CONTEXTUAL FACT-CHECKING:

A New Approach to Correcting Misperceptions and Maintaining Trust

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INTRODUCTION

Today's news organizations face two separate but related problems. Over the past decade, public trust in media has declined precipitously.[1] At the same time, enterprising organizations and individuals have realized that there is money to be made in deliberately spreading fabricated news stories and information. How can media outlets hope to maintain and even regain audience trust when in many circumstances, readers are right to be wary of much of the information they encounter? This white paper outlines some of the factors that shape individuals' ability to understand and process news content, and explains how fragmented news stories can inadvertently engender audience mistrust and even create serious misperceptions. It concludes by offering evidence-based strategies for reducing reader confusion and correcting these misperceptions.

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1   See Ladd, J. M. (2011). *Why Americans hate the media and how it matters*. Princeton University Press. For an academic overview and more recent data, see *A new understanding: What makes people trust and rely on news*. (2016). Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

PART I:
THE CONFUSING NEWS ENVIRONMENT

MOTIVATION AND ABILITY SHAPE ATTENTION TO NEWS

Regardless of whether people consume news primarily on their mobile phones, on television or via print, they face the same fundamental choice: how to allocate their attention. Attention is an extraordinarily valuable resource,[2] and understanding when and why people pay attention to news content is critical both for increasing citizen competence and for making news organizations economically viable in an increasingly competitive market.

Many factors determine whether a person scanning a newspaper—in person or online—chooses to invest her time and energy in reading a particular piece of content. These factors can be categorized along two basic dimensions: *motivation* (how much does the person care about the content?) and *ability* (to what extent is he actually capable of processing the content?). Only if both motivation and ability are high will a reader take the time to engage with a news story. Motivation and ability are affected both by characteristics of the *individual* and by characteristics of the *content*. A middle-aged, college-educated Republican will have different motivations and abilities from those of a teenage immigrant, and a BuzzFeed article headlined "Kim Kardashian just revealed the best part of being married to Kanye" will inspire different emotions and is likely written at a different level (that is, for different abilities) from a Washington Post piece headlined "Why Congress might fail to fund extra Obamacare subsidies."

When pundits criticize the public for not knowing fundamental facts about current affairs, they often assume that the fault lies with audience motivation—in other words, that people simply do not care enough about staying informed. "America the clueless," quipped the headline of an article by The New York Times' Frank Bruni, citing survey data showing that only 16 percent of California residents knew that the biggest part of the state

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budget went to public education.[3] "[T]he truth is that a great big chunk of the [American] electorate is tuned out, zonked out, or combing Roswell for alien remains," he wrote. Bruni is correct that motivation plays an important role in shaping patterns of news consumption. A person's motivation to read the news can be affected by myriad factors, including social identity (if your peers are all reading the latest news on the election, you are more likely to do the same) and emotion (people are more likely to read stories that induce extreme emotion). Motivation can also be shaped by the story itself—for example, "clickbait" headlines work partly by increasing readers' motivation to engage with a piece of content.

However, motivation is only part of the story. Not all gaps in public understanding reflect a lack of interest. They can also occur when information is presented in a format that people are not capable of understanding. Ability plays a critical role in how a person decides to allocate his or her attention. For example, even if a person is highly motivated to learn about North Korea's nuclear testing program, whether she actually does so will also be affected by her capacity to understand and process the information available on the topic.

Table 1 shows several of the specific factors that shape engagement with a piece of information, characterizing them along two dimensions: motivation vs. ability and characteristics of the individual vs. characteristics of the content itself.

TABLE 1. FACTORS AFFECTING ENGAGEMENT

	MOTIVATION	ABILITY
CHARACTERISTICS OF INDIVIDUAL	Interest in content Personal and social relevance of content	Knowledge of content Reading ability Presence of distractions
CHARACTERISTICS OF CONTENT	Emotions evoked by content Social context (e.g. presence of "likes")	Readability of content Complexity of presentation Presence of context

While many studies have examined how to increase readers' motivation to engage with the news, this white paper focuses on an arguably more neglected half of the news consumption equation: ability. In particular, it focuses on the bottom right quadrant of Table 1: the aspects of ability that can

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3   Bruni, Frank. (2013, May 11). America the clueless. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from **http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/12/opinion/sunday/bruni-america-the-clueless.html**

be affected by how a piece of content is created and presented. While a news organization cannot singlehandedly improve its visitors' reading capacities or remove distractions from their lives, it can make its coverage more accessible and understandable to the average news consumer.

Ability is a very real problem for many people trying to navigate an increasingly confusing news environment. Imagine a reader who tries to catch up on a new issue—for example, the Republicans' attempt to repeal the Affordable Care Act. Turning to The New York Times, he is faced with the following two paragraphs, leading an article titled "Senate votes down broad Obamacare repeal."[4]

> WASHINGTON—The Senate voted narrowly on Tuesday to begin debate on a bill to repeal major provisions of the Affordable Care Act, but hours later, Republican leaders suffered a setback when their most comprehensive plan to replace President Barack Obama's health law fell far short of the votes it needed.
>
> The Tuesday night tally needed to reach 60 votes to overcome a parliamentary objection. Instead, it fell 43-57. The fact that the comprehensive replacement plan came up well short of even 50 votes was an ominous sign for Republican leaders still seeking a formula to pass final health care legislation this week.

Which provisions were being repealed? What is a "parliamentary objection"? What exactly was in this "comprehensive replacement plan"? While the article gives an excellent overview of the most recent breaking news in the ongoing repeal story, it does little to provide a novice reader with the background information necessary to understand the story as a whole. This lack of context occurs not because reporters are bad at their jobs, but because of long-documented characteristics of the news system that bias it toward particular types of coverage.

WHY THE NEWS CAN BE SO DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND

Few news outlets deliberately try to reduce their audiences' ability to understand their content. However, this comprehension gap occurs regardless, driven by the individual choices of journalists and editors as well as by the larger incentives shaping the news industry. This section outlines three major factors contributing to the comprehension gap: reporter expertise, novelty bias and the drive for concision.

Reporter expertise

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4   Kaplan, Thomas, and Pear, Robert. (2017, July 25). Senate votes down broad Obamacare repeal. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from **https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/25/us/politics/senate-health-care.html**

Many journalists are assigned to "beats," allowing them to cover the same topic for months, if not years. A reporter might focus largely on health care policy, the Supreme Court or local politics. This division of responsibility is efficient, allowing the reporter to build networks of sources, ask the right questions and communicate multiple aspects of complex issues. However, reporters' expertise can also subtly hinder their ability to write articles that people can comprehend. Humans have an automatic and often unconscious tendency to "project" onto others, implicitly assuming that others share their beliefs and knowledge. This trait is also true of journalists. For example, when editors were asked to estimate the grade level at which news stories were written, they consistently overestimated their readability—on average, by 4.2 grade levels.[5]

Other research has similarly demonstrated that a substantial amount of news content is written in a way that is difficult for a novice audience to understand, and that hard news is among the most complex.[6]

Novelty bias

Consumers depend on news outlets to keep them informed of breaking news. Indeed, three-quarters of news consumers say it is "extremely important" that their preferred news outlet "always has the latest news and information."[7] However, this bias toward the *new* can have unintended effects on readers' ability to understand stories. Stories that focus exclusively on what is *changing* about a given issue may neglect to provide readers with the background necessary for understanding why a change is important.
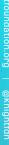
The drive for concision

For most of journalism's history, reporters have been heavily constrained by space and time. A newspaper could devote only so much space to a given story—and unsurprisingly, the first to be cut was often "unnecessary" background information. On television news, time was the major constraint—stories needed to be condensed into brief sound bites to fit into the allotted window. Today, as more news coverage moves online, reporters have (at least in theory) unlimited space in which to write. Of course, realistically, they are also limited by news consumers' attention—few readers will likely read a 10,000-word treatise on Medicaid expansion regardless of its thoroughness. Nevertheless, journalists are professionalized to value concision, which

5   Porter, W. C., & Stephens, F. (1989). Estimating readability: A study of Utah editors' abilities. *Newspaper Research Journal*, 10(2), 87-96.

6   Catalano, K. (1990). On the wire: How six news services are exceeding readability standards. *Journalism Quarterly*, 67(1), 97-103; Wasike, B. (2016, October). Preaching to the choir? An analysis of newspaper readability vis-a-vis public literacy. *Journalism*.

7   *A new understanding: What makes people trust and rely on news*. (2016). Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. Retrieved from **https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/What-Makes-People-Trust-and-Rely-on-News-Media-Insight-Project.pdf**

invariably influences the depth of their coverage.

HOW COMPLEX NEWS AFFECTS CONSUMERS: CONFUSION AND MISPERCEPTIONS

Americans describe the modern news environment as both complicated and confusing. Seven in 10 Americans said the amount of news available today is "overwhelming."[8] Forty percent said that news about the economy made them feel confused.[9] Similar numbers reported being confused by news coverage of topics such as health and medical issues (45 percent),[10] Social Security (56 percent)[11] and even Congress (73 percent).[12]

In addition to confusing readers, the complexity of news coverage can inadvertently lead them to develop misperceptions about some issues. For example, more than half of Americans incorrectly believe that undocumented immigrants are eligible for food stamps, that the federal government spends more on the military than on health care, and that there is no federal limit on TANF (welfare) benefits.[13] While some of these misperceptions may be a result of exposure to deliberate misinformation, many arise because of a *lack* of information—specifically, because media coverage of policies and issues is often fragmented and difficult to understand, leading readers to draw incorrect conclusions from the information provided.[14]

Case Study: The National Debt

| Over the last decade, Americans have consistently named the national debt as one of the

8   Purcell, K., Rainie, L., Mitchell, A., Rosenstiel, T., & Olmstead, K. (2010). Understanding the participatory news consumer. Pew Internet and American Life Project. Retrieved from **http://www.pewinternet.org/~/media//Files/Reports/2010/PIP_Understanding_the_Participatory_News_Consumer.pdf**

9   Most angered by economic news. (2011). Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. **http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/legacy-pdf/08-17-11%20NII%20Final.pdf**

10   Gallup Organization. (2002). Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research. **http://news.gallup.com/poll/6883/americans-get-plenty-health-news-tv-tend-trust.aspx**

11   Americans discuss Social Security. (1998). Princeton Survey Research Associates. Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.

12   Freedom Forum. Congress and media coverage of Congress survey. (1995). Institute for Social Inquiry/Roper Center, University of Connecticut. Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.

13   Thorson, Emily. *The invented state: Policy misperceptions in the American public*. Unpublished manuscript

14   For another example of how confusing rhetoric breeds misperceptions, see Jerit, J., and Barabas, J. (2006). Bankrupt rhetoric: How misleading information affects knowledge about Social Security. *International Journal of Public Opinion Quarterly, 70*(3), 278-303.

"most important problems" facing the country.[15] Politicians and pundits frequently invoke the national debt when discussing issue priorities, and the issue regularly comes to the forefront every few years when Congress debates increasing the debt ceiling. But what do people really know about the national debt, and does news coverage of it actually include the key information that people need to understand this complex issue? This case study brings together several sets of data to paint a picture of the American public's incomplete understanding of the national debt. It also explains how fragmented news coverage has contributed to this dearth of understanding by omitting critical background information, leading readers to fill in the blanks with information that is often factually incorrect.

AREAS OF CONFUSION ABOUT THE NATIONAL DEBT

In the summer of 2014, a series of 20-minute phone interviews were conducted with 40 members of the American public.[16] Participants were recruited online and varied in their education, race, gender, partisanship and political interest. The interviews included a series of questions about the causes and consequences of the national debt. The majority of respondents expressed concern about the issue. Although none volunteered an estimate of exactly how much the U.S. owed, most were confident that any level of debt was problematic. When asked to articulate their concerns in more detail, a number focused on China's ownership of U.S. debt and the potential for China to exercise an outsize influence in U.S. affairs. Several also mentioned the possibility of high interest payments crippling the U.S. economy.

After the interviews, a representative survey was fielded (N=1000) to gauge the extent to which the confusion and misperceptions elicited in the interviews were also present in the general public. The survey included two true-false questions based on the areas of confusion elicited in the phone interviews. The first question asked whether China owned more or less than 50 percent of the national debt. The second asked whether interest on the national debt was more or less than 50 percent of the national budget.

In total, 68 percent of respondents believed China owned at least half of the U.S. national debt (in reality, China owns about 8 percent), and 62 percent believed that interest on the national debt was more than half the federal budget. These misperceptions were widespread among both Democrats and Republicans.

HOW THE MEDIA COVERS THE NATIONAL DEBT

To what extent does media coverage of the national debt play a role in this confusion? To answer this question, a content analysis examined how the national debt was covered in 2014. Coders examined print news articles that mentioned the national debt from Jan. 1 through April 1, 2014, and broadcast news transcripts from Jan. 1 through Dec. 31, 2014.[17]

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15 Newport, Frank. (2013, January 14). Debt, gov't dysfunction rise to top of Americans' issue list. Gallup. Retrieved from **http://news.gallup.com/poll/159830/debt-gov-dysfunction-rise-top-americans-issue-list.aspx**

16 Thorson, Emily. *The invented state: Policy misperceptions in the American public.* Unpublished manuscript.

17 Print news coverage in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times* and *USA Today*. Broadcast news coverage on ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, MSNBC and CNN.

During those periods the issue was mentioned in 197 print news stories and 52 broadcasts.[18] The news stories and transcripts were coded for whether they mentioned the *change* in national debt (the fact that it had increased), the total amount of debt (either in absolute or relative terms), and to whom the debt was owed (including both domestic and foreign holders). Finally, coders noted if there was any mention of the interest on the national debt.

The results, shown in Table 2, suggest that the news gave readers and viewers very little of the contextual information necessary for understanding the issue of the national debt. Less than 1 percent of broadcast news coverage and just 5.6 percent of print news coverage of the national debt had any mention of to whom the national debt was owed. This stands in contrast to the interviews, in which ownership of the national debt was frequently invoked as a major reason for concern. Similarly, interest on the national debt was mentioned in less than 10 percent of broadcast and less than 5 percent of print news coverage—and again, this was a major area of concern for interview subjects, as well as a central area for misperceptions.

TABLE 2. INFORMATION IN MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE NATIONAL DEBT

	BROADCAST NEWS (N=166)	PRINT NEWS (N=197)
Change in debt	16.9% (28)	7.6% (15)
Total amount of debt	20.5% (34)	6.6% (13)
To whom debt is owed	0.6% (1)	5.6% (11)
Interest on the national debt	9.3% (15)	3.6% (7)

These results do not suggest that news outlets are actively spreading misinformation about the national debt. Instead, they suggest that journalists are simply not providing much factual context for the issue, and this *lack* of information may contribute to some of the misperceptions found in the survey results. In the case of the national debt, these misperceptions may have arisen partly because of a faulty analogy. About a quarter of the interview subjects drew an explicit comparison between the national debt and household or personal debt. For example, Amy criticized the government's handling of the debt by drawing an analogy to her own family: "I don't spend money that I don't have; we don't spend above our means." Several of those who did not explicitly employ this analogy used it to structure their inferential reasoning about the consequences of the national debt, mentioning their concern that if the U.S. did not pay back its foreign debt, other nations would come to "collect," just as banks and collection agencies do for personal debt.

Taken as a whole, this case study shows that when news coverage fails to provide the information necessary for understanding an important issue, people fill in the blanks by drawing on the fragmented information available as well their own experiences, which can in turn lead to substantial misperceptions.

News coverage that fails to provide the basic information necessary for

18   Articles were located via a LexisNexis search using the search terms "national debt," "federal debt,"
"u.s. debt" or "us debt." This search produced 221 articles, of which 24 were coded as irrelevant to the U.S.
national debt (for example, many mentioned other nations' national debts).

understanding an issue can have several consequences. First, inadequate factual information threatens readers' *ability* to process the content—a critical ingredient for maintaining reader attention and trust. Second, leaving out key pieces of information can inadvertently help to create misperceptions by placing the burden of interpretation onto readers who might be ill-equipped to understand these complex issues.

PART II:
CORRECTING MISPERCEPTIONS AND REGAINING TRUST

"EXPLAINERS": GOOD IN THEORY, TEDIOUS IN PRACTICE

So-called explainer news attempts to solve some of the problems created by the fragmented and often confusing news environment by offering clear, concise explanations of current events. In practice, however, it can be difficult to reconcile the often-pedantic explainer format with the primary goal of most news organizations: keeping their readers updated on changing current events. For better or worse, people do not come to the news looking for a civics lesson. Three-quarters of Americans say they trust their preferred news source largely because it "always has the latest information."[19] In addition, to the extent that novelty drives traffic, a series of articles about (for example) how Social Security works is unlikely to generate the sort of attention that news organizations depend on for economic viability. Is there a way to reconcile the promise of explainers with the reality of news consumers' expectations?

FACT-CHECKING: GOOD IN THEORY, CONTROVERSIAL IN PRACTICE

The recent explosion of fact-checking—both by legacy media outlets and by stand-alone organizations that specialize in fact-checking—represents a different approach to correcting misperceptions. And unlike explainer journalism, fact-checking has the potential to drive traffic. Consumers like fact-checking, but only under particular circumstances. In the abstract, readers have a positive view of the goals of fact-checking: Sixty percent say that news organizations should fact-check candidates.[20] But in practice they are upset when a co-partisan is corrected, and their displeasure can in

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19   *A new understanding: What makes people trust and rely on news.* (2016). Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. Retrieved from **https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/What-Makes-People-Trust-and-Rely-on-News-Media-Insight-Project.pdf**

20   Monmouth University Polling Institute. Monmouth University Poll, September 2016. Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, iPOLL [distributor]

turn affect how they rate the organization that sponsored the fact-check. In other words, when a news organization fact-checks someone of a reader's own party, he is likely to rate that news organization as more biased.[21] This paradox illustrates the challenge of fact-checking: Readers profess to want it, but dislike it when the fact-check paints their own side in a negative light.

Some outlets have responded by making explicit efforts to fact-check both sides equally, though there is no empirical evidence that this strategy succeeds in mitigating partisan reactance over the long term. A less-explored option is to expand fact-checking efforts to include not only highly partisan issues, but also issues that do not provoke strong partisan reactance. To date, most fact-checking efforts have tended to focus on checking statements made by (usually partisan) political actors. Fact-checkers routinely scan politicians' statements and campaign advertisements to determine their veracity, and many also tackle rumors that spread via emails. For example, PolitiFact checked several contentious statements made during the debate over repealing the Affordable Care Act, including Paul Ryan's (false) statement that "we have dozens of counties in America that have zero insurers left."[22] This statement is relevant to the debate and contains useful information for evaluating policy alternatives, but it also carries a great deal of partisan valence because it is associated explicitly with a Republican.

Statements made by elites, while important and relevant, represent only a small piece of the larger universe of relevant information about a given topic. Not only is there far more *information* out there about the ACA, but there are also other *misperceptions* about aspects of the policy and the repeal. For example, the proposed ACA repeal contained large cuts to the Medicaid program, but many Americans are unaware of what this program actually does or even confuse it with the Medicare program.[23] Despite the importance of the Medicaid program to the Affordable Care Act and to the debate over its repeal, contextual information such as "Medicaid is a government health care coverage program for low-income people and people with certain disabilities" is usually absent from news coverage, for the reasons outlined in the previous section.

CONTEXTUAL FACT-CHECKING: GOOD IN THEORY AND IN PRACTICE?

21   Amazeen, M. A., Thorson, E., Muddiman, A., & Graves, L. (2016, November). Correcting political and consumer misperceptions: The effectiveness and effects of rating scale versus contextual correction formats. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly.*

22   Greenberg, Jon. (2017). Pants on fire! Paul Ryan uses old stat to claim counties will have no Obamacare insurer in 2018. *PolitiFact.* Retrieved from **http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2017/aug/24/paul-ryan/ryan-way-obamacare-county-insurance-stat-cnn-town-/**

23   Kaiser Health Tracking Poll. (2011, May). Retrieved from **https://kaiserfamilyfoundation.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/8190-t.pdf**

The past few decades have seen an increase in "contextualization," in which journalists not only report the news but also try to place it in a larger political context.[24] For example, a reporter writing about ACA repeal might discuss what it means for the midterm elections and how negotiations are affecting the relationship between Congress and the presidency. This approach has also been described as "interpretive journalism."

In contrast, this white paper makes the case for a different approach: contextual fact-checking. While the goal of traditional fact-checking is to correct misleading or false statements made by elites, the goal of contextual fact-checking is to correct areas of confusion and misperception among members of the public. By moving the focus from *misinformation* (false information) to *misperceptions* (false beliefs), news organizations can simultaneously correct misperceptions among the public and potentially increase readers' ability to meaningfully engage with the news. At the same time, by moving away from highly politicized "fact-checks," they minimize the potential for partisan backlash.

Experiment: Contextual Fact-Checking

Can contextual fact-checking actually reduce misperceptions? And what effect does it have on readers' perceptions of media bias? This experiment assesses the impact of contextual fact-checking on reader comprehension and attitudes, specifically whether contextual corrections can successfully correct common misperceptions, and whether contextual corrections engender a similar backlash to other types of fact-checking.

A total of 391 participants were told that they would be reading a brief article from USA Today.[25] They were then randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions. The first group read an article about President Donald Trump's recent budget proposal, including his claims that it would reduce the national debt. The second group read the same story accompanied by a brief callout box with several facts pertinent to understanding the national debt. A third group read a nonpolitical article about grizzly bears.

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24   Patterson, T. E. (2013). *Informing the news*. Vintage.

25   Participants were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk. Half were men. Thirty-seven percent identified as Democrats, 25 percent as Republicans and 35 percent as Independent or Other. Thirty-eight percent had less than a college education.

ARTICLE WITHOUT CONTEXTUAL FACT-CHECK

Trump Budget Proposal Receives Mixed Response

Cuts to domestic programs with the goal of debt reduction.

Jacob O'Malley
USA TODAY

The Trump administration released a budget proposal on Tuesday that includes substantial cuts to domestic programs and an increase in military spending.

The administration says that the proposed budget would allow the government to pay back the entire $20 trillion national debt over the next thirty years.

However, the non-partisan Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget questioned the administration's calculations. They estimate that Trump's plan to cut corporate and individual taxes would actually cost the federal government about $5.5 trillion over 10 years, adding more than $6 trillion to the national debt.

The budget met with mixed responses from members of Congress. House Speaker Paul Ryan (R-WI) said the budget was "right on target," while Senator John McCain (R-AZ) declared it "dead on arrival." House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) charged that the budget is based on "bogus" economic projections.

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What is the national debt?
The U.S. national debt is the total debt owed by the federal government. The government owes **most** of its debt to U.S. citizens, state governments, and the Federal Reserve. A **third** of the debt is owed to other nations. Interest on the debt is about **six percent** of the U.S. budget.

US to Lift Yellowstone Grizzly Bear Protections

Government officials rule that the population is no longer threatened.

Jacob O'Malley
USA TODAY

Protections that have been in place for more than 40 years for grizzly bears in the Yellowstone National Park area will be lifted this summer after government officials ruled Thursday that the population is no longer threatened.

Grizzlies in all continental U.S. states except Alaska have been protected under the Endangered Species Act since 1975, when just 136 bears roamed in and around Yellowstone. There are now an estimated 700 grizzlies in the area that includes northwestern Wyoming, southwestern Montana and eastern Idaho.

The federal agency will continue monitoring the grizzly population over the next five years, and certain factors would prompt a new federal review of the bears' status. The federal agency's rule sets a minimum population of 500 bears for Yellowstone, and requires states to curb hunting if the population falls below 600.

The ruling does not affect other populations of grizzlies that are still classified as threatened but which wildlife officials consider recovered, including in the Northern Continent Divide area of Montana and Idaho.

After reading the article, all participants were asked to answer two factual questions. The first asked whether China owned more or less than half the national debt, and the second asked whether interest on the national debt was more or less than half the national budget. They were also asked to evaluate the specific article as well as USA Today more generally.

RESULTS

The contextual fact-check was extremely successful at reducing misperceptions about the national debt. In the versions of the article without the contextual fact-check, about 70 percent of respondents said they thought interest on the national debt was more than half of the national budget, and 60 percent said they believed China owned more than half of the U.S. national debt. The contextual fact-check significantly reduced both numbers. Among those who were exposed to the article with the contextual fact-check, just 41 percent incorrectly believed that interest was over half the budget, and 43 percent that China owned the majority of debt.

The inclusion of the fact-check did not lead readers to evaluate either the article or the news outlet more negatively. They were no more likely than those who did not read the fact-check to characterize the article as biased or unbalanced, and just as likely to characterize it as trustworthy and informative. They also did not rate USA Today more negatively. This held true for Republican, Democratic and independent respondents—there was no backlash among any group of partisans.

The results of this experiment show that contextual fact-checks can be remarkably successful in correcting misperceptions, and that unlike traditional fact-checking, they do not seem to engender a partisan backlash. Indeed, although the effect did not reach statistical significance, people evaluated the article *more* positively when it included the contextual fact-check—and this effect was strongest among those who reported being least interested in the news.

STRATEGIES FOR IMPLEMENTING CONTEXTUAL FACT-CHECKING

How can news organizations use contextual fact-checking to reduce misperceptions while avoiding reader backlash? This section outlines three concrete steps that news outlets can take to introduce contextual fact-checking into their coverage.

Step 1:
Map existing knowledge on relevant issues

In American politics, certain policies, topics and terms arise again and again, both in elite political rhetoric and in everyday reporting. Social Security. Medicaid. The national debt. Fracking. Voter fraud. The filibuster. Each of these could plausibly be mentioned—either in passing or as a focal point— in a wide range of coverage, from an in-depth analysis of a candidate's speech to a feature story on poverty in America. Each is a strong candidate for contextual fact-checking because it meets two criteria: *centrality* and *complexity.* The goal of contextual fact-checking is to clarify issues that are important to how Americans make sense of politics, but are also complex enough that they have engendered confusion or misperceptions. Many issues are complex but not central (for example, quantitative easing), and many others are central but not particularly complex (for example, Hurricane Irma).

Of course, the precise issues that a given news outlet focuses on will likely vary depending on its particular area of coverage. A local paper may identify issues in state politics that are particularly confusing for its readers, while a news organization targeting millennials may focus on issues of student financial aid that would not be central to a more general audience.

Once a news outlet has created a list of potential issues that meet these criteria of centrality and complexity, the next step is to determine what its audience knows, does not know, wishes it knew, or gets wrong about each issue. There are many strategies for mapping out public knowledge on a given topic, ranging from informal (a journalist discussing the issue with family members) to precise (commissioning a representative survey). Below is a list of several strategies a news outlet might use to identify common areas of confusion and misperception.

- **EXISTING RESEARCH** on public knowledge, including survey databases such as the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research and Gallup, as well as relevant academic research.

- **INTERVIEWS**, conducted in person or on the phone, that use open-ended questions like, "Explain what you know about how the Affordable Care Act changed health insurance in the United States," or "What do you wish you knew about the ACA?" to elicit factual beliefs and areas of confusion.

- **OPEN-ENDED SURVEYS** that employ similar questions but can reach a wider range of people than interviews, often with fewer resources.

- **CLOSED-ENDED SURVEYS** that include factual questions can be an even more efficient way of gauging levels of knowledge, though in designing these surveys it is important to keep in mind that what the public *wants* to know about an issue may be different from what journalists think they *should* know.[26]

The goal of mapping existing knowledge is to shed light on *beliefs*, not *opinions*. A successful knowledge-mapping strategy uncovers not whether people support a given policy, but what they think the policy does. Unfortunately, most publicly available survey data tend to focus on opinions rather than beliefs, which may make it necessary to commission original research.

Step 2:
Compile a database of relevant fact-checks

As with a traditional fact-check, the goal of contextual fact-checking is not to provide *every* piece of relevant information on an issue. Rather, it is to address the outstanding areas of misperception and confusion that emerged in the knowledge-mapping phase of the project. The goal of this step is to develop concise corrections addressing areas of confusion that can quickly be inserted into stories that mention the issue in question.

Step 3:
Include contextual fact-checks in news coverage

There are a wide range of options for *how* to include contextual fact-checks in a story. The example in the experiment included a highlighted box at the end of the article. Similarly, a contextual fact-check could be included in a sidebar or mouse-over text. An alternative strategy is to include the fact-check in the main content. This approach has precedent: For example, when most media outlets refer to a member of Congress, they provide her district and party affiliation. The same strategy could be adopted for mentions of issues. For example, an article mentioning Donald Trump's campaign

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26   Boczkowski, P. J., & Mitchelstein, E. (2013). *The news gap: When the information preferences of the media and the public diverge.* MIT Press.

statement, "I am going to protect and save your Social Security" might also include the statement, "Social Security is a federal program that provides benefits to retired and disabled Americans. It is funded through taxes on people who are currently working."

CONCLUSION

This white paper advocates taking a bottom-up approach to increasing reader comprehension and, ultimately, rebuilding their trust. Consuming news can be a confusing and even intimidating experience, partly because coverage is often fragmented and difficult to understand. News content is heavily informed by journalists' assumptions about what people *should* know. Instead, this white paper suggests that news organizations invest time first to determine what people *do* know, what they get wrong and what they wish they knew.

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