonymous with believability (Hovland & Weiss, 1951).

In 1954, Hovland and colleagues first suggested the two-dimensional measure of source credibility: “trustworthiness” and “expertise”. This model/definition of credibility was challenged in 1969 by Berlo, Lemert, and Mertz, who criticized Hovland and his colleagues for portraying credibility, among other things, as a “static attribute of the source” and called for empirical evidence to establish specific criteria used by message receivers when evaluating a source.

Whitehead (1968) further expanded on the work of Hovland and Weiss; he identified five dominant factors of source credibility as trustworthiness, professionalism or competence, objectivity, and the important addition of dynamism (Whitehead Jr,

1968). Dynamism is seen as a vital component when credibility is studied in conjunction with persuasion. A year later, Jacobson (1969) measured credibility along 20 pairs of adjectives, leading to the two credibility-based factors of “authenticity” and “objectivity” as well as two dimensions termed “non-credibility-based dimensions” of “dynamism” and “respite”. These early studies dealt with communication models in general. It was later in 1985 when The American Society of Newspaper Editors conducted credibility research that incorporated more specific journalistic concerns of credibility including fact versus opinion, reader preference, and sensationalism, resulting in a 12 item credibility factor (ASNE, 1985).

Around the same time, research by Gaziano and McGrath (1986) took the classic Whitehead scale and expanded it to a twelve point credibility index which included components such as depth of information, perceived bias, fairness, and concern for the public’s best interests (see Table 2). They noted that additional subdivision in the index was possible, a concept that Rimmer and Weaver (1987) later used to relate media use to media credibility. Munter (1986, 1987) proposed a five-dimensional model of source credibility (later simplified to four by combining the components of goodwill and fairness) in which she synthesized research by social-power theorists, French and Raven (1959) and Kotter (1977).

Table 2: Credibility Factors, Gaziano & McGrath

Item
Unbiased
Tells the whole story
Can be trusted
Separates facts from opinions
Accurate
Fair
Respects people's privacy
Reporters are well trained
Factual
Patriotic
Concerned about the community's well-being
Concerned mainly about the public interest
<b>Watches out after your interests</b>

*Data Source:* Meyer, 1988

In 1988, P. Meyer took an important step in conceptualization of credibility scales and indexes by reviewing and validating historic measurements. He took exception with Gaziano and McGrath's indices, since while valid on face value, they were hampered by, "the absence of any theory to inform their interpretation" (p. 570). Gaziano (1987) defended the analysis in a personal communication, saying it, "allowed respondents themselves to define credibility rather than imposing an academic definition on them." This is the approach of this thesis, which considers credibility to be individually defined and weighted differently for individuals on the key components of objectivity and bias. The result of Meyer's attempt to establish an academic definition of credibility linked to prior, established constructs was an index that included five pairs of adjectives for credibility: fair/unfair, unbiased/biased, tells the whole story/doesn't tell the whole story,

accurate/inaccurate, and can be trusted, can't be trusted (p. 574), along with a second factor encompassing "social affiliation".

This scale was further validated in 1994 when West tested Meyer's and Gaziano-McGrath's scales with new data as well as Meyer's original data. To West (1995), the Gaziano-McGrath scales were, "the only set of scales for the measurement of media credibility to have undergone validation" (p. 160). West had similar goals to Meyer, that is to arrive at a standardized scale to facilitate cross-study comparisons of credibility. Unfortunately, these scales have not been consistently applied to contemporary research. Researchers have cherry-picked different items for individual purposes. The idea that factors of the credibility construct need to be replicated on different samples as well as examined within an established theoretical framework was further criticized by Gorsuch (1983). He added that the accepted approach of factor analytics remained generalizable to communication and not specific to journalism.

In their 2009 study, Johnson and Wiedenbeck conducted an experiment exploring elements that enhance perceived credibility of citizen journalism web sites; they provided a table of common constructs in the study of credibility that were used for their index, which included believability, accuracy, trustworthiness, bias, completeness, etc. These constructs were separated into categories of "perceived credibility", "site credibility", and "sponsor credibility". Important to the advancement of standardized measures of credibility within a theoretical context, Johnson and Wiedenbeck noted the additional studies where identical credibility criteria were used. They also included a four-

dimensional measure of issue salience to control for the reader's story engagement, a component of credibility often ignored in other experimental designs.

While credibility matrices and constructs are continually amended and revised, little has been done to address the universalizing nature of such models, as well as the erosion of the importance of objectivity and unbiased news. While some scholars, notably Kelly (1991) argue that credibility is *not* universal, but rather a psychological space unique to individuals and based on subjective experience, others insist on frameworks of the "common aspects of credibility assessment regardless of media, type of information, and environment of information use" (Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008). The current study acknowledges that common historic constructs do exist for credibility assessment, but that individuals place different importance on these components.

## **OBJECTIVITY AND NEWS**

### **Audience Fragmentation**

Audience fragmentation plays a huge roll in how credibility is conceptualized in the current media landscape, and how prominent opinion claims are in journalism. Diversity of media products is closely linked to freedom of the press (Glasser, 1984). In the most general terms, the more diversity in channels of news media and diversity of content, the better for freedom. In 1977, the three major broadcast networks accounted for over 90% of all prime-time television viewership by Americans (Veronis, 1994). With the emergence of cable and online news, fragmentation of news audiences has increased dramatically. Cable television reaches 60.7% of American households and



alternative delivery systems such as satellite providers reach 30.5%, according to the TVB analysis of Nielsen Media Research data for November 2010. As early as 2003, Americans had access to over 100 channels (Webster, 2005). There has been a rapid shift from a “low-choice” to a “high-choice” news media environment. Some researchers believe this has helped to engage individuals with politics, while others (e.g. Neuman, 1996) show that increased options lead to less political knowledge, or simply widens the gap in political knowledge and turnout (Prior, 2005).

Media technologies in particular have been examined for their power to fragment audiences (e.g., Chaffee & Metzger, 2001; Havick, 2000). The primary concern of researchers is that the resulting audience will converge in smaller niches that avoid opinions that are contrary to their insulated point of view (e.g., Sunstein, 2001; Turow, 1997; Webster, 2005). Further complicating tendencies towards self-selected “on-demand” news is the rise of the use of Internet search portals such as Yahoo and Google that rely on complex algorithms to determine the news consumers readily view (Sundar & Nass, 2001; Ekdal, Thorson, & Vraga, 2010). Researchers are also concerned that the process of focusing on narrow content is troublesome for the function of modern democracy (Katz, 1996). The fragmentation of news media specifically has led to a dramatic increase in ideological political coverage. How individuals select news influences knowledge of current events as well as how they assess public issues.

Access to news on the Internet further encourages fragmentation, if only that Internet user motivations tend to be the acquisition of *specific* rather than general information (e.g., Ferguson & Perse, 2000; Johnson, Kaye, Bichard, & Wong, 2007; Katz,

1997; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Teo, 1999, Tewksbury, 2005 ). Empirical evidence also suggests that the Internet is particularly conducive to creating and/or encouraging news audience specialization (e.g., Tewksbury & Althaus, 2000; Dutta-Bergman, 2004). Media technologies not only allow but encourage audience members to seek out, or selectively expose themselves to individual interests and needs (Sunstein, 2001; Webster & Phalen, 1997; Webster & Lin, 2002). While exploring media economic models is outside the scope of this work, it is important to understand that fragmented media audiences provide media outlets an opportunity to profit as they are able to offer up specific demographic groups to advertisers, e.g. gender, income, race, political affiliation. As a result, news and information channels continue to intentionally skew their content.

### **Studies of Objectivity**

Objectivity is semantic stand-in for “good” journalism, and is almost universally accepted by journalists themselves (Steiner, 1998). Even “the nation’s most widely invoked code for individual journalist and news organizations” (Black, et al, 1993) from the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ)—the largest professional journalist association in the world—mandates comprehensive, factual, and objective reporting (Beasley, 1997). “The most central concept in media theory relation to information quality has probably been that of objectivity, especially as applied to news information” (McQuail, 2005, p.200). Credibility, objectivity, and truth have become so axiomatic when it comes to journalism that they are often taken for granted. “Credibility is, after all, the most important thing a communicator has. A communicator in the news media who lacks credibility probably also has no audience,” (Severin & Tankard, 2001).

Credibility is often ubiquitous with objectivity, though scholars and industry professionals alike decry objectivity as unattainable. “Trust in news media means trust in their specific selectivity rather than in objectivity or truth” (Kohring & Matthes, 2007, p. 239). Objectivity as a tenant of journalism did, in fact, evolve (Schudson, 1978) and thus cannot be considered truly “universal”. It is instead, as some scholars posit, “objectivity with a human face” (Ward, 1999). Others go farther, attacking objectivity for being too detached and consequently inhumane (Bell, 1998), such as with the conflict in the Balkans that saw a calloused, detached press reporting on atrocities, “as if covering a football match, notwithstanding the travesties committed by one side against the other (Lavie & Lehman-Wilzig, 2005). Indeed, experiments have shown that a public can simultaneously disagree with *how* a media outlet covers a story while still believing *what* it says (Center for Family Research, 1978). Journalists themselves are also reluctant to transparently discuss factors that may interfere with presenting objective news to the public (Lavie & Lehman-Wilzig, 2005).

McQuail notes that objectivity should not be confused with the notion of “truth”, but recognizes that it is another version of it. Westerstahl (1983) observed that objectivity deals not only with facts but with the values of balance and neutrality. Observing and reporting are susceptible to being “contaminated by subjectivity” (p.200) and McQuail outlines the three main principles of objectivity as

1. The adoption of a position of detachment and neutrality towards the object of reporting.
2. There is lack of partisanship: not taking sides in matters of dispute or showing

bias.

3. Objectivity requires strict attachment to accuracy and other truth criteria (such as relevance and completeness).

Objectivity then is an understanding and recognition of one-sided versus two-sided messages, and the absence of personal opinion. Objectivity, then, is more closely related with “perceived” credibility rather than “actual” credibility which is more closely related with the notion of truth. Pew (2011) finds that perceptions of the media as favoring one side over the other have been on the rise since 1985 while perceptions that news organizations deal fairly with all sides has declined by nearly half between 1985 (34%) and 2011 (16%) (See Figure 2). Also of note, the partisan gap in perceptions of media accuracy and bias have become more uniform; Democrats and Independents have expressed increasingly critical views of the media with 57% of Democrats saying that news organizations are biased compared to 76% of Republicans (Pew, 2011).

Perceptions that news organizations were politically biased in their reporting overall rose from 45% in 1985 to 63% in 2011. This rise in biased reporting is not entirely due to increased demand from the public, since 63% of Americans say that they prefer news with no point of view; that preference is even stronger for online news consumers, 74% of whom prefer news without a political point of view (Pew, 2011). This seems counter intuitive considering the selective nature of online news viewership. Even when asked if they would prefer news from their *own* point of view, just 25% of respondents agreed (Pew, 2010). However, this question by Pew highlights a pitfall of such questionnaires that this thesis proposes to correct for future research. No one wants to freely admit to

preferring news from their own camp, which could be viewed as close-minded; and Internet users pride themselves on being open-minded. They may even gravitate towards that news unconsciously. There must be a better measurement scale that unobtrusively asks questions regarding an individual's preference for one-sided or opinionated news. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H1.** Opinionated news will be rated less credible than neutral news.

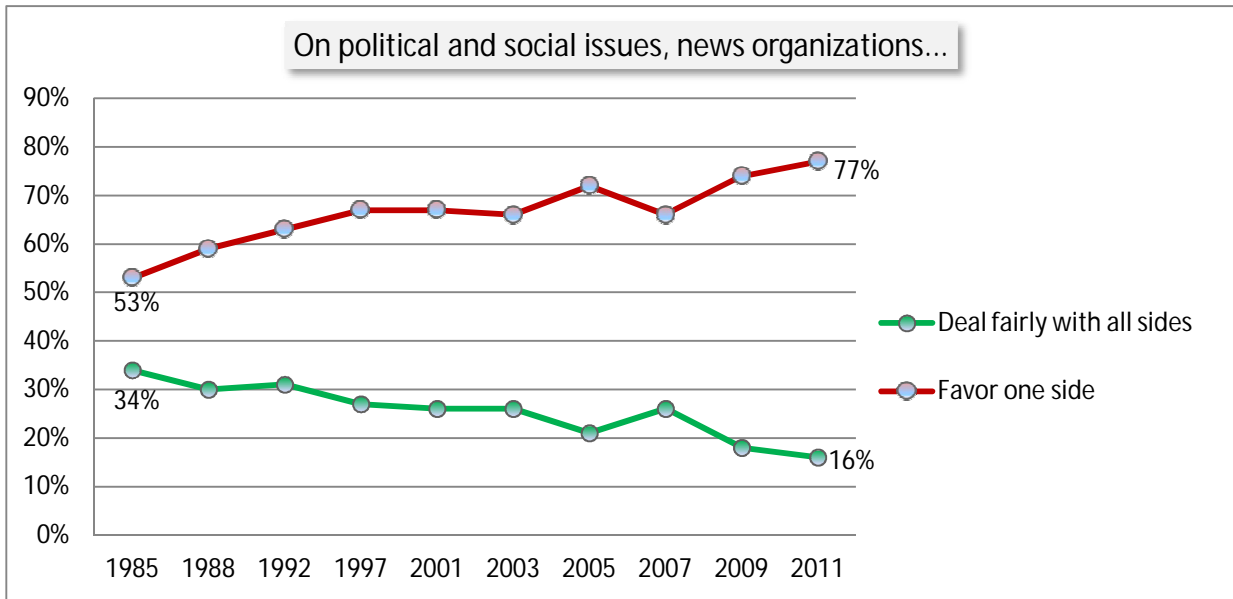


Figure 2: Bias and Objectivity on Political and Social Issues in American News. Data Source: Pew, 2011<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See Footnote 1

One of the first and most often cited studies on objectivity is Hovland, Lumsdaine, and Sheffield's 1949 study for the United States Army. They conducted an experiment to determine the effectiveness of one-sided versus two-sided messages on audiences who a) initially opposed the message and b) initially sympathetic to the message. In this experiment, the message concerned the continuing length World War II in the wake of Germany's surrender. As hypothesized, the research team found that the one-sided or non-objective message was most effective with those whose beliefs initially aligned with the message, and that the two-sided or objective message was most effective with those opposed to the message.

Hovland and his research team were more concerned with message persuasion than credibility, though we see from contemporary research that credibility perceptions tend to be higher when news consumers believe that the reporter's point of view is aligned with their own (Johnson & Kaye; Metzger, Flanagin, & Medders, 2010; Stroud, 2010). Research also shows that Americans view the news sources they rely on most as far more accurate than the news media in general. Sixty-two percent of respondents in a 2011 Pew study reported that their main source for news gets the facts straight, which is double the figure for news in general.

Also, news consumers tend to discredit information that runs counter to their own opinions (Nisbett, 1980) as well as find that messages that disagree with their opinions to be more biased and hostile (Eveland & Shah, 2003; Gunther, 1992; Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chia, 2001; Perloff, 1989; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985).

Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H2.** Opinionated news will be rated higher in terms of credibility if aligned with previously held personal beliefs on life in prison for juveniles.
- H3.** News will be rated higher in terms of credibility by those participants exposed to a news brand they rated as believable.

### **Accepting Opinion, Rejecting Objectivity**

In preparation for the current study, two focus groups (12 and 9 participants respectively) were conducted in the winter of 2010 at a large southwestern University to act as a pretest. In opposition to previous survey research and focus group research that sought to assess the credibility of specific news products, trust and credibility were examined in depth from a humanistic approach that got closer to credibility than previous research that defined credibility in limited, universalizing terms. The purpose of the focus groups was to conceptualize a new scale to discreetly measure an individual's reliance on or, conversely, rejection of opinion in news. Previous large-scale national surveys (such as those conducted by Pew and Gallup) fail to adequately address how willing the individual may be in accepting a certain amount of bias and opinion in his or her news, since those studies do not attempt to ask the question indirectly. It is the opinion of this researcher that semantics may play a role in how an individual responds to questioning their preference for opinion in news. These focus groups were an initial step in determining if respondents might be more prone to acknowledging a preference for opinionated news if asked obliquely.

Participants ranged in age from 20's to 40's, though the majority of participants were in their mid 20's. Participants filled out a questionnaire before each group discussion. This provided demographic information and allowed for several questions to promote the participants to begin thinking about the topic for discussion. One of the questions on the questionnaire asked participants to list three words that come to mind when they think of "credibility", while the second focus group participants were asked to write a personal definition of credibility. While there was a danger of decontextualizing credibility by analyzing the questionnaires, it was helpful to understand basic tropes, or "buzz words" individuals understand when confronted with credibility and trust in the current media climate. Through a rich and lively discussion, general conventions were challenged, and common themes of credibility emerged.

The focus groups problematized the ways credibility and trust are operationalized in the majority of news media research. Through just over two hours of rich discussion, common themes of news credibility emerged that complicated the common binary constructs used in the contemporary conceptualization of credibility, particularly the importance of objectivity and unbiased news. Participants began the discussion with peripheral, fundamentalist statements about what credibility meant to them. Several respondents contradicted their previous statements when continuing to self-evaluate their own news media practices and credibility processing throughout the focus groups.

*If I had to take truth versus objectivity, give me truth. I think there's a scale that we balance things on internally, and I think that's why it's so hard for someone to get credibility is because you're weighing all these different things and you go no,*



*well, how much of this do I need versus this. I mean there is no mathematical procedure for determining if somebody's credible.*

Quotes like the one above presented an opportunity for future research to explore how individuals value different components of credibility, specifically opinion, objectivity, and bias. News consumers may purport certain components of credibility as important, but when observed in an experimental setting, aspects of credibility such as objectivity and bias may have a more complicated relationship with credibility that is often ignored in historical research. For instance, shouldn't an individual have a way to express that objectivity and bias is not an important component of credibility? Instead, they are simply assessing the mere presence of bias or opinion, not whether that matters to them. Studies simply tack on "objectivity" and "bias" onto credibility matrices without considering that while an individual may recognize that a story is slanted, it does not necessarily mean it detracts from their overall perception of credibility. This was illustrated by one focus group respondent in the following quote:

*I don't think 100% objectivity is what we want. I don't think most people want that. I think most people want an element of – If I had to take truth versus objectivity, give me truth.*

Most participants in the focus group eventually (often reluctantly) admitted that a certain amount of opinion has an "entertainment" quality, and that objectivity is not the end-all-be-all.

*I don't necessarily need objective, but if you're not going to be objective, say you're not objective. I don't mind having a slant in news, but tell me that's your slant. Don't try to hide it as fact.*

Based on these focus groups, a scale or index of items is needed in order to discretely measure and account for an individual's acceptance of opinion separate from a knee-jerk response typical at the start of the focus groups. From these preliminary, exploratory focus groups, the following statements and question were created:

1. Sometimes it is ok for news to have an opinion.
2. Accuracy is more important than telling both sides of the story.
3. There is no place for opinion in mainstream news.
4. How important is objectivity in news to you?

With the creation of a new variable, the following research questions are posed:

**R1a.** Can a reliable scale be created to unobtrusively measure an individual's acceptance of opinion and rejection of objectivity in news?

The new scale, known as the Acceptance of Opinion Scale (AOS), could then be used as an intervening variable in studies of credibility and trust of opinion-based news such as punditry, partisan blogging, cable news, etc.

**R1b.** Will opinionated news be more credible for those who score highly on the Acceptance of Opinion Scale?

### **Cognitive Processing and Gender**

An experimental methodology can empirically test components of credibility matrices that are no longer ubiquitous in an increasing polarized news market: bias and objectivity. While psychological and advertising research has explored gendered differences in product and other information assessment, there appears to be a gap in gendered credibility perception research since credibility is often seen as a universal concept with universal (and tautological) components. Additionally, while studies have frequently explored news preference by gender, there is a gap in the literature in how opinion news, gender, and credibility interact.

“When it comes to news, media users clearly show different information seeking behaviors depending on their socio-demographic characteristics such as sex, age, and level of education” (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2007). Selective attention and exposure have been linked in journalism to gender. Results of a 2007 experiment found that news consumers’ selective exposure was influenced by gender, in that women read more about social and interpersonal issues and men read more achievement and performance-oriented news (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2007). A 2008 study of gendered responses to news frames found that women found greater enjoyment in positively frames news and men found more enjoyment and identified more with negatively framed news (Kamhawi & Grabe, 2008).

Additionally, using the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1974) to establish gender as a psychological trait, a 2008 study found that gender has an impact on cognitive processing of media messages, specifically that the structure of written news (inverted pyramid versus chronological) can affect androgynous and gender-typed individuals differently. The findings suggest that androgynous individuals spent more time constructing meaning during reading than subjects in other categories.

While information-seeking as well as cognitive processing research regarding gender has been explored, it is rare in the context of news credibility *perception*. This study attempts to analyze credibility perception differences between males and females. Most historic and current research runs statistical analysis to determine differences in credibility *scores* between men and women using construct matrices of credibility. If no statistically significant differences emerge between genders in the score, such credibility constructs may appear on the surface to validate the universality of credibility. However, psychological as well as advertising research tells us that there are inherent differences in information processing between genders. In advertising, differences between genders have historically been used as a basis for audience segmentation (Darley & Smith, 1995) and that women are more sensitive to “subtle” stimulus factors associated with ad processing (Lenny, et al., 1983; McGuiness & Pribram, 1979). Women are also more attuned to their personal emotional state than men (Allen & Haccoun, 1976) and consequently place a higher premium on these insights (Dubé & Morgan, 1998). Previous research also typifies males as more analytical and logical; they have also been found to use more physical attributes when conceptualizing items, as well as use fewer

adjectives. Indeed, men are found to be more receptive of objective claims over subjective claims in advertising when they engage in heuristic processing and also that objective claims are the salient focus. Men are often portrayed as more analytical and logical in their processing while women are more subjective and intuitive (Broverman et al. 1968). It may be because of this that men are more receptive to objective (rather than subjective) claims when they are fully engaged and the objective claim is both salient and focal. Conversely, women are able to process objective and subjective claims on a comprehensive level (Darley & Smith, 1993). Researchers have also found that women process information more subjectively than men, and thus demand different advertising methods that are targeted by gender (Prakash & Flores, 1985).

Objectivity and subjectivity can thus be understood as two ends of a continuum of verifiability of information. Objective claims (as in news, perhaps) contain tangible attributes along with factual descriptions” (Darley & Smith, 1993; Edell & Staelin, 1983; Holbrook, 1978). Conversely, subjective claims contain intangible qualities and more impressionistic attributes. According to Holbrook (1978), an “objective” claim encompassed two dimensions: first that a claim about a brand is associated with a tangible feature of a product, and second, that a claim includes specific factual information. On the other end of the spectrum, subjective claims are, “emotional, subjective impressions of intangible aspects of a product.” The language of these objective and subjective claims is not “sex-neutral” (Allen, 1987); neither text nor language can be sex-neutral, but is instead a “vehicle for conveying different cultural expectations and value systems for men and for women” (Stern, 1999, p.4). Of note is

that differences between male and female information processing and interpretive strategies that are based in childhood experiences can also be applied to other divergences that distinguish one group of people from another (Stern, 1999).

Given objectivity's connection with credibility and men's predispositions for objective fact-based claims, the following questions are posed:

**R2a.** Will men score lower than women on the Acceptance of Opinion scale?

**R2b.** Will women rate opinionated news as more credible than men?

### *Chapter 3: Method*

#### **PROCEDURE**

The hypotheses were tested in an experiment embedded in a Web survey in which participants viewed a fictitious online news story about policy changes for life in prison for juvenile offenders. Participants were recruited through a public records request of public university email addresses. Universities were chosen at random from a list of all public institutions in the United States. Participants were students (undergraduate and graduate), faculty, and staff above the age of 18 and were contacted through an email flyer with an incentive of entrance into a drawing for one of two Visa gift cards valued at \$100. A total of 6,609 individuals began taking the survey, with 4,897 completing it (74%). The survey remained active between June 30 and August 30 of 2011. Along with the initial invitation, potential participants were sent two reminder emails at two week intervals.

Participants were 64% female and 36% male with a median age of 23 and median household income of \$50,000 to \$59,000. They were primarily single (67%) with 31% reporting to be married or divorced. Participants were primarily Caucasian (76%), with the next largest group being Black or African American (7%) and 3% Hispanic. As is typical of social science studies that utilize primarily student populations, the participants were highly educated; only 5% reported earning a high school diploma or less while 19% reported having a Master's or Doctoral Degree. Eight percent declined to answer. Participants tended to lean towards the Democratic Party on social issues (58% to 42%), but leaned towards the Republican Party on economic issues (59% to 41%). A little more

than half (58%) considered themselves Democrats, or “leaning” towards the Democratic Party. It is important to note here that while a diverse sample is important to empirical research, this is not a generalizable survey study, but rather an experimental methodology. While the response rate was relatively low (just under 10%), it is less important since internal validity trumps concerns with external validity in this instance.

The study used a 3 (news brand *New York Times*, *Fox*, or *MSNBC*) X 3 (neutral, pro-issue, or anti-issue) between-subject design, where brand was manipulated using equally sized and placed digital logos and neutrality was manipulated by including or omitting sentences of equal length in favor, in opposition, or neutral in tone towards the issue of life in prison for juveniles.

Respondents read a news story concerned with the 2010 Supreme Court decision regarding life in prison for juveniles (LIPJ). The rationale for choosing this topic was to find a salient issue that while at times partisan, not nearly as polarizing and incendiary as other topics such as abortion or gun rights. The neutral story was written to provide a balanced summary of the two positions regarding the issue (see appendices A through I for full text of the news story). The pro-LIPJ and anti-LIPJ stories included additional statements, both objective and subjective in nature, that promoted one position on the issue over the other (i.e. “Absent an ability to do this, and in light of what science tells us about the capacity for adolescents to change, it makes no sense to lock up any young offender and throw away the key”). The news organizations of the *New York Times*, *Fox*, and *MSNBC* were chosen due to their prominence, salience, as well as reputations. In 2011, Pew asked respondents what first came to mind when they thought of “news



organizations”. A majority of respondents named cable news outlets; 39% named *Fox* and 12% named *MSNBC*, and 5% named the *New York Times*.

Portions of the story were from a *New York Times* Op-Ed article titled “The Young and the Reckless”, published November 13, 2009. The authors’ names, Elizabeth S. Scott and Laurence Steinberg, were used in the bylines of all experimental conditions. Participants were asked if they were familiar with the authors before today, and if they were familiar with the specific article before today as manipulation checks. Only 1% of participants reported being familiar with the news story and 3% reported being familiar with the authors.

## **MEASURES**

### **Control Variables** (See Table 4)

In addition to general demographic questions, various scales and items were included in order to isolate the effects of the experimental manipulations of opinion and brand on news story credibility. These included Issue Salience, Propensity to Trust, Opinion towards Life in Prison for Juveniles (LIPJ), Environment, Believability of News Brands, News Elaboration, Social Politics, and the proposed Acceptance of Opinion Scale (AOS).

To avoid pitfalls of earlier credibility research that failed to account for participant interest in the news topic, Issue Salience was measured using 4 items, where participants were asked to rate how interesting, important, relevant, and enjoyable they found the article on a 10-point scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .87$ ). Propensity to Trust was measured using 4 items, “I usually trust people”, “I give people the benefit of the doubt”, “I trust new acquaintances”, and “I trust

the United States judicial system”. The statements were evaluated on a 10-point scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .76$ ). The first three statements are standard on traditional scales used to measure propensity to trust. While the *alpha* is relatively low, due to the nature of the subject matter involving the United States judicial system, trust in the judicial branch of government is important as a variable in the index.

Opinion towards LIPJ was measured by asking participants their level of agreement of the statement “Sentencing a juvenile to life in prison without the possibility of parole should be illegal” on a 10-point scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. They were also asked if juveniles should be eligible for the death penalty (which is currently illegal under U.S. law based on a previous Supreme Court decision) using the same scale. The items were repeated after the manipulation to account for article influence on opinion.

Because this was a survey-based experiment, it was important to control for environment as much as possible. Participants were asked to describe the environment in which they completed the survey (e.g. on a home computer, on a school computer), if they were forced to pause or stop taking the survey, and if so, why.

Believability of News Brands was measured using a 10-point scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree, asking participants, “Please rate how much you think you can believe each of the following news organizations” (See Figure 3). This mirrors Pew’s own credibility question and their list of 18 news outlets, including *USA Today*,

CNN, MSNBC, *The New York Times*, *Fox News*, and *The National Inquirer*. (See Table 3)

Table 3: Believability of News Brands Pretest

<b><i>NYT Pro-Issue</i> (Range = 9)</b>	<b><i>M</i></b>	<b><i>SD</i></b>
USA Today	7.15	2.074
Wall Street Journal	7.66	2.056
New York Times	7.63	2.137
Daily Newspaper	7.32	2.03
CNN	7.11	2.261
<i>Fox News</i>	5.59	2.93
MSNBC	6.54	2.352
ABC News	6.9	2.143
CBS News	6.91	2.143
NBC News	6.95	2.162
Local TV News	7.12	2.102
C-Span	7.32	2.144
The PBS NewsHour	7.4	2.144
60 minutes	7.25	2.118
NPR	7.36	2.337
Time Magazine	7.14	2.21
People Magazine	4.61	2.389
<b>National Inquirer</b>	<b>2.92</b>	<b>2.6</b>

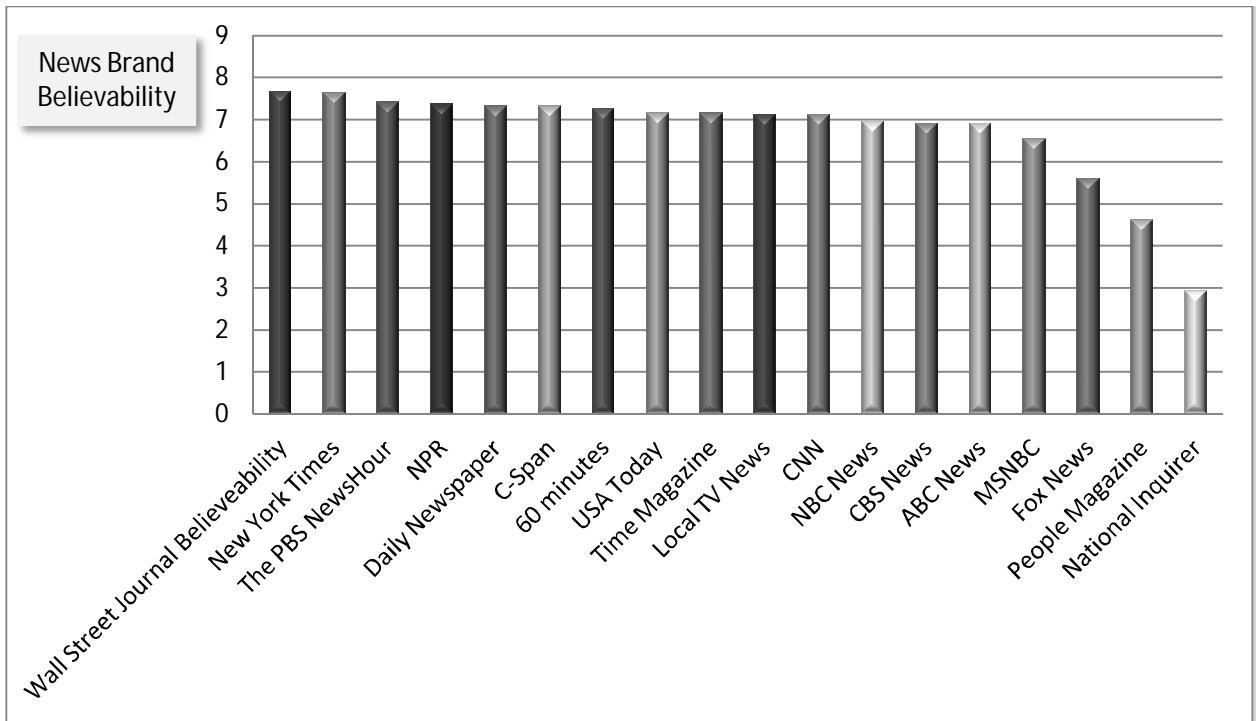


Figure 3: Mean Ratings for News Organization Believability Pretest. Maximum response is 10.

News Elaboration was measured using four items, asking participants how often they find themselves “thinking about what I’ve seen or read in the news”, “tie what I see or read in the news to ideas I’ve had before”, “try to relate what I see or read in the news to my own personal experiences”, and, “think about how what I see or read in the news relates to other things I know” on a 10-point scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .91$ ).

As noted previously, the experiment included questions to determine the social politics of the participants. Two items were included that asked participants to move a sliding-scale to position themselves between the Republican and Democratic parties in both social issues and economic issues (“On social issues, I consider myself a...”).

The Acceptance of Opinion Scale was created from four questions (two of which were reverse-coded) to determine an individual's attitude towards opinion in news. Three of the items were measured on a 10-point scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. The statements were, "Sometimes it is ok for news to have an opinion", "Accuracy is more important than telling both sides of the story", "There is no place for opinion in mainstream news". The scale also included the question, "How important is objectivity in news to *you*?" on a 10-point scale from Not Important at all to Very Important. Due to an unacceptably low Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .41, two of the items were removed from analysis so as to include only "Sometimes it is ok for news to have an opinion" and "There is no place for opinion in mainstream news" (Cronbach's  $\alpha$  = .71).

### **Dependent Variable**

#### ***Credibility***

Participants were asked to evaluate the credibility of the news story using a scale comprised of 12 items, each on a 10-Point Scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. Participants were asked to rate how Trustworthy, Unbelievable, Reliable, Authoritative, Inaccurate, Honest, Biased, Credible, Knowledgeable, Dynamic, Informative, and Objective they found the news (Cronbach's  $\alpha$  = .89). This scale was comprised of measures from previous studies but with several of the items reverse-coded to avoid positive response bias (e.g. Inaccurate, Unbelievable).

Table 4: Independent and Dependent Variable Scales

Scale/Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>
Salience	26.68	7.46	36
Credibility	73.95	15.78	108
Acceptance of Opinion Scale	9.76	4.75	18
Propensity to Trust	24.41	6.44	36
Life in Prison for Juveniles	5.84	2.99	9
Social Politics	41.43	30.34	100
News Elaboration	28.18	8	36

## Chapter 4: Results

### HYPOTHESIS 1

For H1, that opinionated news will be rated less credible than neutral news, a t-test was conducted that analyzed credibility scores of respondents within what brand of news to which they were exposed, the *New York Times*, *Fox*, and *MSNBC*. The study found that among respondents who viewed a *New York Times* article, neutral news had statistically significant higher credibility ratings than opinionated news ( $t(1023.76) = -6.090, p < .001$ , with a Mean credibility score of 78<sup>3</sup> for the neutral story and a Mean credibility score of 73 for the opinionated conditions (See Figure 4). Even when using a credibility matrix that omitted the items of “Objectivity” and “Bias” (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .91$ ), the results of the t-test were still significant ( $t(1594) = -4.175, p < .001$ , showing that the neutral story (Mean credibility 67) was still more credible than either of the opinionated stories (Mean credibility 63)<sup>4</sup>. This secondary credibility matrix was tested as to alleviate the concern of tautology, that respondents were identifying qualities that the story contained rather than assessing them in terms of credibility. While results varied slightly, the neutral condition was still statistically significantly more credible.

A similar result was found for *Fox* stories, where the neutral story (credibility Mean of 76) was more credible than the opinionated stories (credibility Mean of 72) ( $t(1656) = -5.102, p < .001$ ). When using the credibility matrix without “Objectivity” and “Bias”, the results held, with neutral story credibility at 64 and opinionated story

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<sup>3</sup> A maximum credibility score of 120 was possible by rating “10” to every item in the credibility matrix.

<sup>4</sup> A maximum credibility score of 100 was possible by rating “10” to every item in the secondary credibility matrix.

credibility at 62 ( $t(1656) = -2.933, p = .003$ ). For the *MSNBC* articles, neutral news was more credible than opinionated news, 76 to 72 accordingly ( $t(1668) = -5.779, p < .001$ ). When using the secondary credibility matrix omitting “Objectivity” and “Bias, results remained similarly significant, where the neutral story was found to be more credible than the opinionated story, 65 to 63. ( $t(1670) = -3.362, p < .001$ ). Hypothesis 1 is thus universally supported.

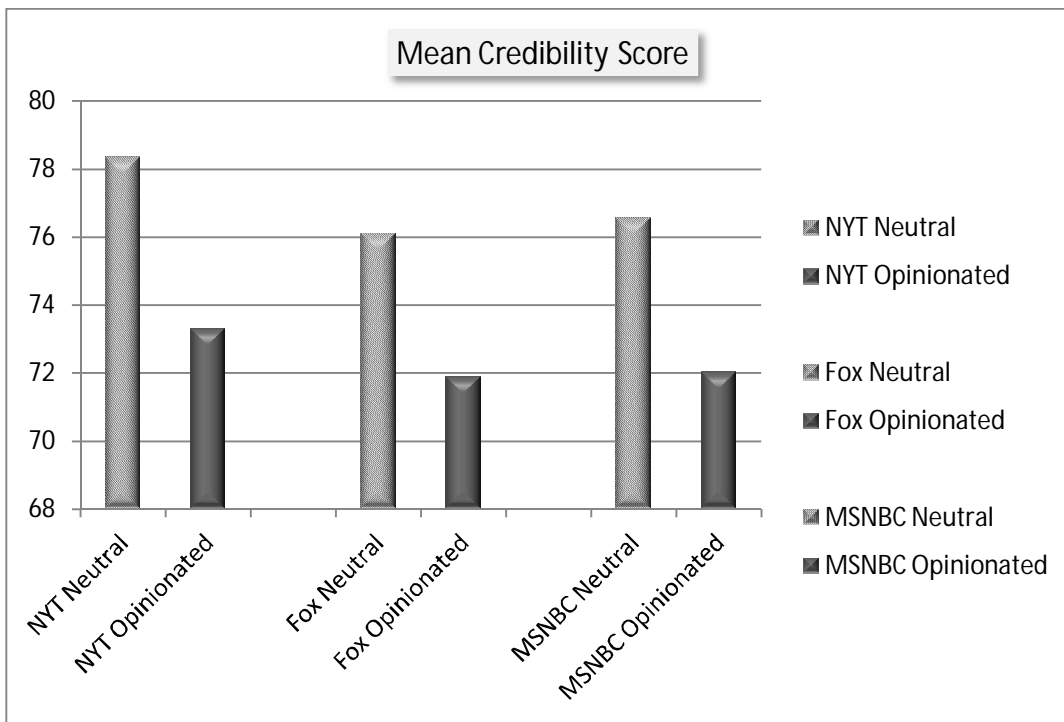


Figure 4: Mean Credibility Scores by Experimental Conditions. A maximum credibility score of 120 possible.

## HYPOTHESIS 2



For H2, that opinionated news will be rated higher in terms of credibility if aligned with previously held beliefs on life in prison for juveniles, a two-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted across all nine story conditions. For all story conditions, a preliminary analysis evaluating the homogeneity-of-regression (slopes) assumption indicated that the relationship between the covariates (Believability of News Brand, Issue Salience, Propensity to Trust, News Elaboration, and AOS) and the dependent variable (Credibility) did not differ significantly as a function of the independent variables (LIPJ Score and Social Politics). In all conditions, the relationship between the covariates and credibility did not differ significantly as a function of belief in LIPJ or politics on social issues. There was homogeneity of variance between groups as assessed by Levene's test for equality of error variance in all instances except for the MSNBC pro-issue condition. However, H2 was not supported. In certain cases, the reversal was true, that opinionated news that aligned with personal attitudes towards LIPJ was found to be less credible.

Table 5: Analysis of Covariance for Credibility by Belief in Life in Prison for Juveniles- New York Times

<b>Condition</b>	<b>SS</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>MS</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>p</b>
<i>NYT Anti-Issue</i>					
Belief in LIPJ	591.679	1	591.679	3.314	.070
Social Politics	130.050	1	130.050	.728	.394
Social Politics*LIPJ	132.553	1	132.553	.742	.390
Error	41601.625	233			
Total	62909.769	241			
<i>NYT Pro-Issue</i>					
Belief in LIPJ	4.611	1	4.611	.019	.890
Social Politics	1.728	1	1.728	.007	.933
Social Politics*LIPJ	.344	1	.344	.001	.970
Error	59088.990	244			
Total	77772.696	252			
<i>NYT Neutral</i>					
Belief in LIPJ	4.397	1	4.397	.026	.873
Social Politics	7.269	1	7.269	.042	.837
Social Politics*LIPJ	25.918	1	25.918	.150	.698
Error	41520.889	241			
<b>Total</b>	<b>65980.576</b>	<b>249</b>			

### *New York Times Condition*

For the three New York Times story condition, there were no significant interactions between the effects of opinion towards LIPJ and social politics on credibility (see Table 5).

### *Fox News Condition*

For the *Fox News* story condition, simple main effects analysis of the anti-LIPJ condition showed that among social Democrats, those who are pro-LIPJ found the story to be more credible than those social Democrats who are anti-LIPJ ( $p = .024$ ) (see Table

6 and Figure 5). There were no differences found among social Republicans ( $p = .076$ ). There were no significant interactions between the effects of opinion towards LIPJ and social politics on credibility.

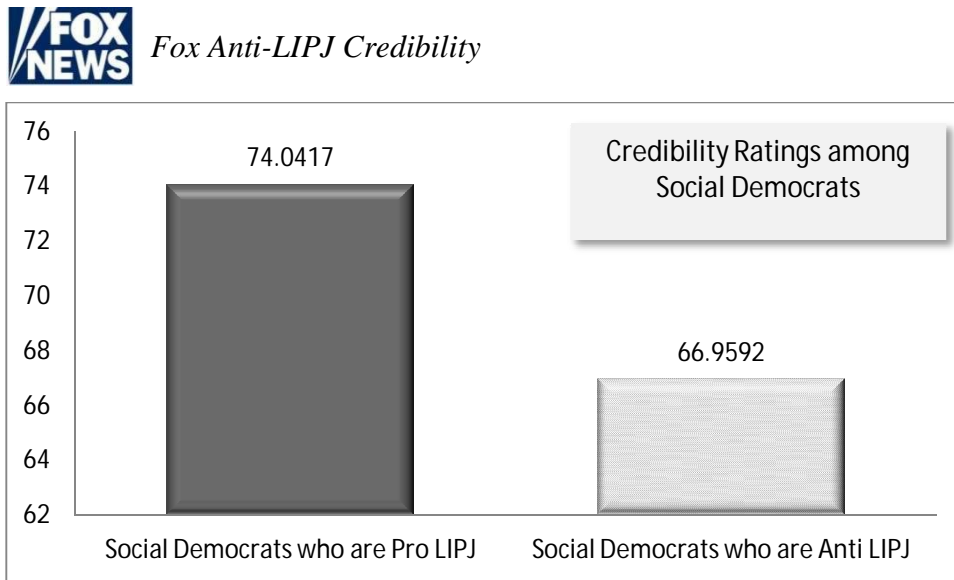


Figure 5: Credibility Ratings among Social Democrats for *Fox* “Anti-Life in Prison for Juveniles” Condition. A maximum credibility score of 120 is possible. From left to right,  $SD = 16.56$  and  $SD = 18.4684$ .

Table 6: Analysis of Covariance for Credibility by Belief in Life in Prison for Juveniles- *Fox News*

<b>Condition</b>	<b><i>SS</i></b>	<b><i>df</i></b>	<b><i>MS</i></b>	<b><i>F</i></b>	<b><i>p</i></b>
<i>Fox Anti-Issue</i>					
Belief in LIPJ	1344.262	1	1344.262	6.066	.014
Social Politics	140.725	1	140.725	.635	.426
Social Politics*LIPJ	46.764	1	46.764	.211	.646
Error	53407.193	241			
Total	79129.056	249			
<i>Fox Pro-Issue</i>					
Belief in LIPJ	43.293	1	43.293	.187	.666
Social Politics	77.440	1	77.440	.334	.564
Social Politics*LIPJ	243.417	1	243.417	1.051	.306
Error	56498.372	244			
Total	84713.897	252			
<i>Fox Neutral</i>					
Belief in LIPJ	418.332	1	418.332	2.297	.131
Social Politics	79.017	1	79.017	.434	.511
Social Politics*LIPJ	.423	1	.423	.002	.962
Error	52454.946	288			
<b>Total</b>	<b>77598.875</b>	<b>296</b>			

### **MSNBC Condition**

For those participants who read one of the three MSNBC story conditions, simple main effects analysis of the anti-LIPJ condition showed that among Social Republicans, those who are pro-LIPJ rated the story as more credible than those social Republicans who are anti-LIPJ ( $p < .001$ ) (See Figure 6). Additionally, simple main effects found that among those who are anti-LIPJ, social Democrats rated the story as more credible than social Republicans ( $p = .002$ ) (See Figure 7). There were no significant interactions

between the effects of opinion towards LIPJ and social politics on credibility (see Table 7).

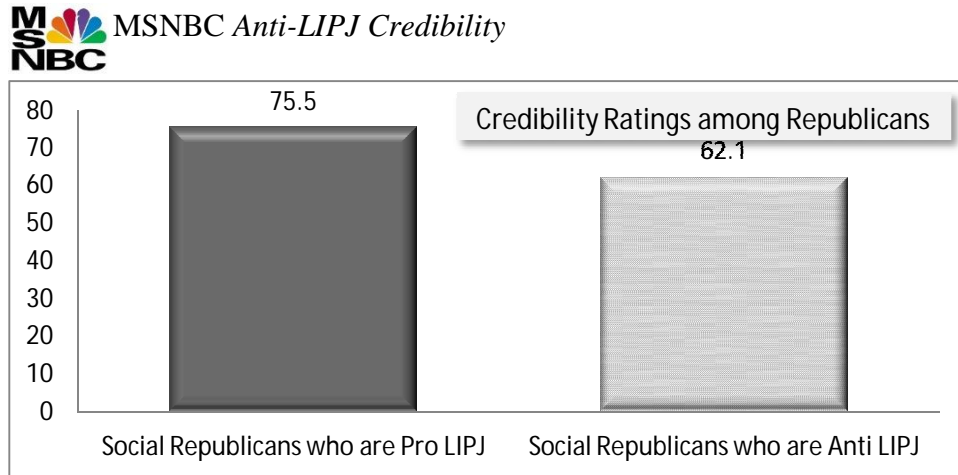


Figure 6: Credibility Ratings Among Social Republicans for MSNBC “Anti-Life in Prison for Juveniles” Condition. Max credibility score of 120 is possible. From left to right,  $SD = 13.5137$  and  $SD = 17.7217$ .

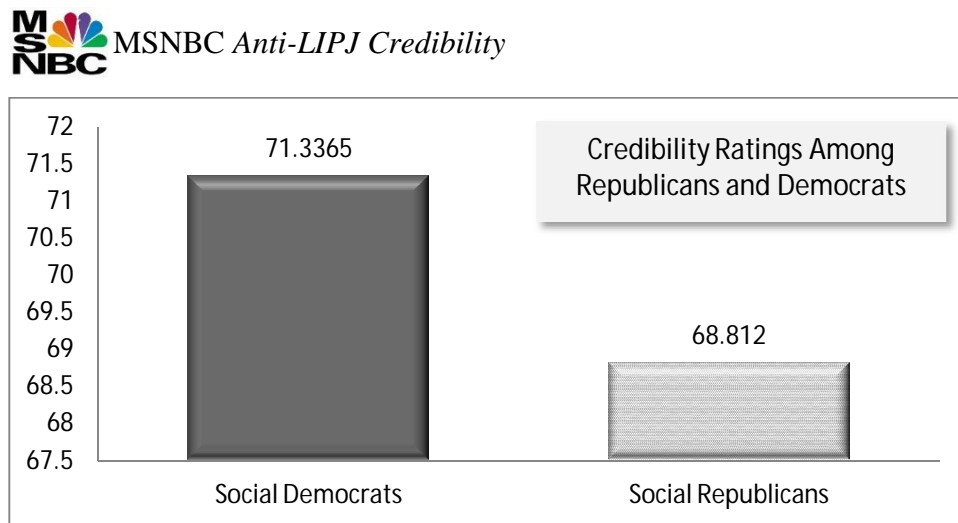


Figure 7: Credibility Ratings Among Social Republicans and Social Democrats for MSNBC “Anti-Life in Prison for Juveniles” Condition. Max credibility score of 120 is possible. From left to right,  $SD = 15.209$  and  $SD = 16.118$ .

Table 7: Analysis of Covariance for Credibility by Belief in Life in Prison for Juvenile- MSNBC

<b>Condition</b>	<b><i>SS</i></b>	<b><i>df</i></b>	<b><i>MS</i></b>	<b><i>F</i></b>	<b><i>p</i></b>
<i>MSNBC Anti-Issue</i>					
Belief in LIPJ	1168.551	1	1168.551	6.105	.014
Social Politics	1185.105	1	1185.105	6.191	.014
Social Politics*LIPJ	62.458	1	62.458	.326	.568
Error	46898.932	245			
Total	76166.614	253			
<i>MSNBC Pro-Issue**</i>					
Belief in LIPJ	278.493	1	278.493	1.819	.179
Social Politics	542.983	1	542.983	3.547	.061
Social Politics*LIPJ	166.518	1	166.518	1.088	.298
Error	39039.502	255			
Total	59233.360	263			
<i>MSNBC Neutral</i>					
Belief in LIPJ	238.068	1	238.068	1.212	.272
Social Politics	25.423	1	25.423	.129	.719
Social Politics*LIPJ	214.944	1	214.944	1.094	.296
Error	54608.342	278			
<b>Total</b>	<b>73998.509</b>	<b>286</b>			

Note: \*\*Indicates Levene's test for equality of error variance not met

### HYPOTHESIS 3

H3 stated that news would be rated higher in credibility for those participants exposed to a news brand they believe. The mean believability score was calculated for *New York Times*, *Fox News*, and *MSNBC* ( $M = 7.63$ ,  $5.59$ , and  $6.54$  respectively) from answers from a pretest that participants completed prior to exposure to the stimuli. The variables were split at one standard deviation from the mean in either direction to create a variable of "Cannot Believe All or Most" and "Believe All or Most". For those who

were exposed to a *New York Times* condition, a t-test revealed statistically significant differences in credibility scores between those who rated the *New York Times* as believable in the pretest ( $M = 81.60, SD = 17.31$ ) and those who rated the *New York Times* as unbelievable in the pretest ( $M = 65.41, SD = 14.04$ ),  $t(616.43) = -12.84, p = .000$  (See Figure 8). Additional t-tests were performed and found statistically significant differences in credibility scores between those who were exposed to the a *Fox News* condition and who rated *Fox News* as believable in the pretest ( $M = 79.53, SD = 15.41$ ) and those who rated the organization as unbelievable ( $M = 66.21, SD = 17.58$ ),  $t(696) = -10.60, p = .000$ . The final t-test also found a statistically significant difference in credibility scores between those who rated MSNBC as believable ( $M = 80.91, SD = 16.94$ ) and those who rated it as unbelievable ( $M = 66.20, SD = 15.81$ ),  $t(649) = -11.46, p = .000$ . H3 is thus supported.

*NYT, Fox, and MSNBC*

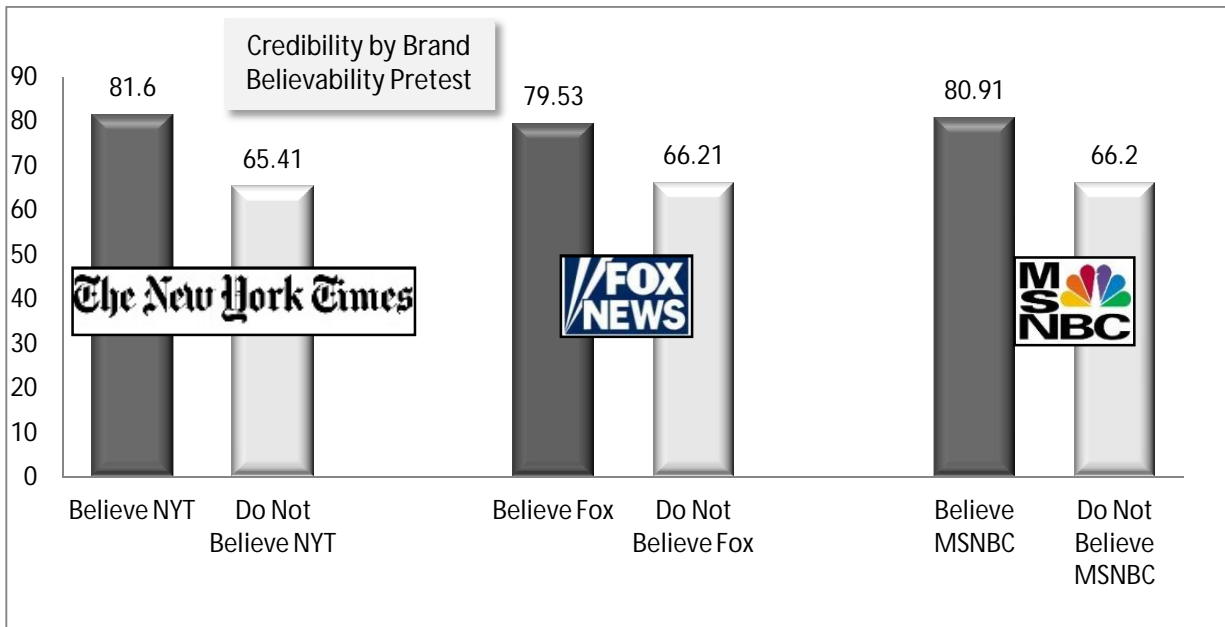


Figure 8: Credibility of *NYT*, *Fox*, and *MSNBC* Conditions Separated by Brand Believers and Non-Believers Pretest. A maximum credibility score of 120 is possible.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

R1a. addresses whether or not a reliable scale could be created to unobtrusively measure an individual's acceptance of opinion and rejection of objectivity in news.

While four items were originally created, two were thrown out due to a lack of reliability analysis. The two items that remained were used to create an Acceptance of Opinion Scale with a score of 2 through 20. R1b. asked if opinionated news would be more credible for those who score highly on the Acceptance of Opinion Scale. The mean of the scale was calculated for all participants ( $M = 9.76$ ,  $SD = 4.75$ ) and participants were divided into two groups: accepting opinion in news and rejecting opinion in news. A t-



test was performed and found statistically significant differences in credibility scores for those accepting opinion in news ( $M = 77.24$ ,  $SD = 15.97$ ) and those rejecting opinion in news ( $M = 70.58$ ,  $SD = 17.60$ ),  $t(1269) = -6.87$ ,  $p = .000$ .

An addition finding concerned the relationship between the AOS and an individual's propensity to trust. Scores on the AOS were positively related to scores on the propensity to trust scale. The propensity to trust scale was divided by standard deviation to make three groups, low trust, medium trust, and high trust individuals. Percentages for the three groups differed significantly according to Welch's  $t$ -test,  $t(2) = 22.675$ ,  $p < .05$ , where individuals with low trust scored lower ( $M = 9.22$ ) on the AOS scale than either medium trust ( $M = 9.80$ ) or high trust ( $M = 10.26$ ) individuals. The 95% confidence interval of the differences is 0.22 to 0.94 points for low to medium trust individuals, 0.67 to 1.40 points for low to high trust, and 0.08 to 0.83 points for medium to high trust individuals.

The final research questions dealt with gender, credibility, and opinion. R2a. asked if men would score lower than women on the AOS. A  $t$ -test found no significant differences between men ( $M = 9.81$ ,  $SD = 5.05$ ), and women ( $M = 9.67$ ,  $SD = 4.62$ ),  $t(3329) = .92$ ,  $p = .360$  on the AOS. R2b. asked if women would rate opinion news as more credible than men. A series of 9  $t$ -tests were performed, one for each story condition (see table 8). Only the neutral *New York Times* condition showed statistical significance between men and women in terms of credibility, with women rating the story higher than men in terms of credibility. The neutral *Fox* condition approached significance.

Table 8: Credibility by Story Condition and Gender

Condition	Men		Women		t (df)	p
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
<i>New York Times</i> Anti-LIPJ	73.21	15.95	71.89	14.02	.933(506)	.352
<i>New York Times</i> Pro-LIPJ	75.49	16.57	73.84	15.56	1.14(506)	.264
<b><i>New York Times</i> Neutral</b>	<b>76.16</b>	<b>15.12</b>	<b>79.94</b>	<b>15.96</b>	<b>-2.643(504)</b>	<b>.008</b>
<i>Fox</i> Anti-LIPJ	71.64	16.49	71.08	15.64	.385(533)	.700
<i>Fox</i> Pro-LIPJ	71.61	17.92	73.31	16.14	-1.07(507)	.286
<i>Fox</i> Neutral	77.89	15.58	75.32	15.65	1.94(569)	.056
MSNBC Anti-LIPJ	69.57	15.63	70.51	15.47	-.672(539)	.502
MSNBC Pro-LIPJ	73.28	14.96	74.24	15.54	-0.681(529)	.496
MSNBC Neutral	76.35	15.35	76.95	14.73	-.452(563)	.651

## Chapter 5: Conclusion and Future Directions

The results of this study confirmed empirical research in some areas of news credibility research, challenged certain conceptions in others, and offered new avenues for exploration. Like other studies, this experiment showed that consumers are significantly affected by specific cues that accompany news stories in their process of accessing credibility. The cues of news brand and freedom of opinion-laden statements were the strongest cues that affected how an individual rated a story in terms of credibility, while previously held beliefs on story topic were not strong credibility cues in this case. Additionally, there was significant interaction with politics and belief in the thorny issue of life in prison for juveniles, though not in the ways anticipated. In some conditions, social Democrats were less likely than Republicans to support life in prison for juveniles, while no significant findings were held in other conditions. This supports

the researcher's intent to find a story that crossed political boundaries, but perhaps to a point of detriment.

The results of the experiment regarding previously held beliefs were surprising in that the hypothesis with the most established support in the literature relating credibility with affinity of opinion was not found to be significant, though believability of the news organization overall did correlate with higher credibility scores when an individual was exposed to that brand condition. The more predisposed the respondent towards overall "believing" a particular brand, the more credible they found that news story. An established affiliation with a news brand is, indeed, important to gaining credibility and trust; reputation is key, and once lost, may be difficult to regain.

This finding, that previously held beliefs towards news brand correlates with credibility, is more noteworthy when put in the context of the other finding that previously held beliefs towards life in prison for juveniles was not found to correlate with credibility. It is possible that extraneous variables not accounted for due to the quasi-experimental nature of the study are the cause, or simply that the news topic was not particularly prominent or salient in the minds of the participants at the time of the investigation. However, what is clear is that belief in the issue was not as important as belief in the news brand itself. This has powerful implications for other research into previously held beliefs and credibility ratings, since the hypothesis appears to hold for some sets of belief systems but not others. In the quest to find a news story topic that lacked dramatic political polarization, statistically significant findings on this particular

hypothesis might have been sacrificed. This is admittedly not a particularly “hot button” issue, and had a relatively low level of salience and prominence for this set of participants. Perhaps more prominent topics such as abortion rights or gun control might have proved a significant finding, though split more heavily along ideological lines. Future researchers should perform rigorous pretests on story topic alone, or when time and space allows, include story topics of varying subject matter to determine the interplay between specific topic, politics, and credibility perceptions. Another question concerning how strongly the respondent felt about the topic would have helped account for apathetic respondents. While a salience measure was used to find how interesting, enjoyable, etc. the story was, a second or third dimension should have been added to compare the salience of this topic with others in the current news cycle. While most respondents found the topic salient (interesting, important, relevant, enjoyable), only 60% of respondents were familiar with the topic of the story before the day they read it. Future research that manipulates story opinion content should include multiple story topics to avoid this pitfall. After all, “familiarity is a precondition for trust” (Luhman, 1979). In a 2000 study of e-commerce, Gefen found that familiarity did indeed build trust. And on a macro level, the whole of advertising is based on the notions of familiarity and trust (Arora & Stoner, 1996; Flavian, Guinalí‘u, & Gurrea, 2006).

It was not surprising that branding in the form of a small logo had a significant effect on credibility. While *Fox* and *MSNBC* did not differentiate from one another in terms of credibility, the *New York Times* was found to be far more credible, regardless of

whether the story was opinionated or neutral. Print institutions may be considered the dinosaur of the digitized media age, but they still have a lot of weight to throw around. It is problematic to compare two organizations primarily seen as television news with the print news goliath of the *New York Times*, but then it was not the purpose of this study to compare those different media institutions, but rather individual perception and personal affinity towards them. This finding has strong implications for individual or “back-pack” journalists who report news independently from large institutions. Establishing a consistent brand and familiarity has always been an important part of establishing trust with audience members. But now more than ever in a saturated news environment with myriad online and offline choices, these branding concerns should remain top-of-mind for all journalists, whether associated with a major news institution or not, as belief sets toward brand were found to be significantly related to credibility. Establishing brand loyalty is not just a concern for tangible products like bath tissue or cheese slices; belief in brand translates to news products as well. Additional research also could explore if mentioning news brands in the pretest in relation to one another primes individuals to elaborate on their belief systems towards those brands. Might the degree to which an individual is asked to think about particular brands be related to the strength of the credibility assessment? Other cues, such as reading additional articles by that brand, or even reminding the participant of past credibility blunders, i.e. Jayson Blair, might also prime respondents to elaborate on the beliefs systems that lend towards credibility assessments of an article under that news brand umbrella.

Further research is also needed to create a more in-depth and theoretically grounded Acceptance of Opinion Scale (AOS), though preliminary results are promising, as this experiment makes an important first step towards addressing some consumers' acceptance or preference for opinion in news. The preliminary focus groups were conducted in order to theorize potential reliable measures to account for an individual's acceptance of opinion in news to expand current credibility theory to consider individual weight (or exclusion in some cases) of credibility matrix items like objectivity and bias. Since the limited index of two items drew significant results, additional empirical and theoretical research into the idea of accepting opinion would be greatly beneficial to social science research into credibility theory within the current and (foreseeable future) fragmented news market. There must be a way to unobtrusively arrive at an individual's preference for opinion in news, since social desirability still seems to govern the news media consumer when it comes admitting a taste for tailor-flavored news. Credibility theory relies heavily on the historical development of the importance of objectivity in news. This remains a fundamental component of "good" journalism practice. But a subset does prefer news with an opinion- Nearly 45% of respondents in this study agreed that opinion in news is ok. Here, again, the case is made for the distinction in credibility theory semantics between "actual" credibility, and "perceived" credibility. "Actual" credibility, then, can be understood as fact-based core news products. "Perceived" credibility is the individual's interpretation across a variety of common credibility components that were measured in this study.

There was also a statistically significant relationship between propensity to trust and the AOS. Trusting individuals were more likely to accept opinion in their news. While further research is needed to understand the reasons behind this correlation, it is in line with current theory that shows a link between personality, specifically agreeableness, propensity to trust, and knowledge sharing (Mooradian, Renzl, & Matzler, 2006). If an individual is more trusting of information in general, then it stands that they are more trusting of individual opinions in their news; there is less cause to doubt the veracity of the information presented. There is also evidence that low levels of trust in the government overall are related to low levels of trust in the media, and that the record low-levels of trust in government are directly related to the decline in the trust of the media (Jones, 2004). This is a rich area for exploration, where the AOS could be expanded to include elements of propensity to trust measures that include political as well as other areas of journalism.

Journalism *with* an objective rarely *is* objective; but having secondary news sources with opinionated commentary can complement core news products that strive to be free of bias. That news model is a healthy, democratic goal. Unfortunately, the balance between partisan and objective news choices is increasingly tilting towards the former. And that is not to say partisanship is a tilting canoe. As drawn from Pew Research Center for People and the Press research (2009, 2011), the partisan news gap continues to grow, unchecked. The proposed AOS measure is an attempt to illuminate audience segmentation and fragmentation issues, not only for scholars who have long

studied these concepts, particularly in the wake of a technology tidal wave, but for news consumers and news makers as well. To be aware of personal biases is to recognize them in others.

It is also not particularly surprising that no significant differences were found between men and women on the two-item AOS measure. From preliminary analysis, men and women appear to respond to the four different items quite differently. This does not mean that credibility, or objectivity, is free of gender implications. More analysis is needed before we can completely answer the question regarding women's and men's attitudes towards opinion in news. Perhaps, though, it is faulty and dangerous logic to assume that advertising research into cognitive processing of subjective versus objective claims can be applied to journalism research. To only think of news as a "product" is to lose sight of the other roles of journalism in a free, democratic society, the roles of watchdog and gatekeeper of information. Additional focus groups must be conducted with a greater emphasis on gender. A specific gender analysis was not conducted of these preliminary focus groups. Men and women were not encouraged to consider any specific criteria that differentiates their credibility assessments from others in the room, but rather were encouraged to discuss how they individually conceptualize credibility. While advertising and psychology research tells us that men and women process subjective and objective claims differently, perhaps they still arrive at the same conclusion regarding news products.



While credibility continues to crumble at pace with the shrinking demand for an unbiased, objective core news product, historic contexts in the study of credibility are more important than ever. Credibility research should be standardized and rooted firmly in established theory. Credibility scales and matrices should continue to be empirically tested while expanding the understanding of what a contemporary news audience will accept as credible, be that biased, opinion-laden, or self-assuring in a media saturated environment. The scale proposed in this thesis is a synthesis of previous credibility studies. It is not only the scale itself but the intervening variables of salience, propensity to trust, and the newly proposed AOS scale that make this method unique from others in the literature. Granted, large-scale surveys such as those conducted by Pew cannot include as many extraneous variables; response rates *do* matter, particularly in national surveys that intend to be generalized to a wider audience. That is what gives experimental approaches such as this one new breadth, since there is room to explore rich concepts and “unpack” traditional scales so that the individual consumer snapshot is more accurate and less ambiguous. That is why with only two preliminary focus groups, this thesis was able to create the beginnings of a valuable tool in credibility research that takes into account both predisposition towards opinionated news as well as countering effects of social desirability that tell individuals that objectivity is universally bad. It is not categorical. Objectivity in news is an evolutionary process, one which this thesis attempts to freeze in time. Objective news is absolutely necessary, a core news product free from commentary is essential. But so is free expression. Individuals need to process an alarming amount of information. If opinion-based news assists in settling cognitive

dissonance, then it has earned its real estate on television, in print, on the radio, and on the Internet.

While the alarmist language of scholars and professionals regarding the downfall of news credibility should not be understated, there is also cause to curb it. The press is still a more trusted source of information than federal, state, and local governments, the Obama administration, or business corporations (Pew, 2011). As far as institutionalized information distribution, the press is far ahead of the pack. Local news sources fare even better still, with 69% of respondents in a 2011 Pew study reporting that they trust all or some of the information from local news organizations compared to 59% for national news organizations. Skepticism is as important to journalism as it is to democracy. As Thomas Jefferson said of skepticism, “Bigotry is the disease of ignorance, of morbid minds; enthusiasm of the free and buoyant. Education and free discussion are the antidotes of both.”

Credibility and objectivity are evolving concepts. This study put credibility ratings in an historical context of how the concept has evolved over its research lifespan and has also expanded the dialogue surrounding credibility research and theory by suggesting that researchers consider the relationships between objectivity, bias, and credibility in a diverse news media market where branding (ideological or corporate) is commonplace. Journalists and newsmakers need to be prescient regarding the roll of opinionated news in relation to other news products. We trust what is credible to us. Certain belief systems dictate how and what we choose to trust. That trust is a

complexity of psychology, life experience, and other contextual factors that will always vary by the individual news consumer. But researchers and industry professionals alike will continue to ask more questions in different ways, hoping to gain insight to influence policy and standard practices, all to inform, engage, and inspire the contemporary news consumer.

## Appendices

### Appendix A

## **The New York Times**

### **The Young and the Reckless**

By ELIZABETH S. SCOTT and LAURENCE STEINBERG

ON Monday, the United States Supreme Court heard oral arguments in two cases that ask whether sentencing a juvenile to life in prison without the possibility of parole is a violation of the Eighth Amendment's prohibition of cruel and unusual punishment.

Those who hope the court will ban this sort of sentencing point to the 2005 decision in *Roper v. Simmons*, in which the court abolished the juvenile death penalty. They believe that the logic the justices applied in *Roper* to exclude minors from capital punishment should extend to life without parole as well.

Those who hope the justices will retain life sentences for juveniles argue that "death is different," and that the court should exercise restraint, as it typically does when reviewing non-capital sentencing decisions for fairness under the proportionality principle.

You can imagine someone who is a month short of his 18th birthday, and you are saying that, no matter what this person does -- commits the most horrible series of non-homicide offenses that you can imagine, a whole series of brutal rapes, assaults -- that person must at some point be made eligible for parole. Why does a juvenile have a constitutional right to hope but an adult does not?

A crucial lesson of the *Roper* case was that the developmental differences between adolescents and adults are important under the Eighth Amendment, as they are in other areas of constitutional law. In deciding to end the juvenile death penalty, the court repeatedly emphasized the relative immaturity of minors, even at age 17, as compared to adults — a point that is well established in behavioral research and finds growing support in brain science.

Writing for the majority in *Roper*, Justice Anthony Kennedy observed that juveniles' impulsivity, recklessness and susceptibility to peer pressure made them inherently less responsible than adults. Justice Kennedy also noted juveniles' potential for rehabilitation, because their personality and character traits are less fixed than adults.

In the years since the *Roper* ruling, research on adolescent brain and behavioral development has provided additional support for Justice Kennedy's observations. There is now a consensus among neuroscientists, for example, that brain regions and systems responsible for foresight, self-regulation, risk assessment and responsiveness to social influences continue to mature into young adulthood. This evidence that adolescents are psychologically and neurologically less mature than adults should be important in deciding how to punish their criminal acts.

In Monday's oral argument, the justices did not question the proposition that juveniles generally are psychologically less mature than adults. The debate focused instead on whether the mitigating trait of immaturity justified a categorical exclusion of juveniles from the sentence of life without parole.

Some justices argued instead that age and maturity should be considered in sentencing on a case-by-case basis. But this approach was rejected by the court in *Roper* — but should not be rejected here as well. As *Roper* recognized, even psychological experts are unable to distinguish between the young person whose crime reflects transient immaturity and the rare juvenile offender who may deserve the harsh sentence of life without parole.

The two Florida offenders whose cases will be decided by the court differ in age and in their offenses: Terrance Graham was sentenced to life without parole for a probation violation involving a house break-in at age 17, while Joe Sullivan was convicted of sexual assault at age 13.

It is possible that the court will treat these two cases differently. But in both cases, the lower court decisions should not be struck down.

We question any distinction drawn between killings and other sorts of violent crimes. The court is quite willing to accept that a 17-year-old who pulls the trigger on a firearm can demonstrate sufficient depravity and irredeemability to be denied re-entry into society, but insists that a 17-year-old who rapes an 8-year-old and leaves her for dead does not. That seems illogical. Such a sentence offends “the evolving standards of decency that mark the progress of a maturing society,” the court’s announced standard for reviewing state punishment under the Eighth Amendment. Indeed, in our opinion, life without parole should be determined on a case by case basis, even for a juvenile.

There is no question that teenagers who commit serious crimes should be held accountable and punished, and that society must be protected from young people who are violent and dangerous.

But states should have the discretion they have long been given to decide how harshly young criminals should be prosecuted. Thirty-seven states, the District of Columbia and the federal government have laws allowing life-without-parole sentences for juveniles convicted of non-homicide offenses. That represents a super-majority of states in favor of the punishment.

And only 129 juvenile offenders have been convicted under such laws. That a punishment is rarely imposed demonstrates nothing more than a general consensus that it should be just that — rarely imposed. It is not proof that the punishment is one the nation abhors.

## **The Young and the Reckless**

By ELIZABETH S. SCOTT and LAURENCE STEINBERG

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Those who hope the court will ban this sort of sentencing point to the 2005 decision in *Roper v. Simmons*, in which the court abolished the juvenile death penalty. They believe that the logic the justices applied in *Roper* to exclude minors from capital punishment should extend to life without parole as well.

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A crucial lesson of the *Roper* case was that the developmental differences between adolescents and adults are important under the Eighth Amendment, as they are in other areas of constitutional law. In deciding to end the juvenile death penalty, the court repeatedly emphasized the relative immaturity of minors, even at age 17, as compared to adults — a point that is well established in behavioral research and finds growing support in brain science.

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It is possible that the court will treat these two cases differently. Such a sentence offends “the evolving standards of decency that mark the progress of a maturing society,” the court’s announced standard for reviewing state punishment under the Eighth Amendment.

There is no question that teenagers who commit serious crimes should be held accountable and punished, and that society must be protected from young people who are violent and dangerous, yet the debate concerning life in prison for juveniles continues.

## Appendix D



### **The Young and the Reckless**

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We question any distinction drawn between killings and other sorts of violent crimes. The court is quite willing to accept that a 17-year-old who pulls the trigger on a firearm can demonstrate sufficient depravity and irredeemability to be denied re-entry into society, but insists that a 17-year-old who rapes an 8-year-old and leaves her for dead does not. That seems illogical. Such a sentence offends “the evolving standards of decency that mark the progress of a maturing society,” the court’s announced standard for reviewing state punishment under the Eighth Amendment. Indeed, in our opinion, life without parole should be determined on a case by case basis, even for a juvenile.

There is no question that teenagers who commit serious crimes should be held accountable and punished, and that society must be protected from young people who are violent and dangerous.

But states should have the discretion they have long been given to decide how harshly young criminals should be prosecuted. Thirty-seven states, the District of Columbia and the federal government have laws allowing life-without-parole sentences for juveniles convicted of non-homicide offenses. That represents a super-majority of states in favor of the punishment.

And only 129 juvenile offenders have been convicted under such laws. That a punishment is rarely imposed demonstrates nothing more than a general consensus that it should be just that — rarely imposed. It is not proof that the punishment is one the nation abhors.

## Appendix E



### **The Young and the Reckless**

By ELIZABETH S. SCOTT and LAURENCE STEINBERG

ON Monday, the United States Supreme Court heard oral arguments in two cases that ask whether sentencing a juvenile to life in prison without the possibility of parole is a violation of the Eighth Amendment's prohibition of cruel and unusual punishment.

Those who hope the court will ban this sort of sentencing point to the 2005 decision in *Roper v. Simmons*, in which the court abolished the juvenile death penalty. They believe that the logic the justices applied in *Roper* to exclude minors from capital punishment should extend to life without parole as well.

Those who hope the justices will retain life sentences for juveniles argue that "death is different," and that the court should exercise restraint, as it typically does when reviewing non-capital sentencing decisions for fairness under the proportionality principle.

Certainly, death is different. But the sentence of life in prison without parole is also different from even lengthy conventional sentences; it is a judgment that an offender will never be fit to rejoin civil society, however long he lives. This punishment may be suitable for adults who have committed terrible crimes, but it is never a fair sentence for a juvenile, whose character is unformed and whose involvement in crime reflects the immature judgment of adolescence.

A crucial lesson of the *Roper* case is that the developmental differences between adolescents and adults are important under the Eighth Amendment, as they are in other areas of constitutional law. In deciding to end the juvenile death penalty, the court repeatedly emphasized the relative immaturity of minors, even at age 17, as compared to adults — a point that is well established in behavioral research and finds growing support in brain science.

Writing for the majority in *Roper*, Justice Anthony Kennedy observed that juveniles' impulsivity, recklessness and susceptibility to peer pressure made them inherently less responsible than adults. Justice Kennedy also noted juveniles' potential for rehabilitation, because their personality and character traits are less fixed than adults.

In the years since the *Roper* ruling, research on adolescent brain and behavioral development has provided additional support for Justice Kennedy's observations. There is now a consensus among neuroscientists, for example, that brain regions and systems responsible for foresight, self-regulation, risk assessment and responsiveness to social influences continue to mature into young adulthood. This evidence that adolescents are psychologically and neurologically less mature than adults should be important in deciding how to punish their criminal acts.

In Monday's oral argument, the justices did not question the proposition that juveniles generally are psychologically less mature than adults. The debate focused instead on whether the

mitigating trait of immaturity justified a categorical exclusion of juveniles from the sentence of life without parole.

Some justices argued instead that age and maturity should be considered in sentencing on a case-by-case basis. But this approach was rejected by the court in *Roper* — and it should be rejected here as well. As *Roper* recognized, even psychological experts are unable to distinguish between the young person whose crime reflects transient immaturity and the rare juvenile offender who may deserve the harsh sentence of life without parole. If experts can't reliably make this determination, then it seems unlikely that juries and judges would be able to do much better.

The two Florida offenders whose cases will be decided by the court differ in age and in their offenses: Terrance Graham was sentenced to life without parole for a probation violation involving a house break-in at age 17, while Joe Sullivan was convicted of sexual assault at age 13.

It is possible that the court will treat these two cases differently. But in both cases, the lower court decisions should be struck down. For a minor to be confined in prison for life with no possibility of ever having the opportunity to demonstrate that he should be allowed to rejoin society is an egregious violation of the Eighth Amendment, especially for a crime in which no life was lost.

Such a sentence offends “the evolving standards of decency that mark the progress of a maturing society,” the court’s announced standard for reviewing state punishment under the Eighth Amendment. Indeed, in our opinion, life without parole is never a fair sentence for a juvenile, even in a murder case.

There is no question that teenagers who commit serious crimes should be held accountable and punished, and that society must be protected from young people who are violent and dangerous. But studies show that the vast majority of juveniles who commit crimes — even very serious crimes — grow up to be law-abiding adults, and that it is impossible to predict which juvenile offenders will become career criminals.

Absent an ability to do this, and in light of what science tells us about the capacity for adolescents to change, it makes no sense to lock up any young offender and throw away the key.

## Appendix F



### **The Young and the Reckless**

By **ELIZABETH S. SCOTT** and **LAURENCE STEINBERG**

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## Appendix G



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## Appendix H



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You can imagine someone who is a month short of his 18th birthday, and you are saying that, no matter what this person does -- commits the most horrible series of non-homicide offenses that you can imagine, a whole series of brutal rapes, assaults -- that person must at some point be made eligible for parole. Why does a juvenile have a constitutional right to hope but an adult does not?

A crucial lesson of the *Roper* case was that the developmental differences between adolescents and adults are important under the Eighth Amendment, as they are in other areas of constitutional law. In deciding to end the juvenile death penalty, the court repeatedly emphasized the relative immaturity of minors, even at age 17, as compared to adults — a point that is well established in behavioral research and finds growing support in brain science.

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## Appendix I



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