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Tisch College Report

An Experimental Study of the Effect of a “Consider the Source” Article on Readers’ Engagement, Knowledge, Attitudes, and Intent to Take Action

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Executive Summary

This report describes an experimental study of reader engagement, knowledge, attitudes, and behavioral intent upon exposure to two articles; one which described the role of corporate-based campaign finances in politics, and the other about corporate corruption without explicit mention of its role in politics. The experiment was designed and implemented by CIRCLE researchers at Tufts University's Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service, as part of a larger impact evaluation for the Center for Public Integrity's *Consider the Source* project. The Center for Public Integrity collaborated with the researchers at CIRCLE to discuss outcomes of interest, but had no further involvement in this experiment until it was concluded, so that the integrity of the experiment remained intact throughout.

The Center for Public Integrity aims to improve democracy by revealing corruption and abuse of power through its investigative journalistic work. CPI's work is particularly relevant in the current era of political polarization and campaign attack ads that are often funded by private interests. CIRCLE conducted a survey experiment in which we explored the effects of one of CPI's investigative stories from *Consider the Source*, its money in politics project, on a representative sample of adults' knowledge of, attitudes toward, and intention to take action to reform campaign financing.

We found that the respondents who read the CPI piece were more engaged with the topic compared to those who read a similar piece that did not touch on the issue of campaign financing—reporting that they would share and discuss it on social media and with their acquaintances, and wanting to know more about the topic. The group that read the CPI

article was, on average, more knowledgeable about campaign financing after they read the article, and felt threatened by the power of special interest groups. Finally, respondents in the CPI group were more likely to say that they will take action against abuses of the campaign finance system, and the intent to take action was positively correlated with the level of anger that participants felt while reading the article.

Our findings indicate that the CPI's *Consider the Source* investigative piece served the intended purposes by engaging and educating the readers so that they will find out more about this issue, discuss it with others, and undertake informed actions in the future.

Background

In the era of political polarization and Citizens United, the American public is constantly barraged by attack ad campaigns that are in turn financially supported by various organizations, including corporations and special interest groups. What is not clear is the extent to which consumers of mainstream media are aware of the role that “dark money”¹ plays in politics.

The Center for Public Integrity (CPI) aims to “serve democracy by revealing abuses of power, corruption and betrayal of public trust by powerful public and private institutions, using the tools of investigative journalism” (CPI, 2014).

As part of its mission, CPI produces the *Consider the Source* series, which includes investigations of the role of money in politics, and the

¹ The term refers to funds used for electoral campaigns (e.g., on behalf of a candidate, special interests, or for a ballot measure) whose sources are undisclosed to voters.

publication of numerous written articles and resources (such as infographics and interactives²) that are designed to inform readers about the ways in which information that the general public sees and hears daily may be influenced by special interest groups and private corporations. Some of the desired outcomes of these investigations are to inform potential voters on the impact of the current campaign financing laws, educate them to be more critical consumers of information, and eventually to improve our democracy by developing an informed electorate.

The Democracy Fund is one of CPI's funders and has asked for an evaluation of the impact of the project on these outcomes. Subsequently, CPI contracted CIRCLE researchers at Tufts University's Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service to conduct an independent experiment to ascertain the extent to which an article by CPI designed to educate readers about the role of money in politics affect readers. Specifically, we conducted a survey experiment in which readers were randomly assigned to two groups, one reading a CPI article titled "Tobacco giant funded conservative nonprofits: Reynolds American acknowledges helping bankroll several secretive 501(c)(4) groups"³ and another reading an article by another well-regarded news outlet (NPR) on a different topic⁴. The experiment was designed and implemented by CIRCLE, as part of a larger impact evaluation for the Center for Public Integrity's *Consider the Source* project. The Center for Public Integrity collaborated with the researchers at CIRCLE to discuss outcomes of interest, but had no further involvement in this experiment until it was concluded, so that the integrity of the experiment remained intact

² "Interactives" refer to online articles, maps, and other visual representation of relevant information which readers can interact and modify, deepen or expand on the content.

³ <http://www.publicintegrity.org/2013/05/30/12740/tobacco-giant-funded-conservative-nonprofits>

⁴ <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thesalt/2014/02/19/276981085/is-tyson-foods-chicken-empire-a-meat-racket>

throughout.

Research Question and Hypotheses

In this study, we explored how people who read CPI's *Consider the Source* article differed from those who read another data-heavy non-CPI article in their engagement with the topic, knowledge of campaign financing, attitude toward money in politics, interest in the topic, motivation to vote for reform, and intent to take action.

Specifically, we tested the following hypotheses:

1. The participants who read the CPI article (“experimental article”) will be more engaged with the topic by sharing the information and discussing the topic with others than those who read the NPR article (control article).
2. The participants who read the experimental article will be more knowledgeable about the facts related to campaign financing than those who read the control article.
3. The participants who read the experimental article will hold more negative attitudes toward “dark money” in politics than those who read the control article.
4. The participants who read the experimental article will be more motivated to take action to remedy the problem they read about than those who read the control article, as indicated in the intent to take specific actions.

We also explored whether the effect of reading the CPI article will differ for readers of different partisan identification, and for those who would not have chosen to read the CPI article (over the NPR article) if they

were given a choice. These questions explore whether the CPI's work has the same impact on those who would not have shown keen interest in the topic as those who have an interest and seek articles on the topic. Given that CPI's work is cited in various major outlets, it is important to understand possible variations in the ways in which its information affects potential readers/viewers.

Methods

CIRCLE conducted a survey experiment in which 1,000 YouGov Survey Panel members were randomly assigned to read one of the two articles. The experimental group read the CPI article about Reynolds American Inc. tobacco's contributions to conservative non-profits. The control group read an article from the National Public Radio (NPR) website titled "Is Tyson Food's Chicken Empire A 'Meat Racket'?" The experimental article was one of the eleven *Consider the Source* articles that were found to have a strong social media presence in CIRCLE's previous work with CPI.

We chose this particular article for this experiment because it was relatively short⁵ and focused on a familiar target (i.e., tobacco companies) and national politics (rather than local). The NPR article was chosen as a comparative equivalent because it a) had a strong social media presence; b) mentioned a company or product with household recognition (Camel, Tyson Chicken); c) drew on empirical data to make a case; d) revealed relatively unknown facts about an industry, all of which are shared with the experimental article. The major difference between these two articles was the fact that the CPI piece revealed a

⁵ The article needed to be relatively short (less than 1,000 words) to encourage participants to read the whole article while also completing the survey portion.

tobacco company's involvement in politics while the NPR piece also shed negative light on a company, but without linking it to a political interest. We chose an already-published piece for comparison rather than creating our own control article in order to expose readers to similar, high-quality journalistic pieces, so that we could simulate a real reader experience in the experiment.

YouGov collected data in June 2014 via online survey, which was fielded to their representative survey panel. We designed the study so that 80% of the participants expressed a specific political party identification (half Democrat and half Republican) and 20% indicated no party identification.⁶

The participants were first asked which of the two articles they would choose if they were “casually browsing the Internet.” The participants were then randomly assigned to the experimental or control article. Thus, there were four groups of participants; 1) those who chose the CPI article and were assigned to the same article; 2) those who chose the Tyson Chicken article and were assigned to the same article; 3) those who chose the CPI article but were assigned to the Tyson Chicken article; and 4) those who chose the Tyson Chicken article but were assigned to the CPI article. Although the participants initially saw only the title of the article, we used the initial choice of the article as a proxy for the type of audience that each article topic would have attracted. Therefore, the first two groups represent an existing audience for each article and the latter two represent an audience that may not actively seek out the topic that they read about in this experiment.

⁶ For more information on YouGov's survey panel, please refer to the Appendix.

We were interested in finding out whether the effect of the CPI article varies by two factors. First, we tested whether a reader would have chosen to read about the role of corporations in politics or not would affect the results. Secondly, we explored whether the reaction to the experimental article was different for Republicans than for Democrats and Independents. In subsequent analyses, we tested to see if the effect of the experimental article varied by these two factors and the findings are explained in the next section.

We used a well-established statistical technique called Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) to explore our research questions because MANOVA allows us to account for the demographic factors that are likely to correlate to the outcomes, such as interest in news in general, voter registration status, importance of religion in life, family income, educational attainment, age, partisanship, and ideology. MANOVA also accounts for correlations between certain outcomes, which is the case in this study.⁷⁸

Findings

1. Engagement

In summary, **the participants who read the CPI article (“experimental group”) were generally more engaged with the article and topic than those who read the NPR article (“control group”),** and the experimental group experienced more negative emotions.

⁷ Please see Appendix for description of demographic differences between these groups.

⁸ For example, the questions that ask about engagement with the article are correlated to one another, making the use of MANOVA appropriate.

The experimental group was also slightly more likely to think they would share the piece on social media, talk about it with people they know, and find more information about the topic. The CPI group tended to experience more negative emotions (e.g., disturbed, angry, and overwhelmed) than the NPR group, while the NPR group was more likely to find the article surprising and intriguing. The most common response to both articles was, however, “informed.” Although there were some differences by the experimental conditions, the biggest differences were observed between the Republican and non-Republican respondents. The Republican respondents were significantly less “involved,” “angry,” “disturbed,” and “sad,” while they were more “bored,” “amused,” and “skeptical.” These differences were mostly present for the experimental and control group, with the exception of “bored.” The Republican respondents were a lot more bored with the experimental article than the non-Republicans, but this was not the case for the control group. This may suggest that the Republican readers do not find campaign financing issues relevant.

Top 4 Emotional Responses to the Article

Experimental (CPI) group	Control (NPR) group
Informed	Informed
Disturbed*	Intrigued+
Angry*	Disturbed
Intrigued	Surprised+

*More common response among the experimental group than the control group

+More common response among the control group than the experimental group

We explored whether the engagement with the article differed for those who identify as Republicans (compared to Democrats and Independents) and for those who would have chosen to read the CPI article over the NPR article, given a choice.

The effect of the experimental article on the likelihood of sharing with people they know and taking action against the problem remained largely the same for Republicans and non-Republicans. However, we found that the effect of the experimental article was stronger for those who would have chosen the CPI article anyway (which simulates the existing audience for CPI—see appendix for the demographic characteristics of this group). In addition to the main findings, this group was even more likely to talk about this article with family and with friends.

2. Knowledge

We found that the experimental article increased knowledge of campaign financing, but only for the non-Republican participants.

We developed three factual questions about campaign financing with different levels of difficulty. We used information that could be obtained from another source but was directly provided in the experimental article.

We found that the experimental group as a whole demonstrated significantly better knowledge of campaign financing and the potential role of corporations in politics. We also asked some general political knowledge questions, in order to rule out the possibility that the group difference in the campaign finance knowledge was attributable to general political knowledge. We found no group difference in general

political knowledge, indicating that the CPI article indeed increased readers' knowledge specific to campaign financing.

However, when we tested whether the effect of the experimental article differed for Republicans and non-Republicans, we found the increase in knowledge (compared to the control article readers) was significant only for the non-Republican participants. The Republican participants who read the experimental article actually scored slightly lower than the Republican participants who read the control article. We did find that the Republican participants spent somewhat less time (40 seconds less on average) reading the experimental article than the non-Republicans, but this difference was not statistically significant and there was no correlation between campaign finance knowledge and the amount of time on the article. We also found that readers who would have chosen to read the experimental article scored higher on the campaign finance knowledge and general political knowledge, regardless of which article they were assigned to read. However, the experimental article significantly increased knowledge of campaign finance, regardless of whether the participant would have chosen to read the article, suggesting that the CPI piece would have been just as informative for readers who would usually not be their audience.

3. Attitudes toward Dark Money and Strategies for Change

Our analysis indicated that the experimental group felt more threatened by special interest groups, and was slightly more likely to see campaign finance as a priority issue.

Although the experimental article had these desired effects on attitudes, its effect on prioritizing campaign financing was significant only for

non-Republicans. We also found that Democrats and independents who read the experimental articles were more bothered by the amount of money spent on campaigns than their peers who read the control article, but this effect was not observed among the Republican participants. When we tested whether the effect differed for the Republican participants, we found that the experimental article had no effect on whether the Republican participants saw campaign financing as a priority issue or not. However, the participants' party identification (Republican or not) had no bearing on the effect of the experimental article on the perception of threat by special interest groups.

The participants were also asked to evaluate possible strategies to "improve our society." The experimental group was very similar to the control group in its evaluation of strategies such as national electoral reform, campaign financing reform, voting, and volunteering and citizen participation. The experimental group was, however, more likely to believe in social entrepreneurship and less likely to think that having a smaller government would improve the society. These two measures were, as expected, heavily correlated to Republican Party identification.

4. Motivation to Take Action

The experimental group was more likely to say that they want to do something about the problem they read about than the control group. The effect did not vary by party identification or the article preference, meaning that the article had a similar effect for all participants. In addition to saying that they wanted to do "something about the problem," the experimental group was more likely to intend to keep up with news about campaign financing, make campaign contributions, and contribute funds for a specific cause. We conducted a

follow-up analysis and found that participants' motivation to take action was strongly and positively correlated to the negative feelings experienced while reading the article (i.e., angry, disturbed, and tense), and negatively correlated to feeling bored or detached. While these correlations were generally present for both the experimental and control group, the relationship was stronger for the experimental group.

These findings mean that: 1) the participants in both groups who felt angry or disturbed were more likely to think that they would do something about the problem; 2) participants in the experimental group were more likely to feel angry and disturbed than the control group; 3) when they did feel angry, the experimental group participants were even more likely to think they would take action than those who were angry in the control group; and 4) feeling bored or detached, in turn, predicted a lower likelihood of taking action, and feeling bored and detached were more common responses among the Republican participants than among non-Republicans.

The experimental group was *no more likely* to plan on asking a political candidate about his or her stance toward the campaign financing system or to vote for an electoral reform than the control group. It is not clear why the experimental group's intent to take action did not relate to their willingness to vote for campaign financing reform or electoral reform. However, it is possible that understanding the complexity and gravity of the problems related to dark money actually makes people more cautious about taking any hasty action and might see campaign financing and electoral reform as incomplete solutions. Further studies will need to be conducted to understand why wanting to do something does not appear to make readers also want to take political actions.

Appendix

YouGov Sampling Frame (from YouGov documentation):

YouGov surveyed 1,307 respondents who were then matched down to a sample of 1,000 to produce the final dataset. The respondents were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, race, education, party identification, ideology, and political interest. The frame was constructed by stratified sampling from the full 2010 American Community Survey (ACS) sample with selection within strata by weighted sampling with replacements (using the person weights on the public use file). Data on voter registration status and turnout were matched to this frame using the November 2010 Current Population Survey. Data on interest in politics and party identification were then matched to this frame from the 2007 Pew Religious Life Survey. The matched cases were weighted to the sampling frame using propensity scores. The matched cases and the frame were combined and a logistic regression was estimated for inclusion in the frame. The propensity score function included age, gender, race/ethnicity, years of education, and ideology. The propensity scores were grouped into deciles of the estimated propensity score in the frame and post-stratified according to these deciles.

The resulting sample is representative of the United States adult population (topline is available upon request). We also explored if there were any demographic differences between the randomized groups (i.e., the groups that saw different articles) and found no significant differences, meaning that randomization worked as intended. We also found that the two groups spent approximately the same amount of time reading the article (between 5 minutes and 5 minutes and 40 seconds).

Demographic Differences by Article Choice

The participants were asked which article they would choose to read if given a choice in the survey. We expected that the respondents who would have chosen to read about campaign financing and large

corporations' involvement would be different from those who would have chosen to read about corporate corruption that is not related to campaign financing in demographic characteristics and outcomes. As noted above, we did find that the effect of the CPI article was often stronger for those who would have chosen to read the CPI article.

Demographically, those who would have chosen the CPI piece held more liberal ideology (though not more likely to be a Democrat). Additionally they were more educated, earned slightly more, were more likely to be employed full-time, were more interested in politics, and attended church less often. This group was also a few years younger, on average. A greater proportion of males and whites chose the article than female and people of color. It should be noted, however, that these differences could well be attributable to the article's title (which is shorter for the Tyson Chicken) and other factors that were not measured for the study. Therefore, we cannot say that CPI's work, in general, attracts this kind of audience.