How Does Topical Diversity Affect Source Credibility?
Fact-Checking Coverage of Politics, Science, and Popular Culture

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Forthcoming at *the International Journal of Press/Politics*
July 2, 2024

Author Note

- This study was approved by the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board (HUM00194344) and involves no conflicts of interests. The preregistration is available at: https://aspredicted.org/pk8h5.pdf The study materials, data, and code are available at: https://osf.io/nx3t6/.
- This study was supported by the Gerald R. Ford Fellowship research fund at the University of Michigan and the and the Garth Taylor Fellowship at the Center for Political Studies of the University of Michigan.
- Acknowledgment: For helpful feedback at various stages of this study, I thank Kevin Arceneaux, Ted Brader, Phoebe Ellsworth, Christopher Fariss, Jennifer Jerit, Yanna Krupnikov, Arthur Lupia, Brendan Nyhan, Mara Ostfeld, and the participants at the 2023 Annual Conference for the Midwest Political Science Association. I am grateful for financial support from the Institute for Social Research and Department of Political Science at the University of Michigan. I also thank anonymous reviewers for constructive feedback.

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Abstract

News sources that correct misinformation, such as fact-checking sites, seek to foster an informed citizenry and promote democratic accountability. Yet, public trust in these outlets remains limited. Is their politics-focused coverage one factor behind the limited trust? Politics-focused coverage highlights partisan competition, which can harm credibility by activating identity-protective biases or resistance to persuasive intent. Prior research suggests depoliticized contexts can help mitigate defensive psychological tendencies in news source assessments. Thus, a potential approach to build broad-based trust in news sources could be to broaden the scope of coverage to non-political topics. I employ a preregistered experiment to test how the topical scope of news coverage affects source credibility perceptions. Compared to politics-focused coverage, specializing in scientific issues improves source credibility assessments. Surprisingly, focusing entirely or partially on popular culture topics such as entertainment, sports, and lifestyle undermines source credibility. Moreover, there is no evidence of a partisan difference in how various topical scopes affect source credibility assessments. The results suggest the public shares the notion that serious public affairs coverage is central to reputable journalism. Overall, coverage of politics and science fares relatively well in building source credibility, whereas coverage of popular culture undermines credibility assessments. People find evidence-based news sources more credible when they cover a range of serious topics, but less credible when they cover lighter topics.

Keywords: Depoliticization, Fact-checking, Media coverage, Misinformation, Source credibility

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To help citizens make informed decisions, a growing number of organizations have joined the efforts to correct misperceptions. For these endeavors to have intended effects, it is crucial that the public sees evidence-based news sources as credible. One prominent example is fact-checking organizations, which have rapidly expanded across the globe since the early 2000s (Amazeen, 2020; Graves, 2016) and now have an international presence (e.g., International Fact-Checking Network; Poynter, n.d.).

Fact-checking organizations emphasize their democratic mission in the "watchdog" role of journalism (Amazeen, 2020; Ferracioli et al., 2022). The enterprise of fact-checking stemmed from the growing awareness that conventional media failed to provide information that enables citizens to hold public figures accountable (Dobbs, 2012). To reform conventional media and to monitor politicians, many fact-checking sites around the world focus on politics. Their mission statements state: "we monitor […] major U.S. political players" (FactCheck.org, n.d.); "fact check claims made by politicians, public institutions" (Full Fact, n.d.); "investigate the statements made by politicians, public officials" (JTBC Fact Check, n.d.); "politicians must be asked to account for their positions with transparency and clarity" (Pagella Politica, n.d.); "focused on […] statements made by politicians" (PolitiFact; Holan, 2018); "aimed at checking the statements of Ukrainian politicians" (VoxUkraine, n.d.); and "the purpose is to 'truth squad' the statements of political figures" (Washington Post Fact Checker; Kessler, 2017).[1]

Despite the growth of fact-checking in professional journalism (Graves, 2016), only a small fraction of people visits fact-checking sites (Guess et al., 2020). Some people, especially

[1] All fact-checking sites referenced in this paper are verified signatories of the International Fact-checking Network as of 2023 (Poynter, n.d.).

conservatives, express concern that fact-checkers are biased (Brandtzaeg et al., 2018; Walker & Gottfried, 2019). Despite the democratic mission of fact-checking, why do many people still distrust and rarely use fact-checking sites?

There are theoretical reasons to suspect that a heavy focus on partisan politics may inhibit public trust in fact-checking sites. When partisan conflict is made salient, people more readily counterargue or are inclined to distrust the given information in order to protect their identities and opinions (Kahan, 2015; Groenendyk & Krupnikov, 2021). Politicized contexts also intensify the tendency to see balanced coverage as biased (hostile media bias; Feldman, 2017) and the tendency to overestimate political bias in others' views (naïve realism; Robinson et al., 1995). People often react with skepticism when they perceive a message on political topics as a persuasion attempt (Dillard & Shen, 2005; Friestad & Wright, 1994). These defensive psychological tendencies might be mitigated by broadening the topical scope to depoliticized contexts. For instance, partisan defense or selective exposure is weaker when a message covers non-political topics or when party cues are removed (Druckman et al., 2013; Mummolo, 2016; Pingree et al., 2014).

Despite the insights from existing theories, it remains unknown whether politics-focused coverage helps or hinders credibility. It is important to empirically test this question for two reasons. First, no study has yet compared how people assess fact-checking sites with different topical scopes. While some major fact-checking sites (e.g., FactCheck.org, PolitiFact, Washington Post Fact Checker (U.S.), JTBC Fact Check (South Korea), Pagella Politica (Italy), VoxUkraine (Ukraine)) tend to focus on partisan politics, not all do. Fact-checking sites such as Snopes (U.S.) and 20 Minutes (France) heavily cover non-political popular culture topics such as entertainment, sports, and

lifestyle. Other fact-checking sites such as Science Feedback (U.S.) and Agence Science-Presse (Canada) focus on scientific topics. Some fact-checking sites cover a mix of topics, both politics and non-political topics, as illustrated by LeadStories (U.S.), GhanaFact (Ghana), Lupa (Brazil), or YouTurn (India). Second, prior research has explored how the coverage of news and misinformation influences the credibility of news stories or the news media at large (Peacock et al., 2022; Thorson 2018; Thorson, 2024), but not at the level of individual sources. By focusing on news sources and comparing different topical scopes, this study clarifies which approach to news coverage more effectively builds credibility in evidence-based sources. Using a preregistered experiment, I examine how people assess a news source whose coverage focuses on (1) partisan politics, relative to when it covers (2) non-political scientific topics,[2] (3) non-political popular culture topics,[3] (4) a mix of partisan and scientific topics, or (5) a mix of partisan and popular culture topics.

This study examines how topical scope of fact-checking coverage influences perceptions of source credibility. Understanding the determinants of source credibility is important for the

[2] Because scientific topics can be politicized (Kahan, 2015), I focus on scientific topics unrelated to partisan controversies.

[3] This category includes 'softer' varieties of topics, as opposed to 'harder' news. Compared to 'harder' news, 'softer' news is less politically relevant, more individually relevant (less societal relevance), more episodic (less thematic), and more personal and emotional (less impersonal) (Reinemann et al., 2012). Hard news concerns topics such as politics, economics, international relations, and scientific developments, whereas soft news involves human-interest stories, gossip, and celebrity (Tuchman, 1973). Because soft news conceptually includes political news that reorients policies to personalities (Baum, 2007), this study focuses on non-political popular culture topics.

following reasons. When source credibility is properly established, it may overwhelm partisan defenses against corrective messages (Druckman & McGrath, 2019) and generate continued visits to news sources (Taneja & Yaeger, 2019). When people find a source credible, they find its messages more persuasive and more willingly accept corrective information (Liu et al., 2023; von Hohenberg & Guess, 2022).

As to whether focusing on politics helps or hinders building credibility, this study provides two key answers. First, compared to politics-only coverage, coverage that specializes in science increases credibility of a news source. Second, surprisingly, covering only non-political popular culture topics or covering both politics and popular culture hinders source credibility. The results indicate that people expect serious public affairs reporting, rather than entertainment reporting, from credible news sources.

Politics-focused Fact-checking Coverage

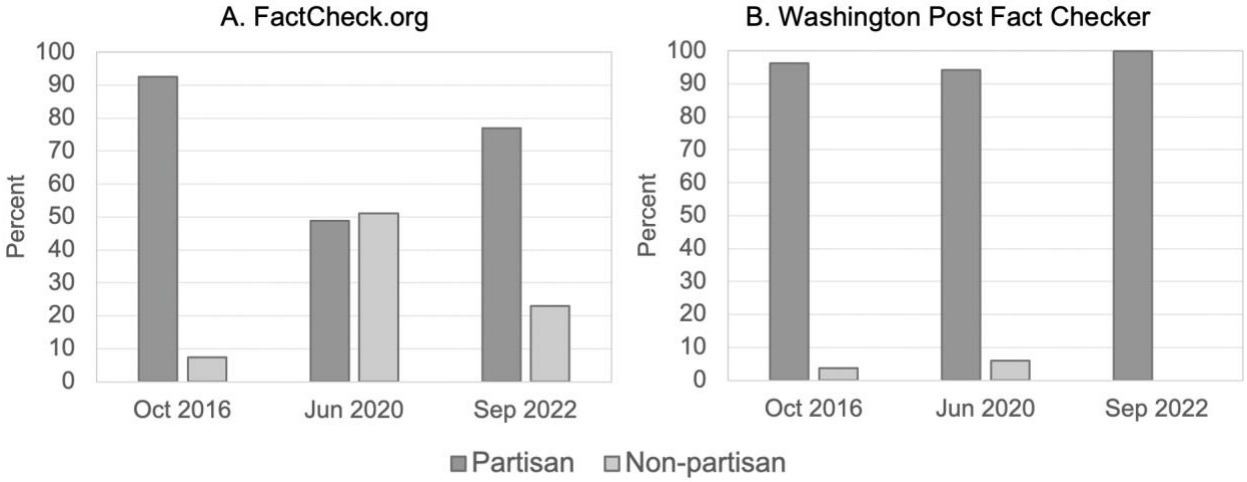
To enhance democratic accountability, major fact-checking sites have focused their coverage on high-profile politicians and partisan controversies. Between 2017 and 2019, 88% of fact-checks produced by FactCheck.org targeted federal-level politicians and government officials (Ferracioli et al., 2022). Another study from the same time frame finds that conventional media's fact-checking coverage (Associated Press, CNN, New York Times, Washington Post) heavily focused on high-profile political figures (81% of coverage targeted the president) and salient partisan controversies such as national security, healthcare, and economy (Yousuf, 2023).

My data collection also shows that visitors to major fact-checking sites are likely to encounter coverage focused on politics. For fact-checking articles published by FactCheck.org

and Washington Post Fact Checker in October 2016, June 2020, and September 2022,[4] I collected data on whether fact-checked targets had partisan affiliations or not (details in Tables S5-S7 in supplementary materials). Figure 1 illustrates that fact-checking coverage tends to focus heavily on partisan targets. For FactCheck.org, partisan-target fact-checks constituted 93% of coverage in October 2016 and 77% in September 2022. In an extraordinary time, the early stages of a novel pandemic (COVID-19) in June 2020, the coverage of FactCheck.org tilted toward less partisan coverage (49%). As for Washington Post Fact Checker, almost all coverage (94 to 100%) was dedicated to partisan targets during all three months. The heavy focus on partisan targets in fact-checking sites is distinct from the broader news environment that has a moderate dose of politics amid many other topics (e.g., only 14% of articles published by major U.S. news outlets pertained to politics in 2013; Budak et al., 2016).

[4] Google Trends data (Figure S2) indicate that public interest in fact-checking peaked in October 2016, prior to the presidential election. June 2020 reflects fact-checking coverage at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. I originally selected October 2022 for a third period, the month preceding the 2022 midterm election. It was adjusted to September 2022, because Washington Post Fact Checker published only three fact-checks in October 2022, which was too few to examine distributions.

Figure 1. Proportion of Partisan Targets in Fact-checking Coverage: U.S. Fact-checkers



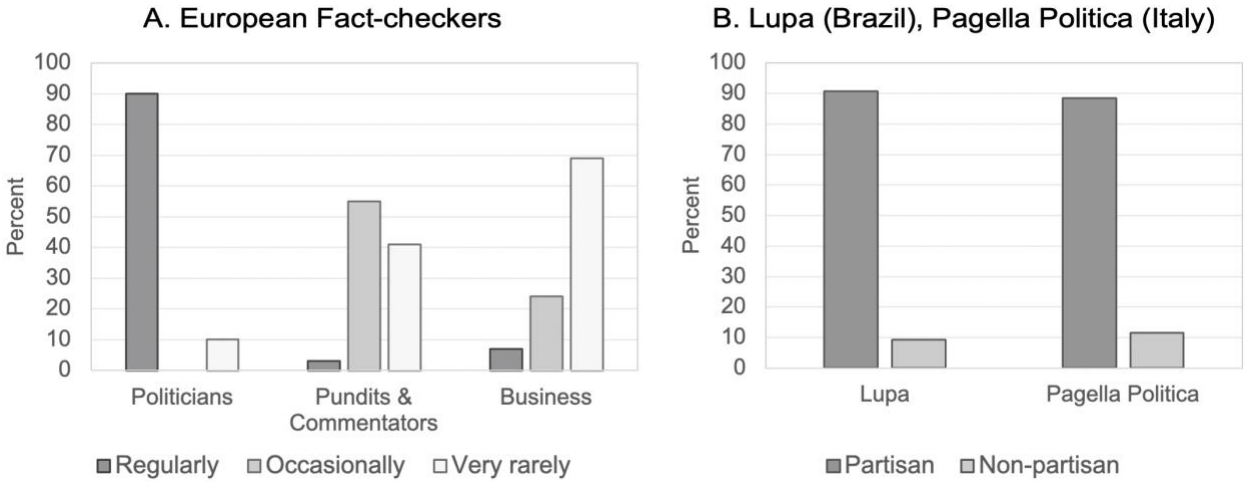
Note: "Partisan" indicates that fact-checked targets had partisan affiliations. "Non-partisan" indicates that fact-checked targets were not affiliated with a political party. Table S8 presents the result in tabular form.

A similar pattern is found among non-U.S. fact-checking sites. Figure 2 shows that non-U.S. fact-checking sites also focus their coverage on political actors. When European fact-checkers were asked "How often do your fact checks take aim at the following figures?", 90% indicated that they regularly target politicians, while only 3-7% regularly check non-political targets such as pundits or business (Figure 2A; Adapted from Figure 4 in Graves & Cherubini, 2016, p. 20).[5] Between 2017 and 2019, approximately 90% of fact-checks produced by Lupa (Brazil) and Pagella Politica (Italy) targeted partisan figures affiliated with either incumbent or

[5] Graves and Cherubini (2016) conducted interviews among 43 practitioners at the European fact-checking sites (p. 36): Demagog.cz (Czech Republic), Demagog Association (Poland), Demagog.SK (Slovakia), Libération (France), Doğruluk Payı (Turkey), FactCheck Ukraine (Ukraine), Factual.ro (Romania), Factograf (Croatia), Full Fact (U.K.), FactCheck Georgia (Georgia), Istinomer (Serbia), Kallxo (Kosovo), La Chistera (Spain), Les Décodeurs (France), Pagella Politica (Italy), StopFake (Ukraine), The Conversation (Australia), The Journal FactCheck (Ireland), and VoxUkraine (Ukraine).

opposition parties (Figure 2B; Derived from Ferracioli et al. (2022), Appendix E). These findings indicate politics-focused coverage is an approach widely adopted by professional fact-checkers across the globe.

Figure 2. Proportion of Partisan Targets in Fact-checking Coverage: Non-U.S. Fact-checkers



Source: Figure 2A was adapted from Graves & Cherubini (2016), Figure 4 (p. 20). Figure 2B was derived from Ferracioli et al. (2022), Appendix E. Table S9 presents Figure 2B in tabular form.

Professional fact-checkers take pride in their emphasis on salient political figures and topics. For instance, Glenn Kessler of the Washington Post Fact Checker said in an interview that "all [fact-checking organizations] have a passion for holding politicians accountable for their statements" (Kessler, 2014). Bill Adair of PolitiFact expressed his belief that the work of fact-checkers can help people be "better armed with the truth so they make smarter judgments about the candidates" (Adair, 2012). Brooks Jackson of FactCheck.org indicated his vision of fact-checking as "a resource for citizens who are bewildered and confused and looking for help" in the complex political world (Graves, 2016, p. 89). A question remains: Does politics-focused coverage help or hinder fact-checking sites in building credibility?

Does Politics-Focused Coverage Reduce Source Credibility?

Prior research has identified a number of psychological tendencies that may reduce the credibility of politics-focused coverage. Theories of identity-protective reasoning (Kahan, 2015; Kunda, 1990) and resistance to persuasive intent (Dillard & Shen, 2005) suggest news coverage focused on partisan politics likely diminishes perceived source credibility. Other studies suggest that these obstacles may be mitigated by broader topical scope, leveraging depoliticized contexts (Pingree et al., 2014; Mummolo, 2016).

Obstacle 1: Identity-protective Reasoning

When an information source focuses on political content, people tend to be more defensive against potential threats to their own group and values. When competition with the opposing group is salient, individuals are more likely to perceive threats to their identity (Bobo & Hutchings, 1996) and react with identity-protective reasoning (e.g., partisan motivated reasoning, cultural-protective cognition; Druckman & McGrath, 2019; Kahan, 2015). Because individuals associate politics with conflict, rather than deliberation, people process information labeled as "political" with greater partisan bias (e.g., readiness to counterargue) compared to information without such a label (Groenendyk & Krupnikov, 2021).

Illustrating the role of political contexts in how people assess news sources, prior studies have shown that polarized contexts tend to reduce trust in the news media (Ladd, 2012; Marietta & Barker, 2019) and lead individuals to prioritize partisan opinions over the quality of evidence (Druckman et al., 2013). The salience of group competition likely intensifies the hostile media effect, the tendency to perceive a balanced source of information as biased (Vallone et al., 1985). For instance, when news sources cover political topics, partisans tend to perceive balanced news

coverage as biased in favor of the other side, especially on topics they deeply care about (Feldman, 2017; Gunther & Schmitt, 2004) and when news coverage is opinionated (Feldman, 2011). These tendencies can be exacerbated by "naïve realism," which refers to individuals' tendency to believe that their own views are objective and well-informed, while attributing and overestimating political bias in others' views (Robinson et al., 1995).

In the context of fact-checking, messages that cue partisan controversies are often less effective at reducing misperceptions (Garrett et al., 2013; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). Because the salience of partisan conflict matters, identity-protective biases are apt to be triggered when people visit fact-checking sites that focus heavily on partisan leaders, groups, and issues.

Obstacle 2: Resistance to Persuasive Intent

Individual tendencies to resist persuasive intent can pose another obstacle to building trust in news sources that heavily cover politics. Prior studies suggest two forms of such resistance: "psychological reactance" and "persuasion knowledge." Psychological reactance refers to a type of response to persuasive messages that is characterized by perceived threat to the ability to freely form an opinion, often resulting in anger and defensive counterarguing (Dillard & Shen, 2005). Persuasion knowledge refers to the knowledge that individuals deploy to cope with a persuasion attempt (e.g., knowledge about source or topic that can aid their decision), where a common coping response to political messages (e.g., political advertising) is skepticism toward the source of information (Nelson et al., 2021). These defensive tendencies are prominent when the contexts or topics are politicized, such as election campaigns or climate change, particularly among individuals whose partisan views are challenged (Binder et al. 2022; Chinn & Hart,

2023). Thus, heightened salience of partisan conflict in news coverage is likely to strengthen oppositional reactions such as reactance or skepticism.

While fact-checkers claim that their reporting seeks to inform, not persuade (Graves 2016), for the enterprise of fact-checking to be of value (e.g., correct misperceptions), it might be appropriate to understand fact-checking messages as "a form of persuasive or strategic communication" (Garrett & We deks, 2013, p. 1049). This understanding of fact-checking suggests that, despite fact-checkers' intention not to persuade, the audience may still perceive fact-checking messages as having a persuasive intent, and therefore react with anger, counterargument, or suspicion, as implied by prior research on motivated reasoning, hostile media bias, psychological reactance, and persuasion knowledge.

Mitigation Strategy: Leveraging Depoliticized Contexts

Defenses against identity threats or persuasive intent are expected to be less strong in contexts where individuals do not anticipate political contention. For instance, partisan defenses are weaker toward messages on less politicized topics (e.g., skin cream, nuclear waste) compared to messages involving intense partisan controversies (e.g., gun control, climate change) (Bolsen & Druckman, 2018; Kahan et al., 2011; Kahan et al., 2017). A backfire effect, where corrective messages rather intensify misperceptions, was found on politicized topics (e.g., weapons of mass destruction in Iraq) but not on less politicized topics (e.g., stem cell research) (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). Individuals pay greater attention to the quality of evidence than to partisan endorsements when partisan competition cues are removed (Druckman et al., 2013).

In the context of fact-checking, fact-check ratings—brief accuracy evaluations (e.g., "mostly true," "false")—are more effective in correcting misperceptions when the topic is non-

political (e.g., nutritional benefits of cereal) than political (e.g., political advertisement) (Amazeen et al., 2018). Despite concerns that readers may mistake fact-checkers' accuracy judgments for bias, factual adjudication that avoids strong partisan cues (i.e., deemphasizes competing partisan interests) can update people's factual beliefs in the direction of adjudication and improve news quality assessments, compared to a news story without adjudication (Pingree et al., 2014).

One way to depoliticize the context, or to reduce the salience of group competition or persuasive intent, is to cover topics not associated with partisan conflict. While partisans tend to avoid politically unfriendly news sources, this tendency is often eclipsed by their interest in personally relevant topics, whether political (e.g., Social Security cuts) or non-political (e.g., weight loss tips) (Mummolo, 2016). Relatedly, individuals select and assess news content based on not only partisan congruence, but also "informational utility"—the relevance to "individuals' immediate and prospective encounter of threats or opportunities"—that can overpower the tendency to discredit or avoid dissonant news content (Knobloch et al., 2003, p. 95). Thus, broadening the scope of coverage to non-political topics not only reduces the salience of party competition, but may also open up the possibility that individuals find the news content more relatable and useful.

Given prior work, I expect that individuals will be less defensive against partisan threats or persuasive intent, when a source covers non-political topics or when partisan topics are embedded in topics that are less controversial or conflict-oriented. Thus, I hypothesized that news coverage that includes non-political topics—either popular culture or science—would increase partisans' perceptions of source credibility, compared to politics-focused coverage.

Mixed Coverage Hypothesis: Compared to when a source covers only partisan issues, perceived source credibility will increase when the source additionally covers non-political (popular culture or science) topics.

Specialized Coverage Hypothesis: Compared to when a source covers only partisan issues, perceived source credibility will increase when the source covers only non-political (popular culture or science) topics.[6]

In assessing the effects of topical scope, I examine potential partisan differences. Because Democrats have higher baseline trust in news media and fact-checking (Pennycook & Rand, 2019; Walker & Gottfried, 2019), it is possible that treatment effects of non-political popular culture coverage could be more muted among Democrats than Republicans. On the other hand, because Republicans tend to be more distrustful of science than Democrats (Krause et al., 2019; Gauchat, 2012), coverage of non-political scientific topics may improve credibility assessments to a greater extent among Democrats than Republicans.

Partisan Difference Question: Compared to when a source covers only partisan issues, does coverage of non-political topics improve source credibility perceptions to a greater extent among Democrats or Republicans?

Study Design

To understand how the topical scope of a news source affects source credibility assessments, I conducted a survey experiment on February 27, 2021. Participants were recruited via Prolific, an

[6] The preregistration contained a hypothesis that, compared to mixed coverage, specialized non-political coverage will increase perceived source credibility. This hypothesis, coupled with the Mixed Coverage Hypothesis, was simplified to the Specialized Coverage Hypothesis.

online crowdsourcing platform whose participants performed better on attention checks, honest behavior, and reproducibility of existing results compared to counterparts (Palan & Schitter, 2018; Peer et al., 2017). Using Prolific's prescreening data, I recruited an equal number of Democrats and Republicans,[7] 1000 respondents in total.[8] The proposed hypotheses, exploratory research question, and analysis plan were preregistered at AsPredicted.org prior to data collection.[9]

Experimental Conditions

Participants were told that they were given a list of headlines from an online news outlet, where the composition of topics differed across experimental conditions. A total of six headlines were randomly pulled from a set of 18 headlines, six each in three topic areas: partisan politics, non-political popular culture, and non-political science.

In this study, partisan topics refer to the issues where "facts have positive or negative implications for political parties" (defined as "partisan relevance" in Jerit & Barabas, 2012). A set of issues where Democrats and Republicans substantially diverge in factual beliefs, such as gun violence and abortion, falls into this category (Wood & Porter, 2019). Non-political popular culture topics pertain to non-political realms of everyday life, where facts have neither positive nor negative implications for political parties, such as weather, sports, entertainment, and food (Mutz, 2007; LaMarre et al., 2014; Yu, 2016). Non-political scientific topics refer to the issues

[7] Partisan leaners were considered as partisans (Petrocik, 2009). There was no pure independent in the sample.

[8] The sample size was determined based on power analysis (.80 power at the .05 significance level) using a prior experimental study (Table S17).

[9] The preregistration is available at: https://aspredicted.org/pk8h5.pdf

where facts are based on scientific research and do not have partisan implications, such as astronomy, biology, and electronics (Kahan, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2015). In devising the headlines, I avoided politicized scientific topics (e.g., climate change; Kahan et al., 2011). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the five experimental conditions:

- Baseline: Partisan politics only (e.g., abortion, gun violence)
- Treatment 1: Popular culture only (e.g., entertainment, sports)
- Treatment 2: Science only (e.g., astronomy, biology)
- Treatment 3: Partisan politics & popular culture
- Treatment 4: Partisan politics & science

These experimental conditions represent different approaches that fact-checking sites may adopt. The baseline condition (partisan politics only) resembles the approach adopted by FactCheck.org, PolitiFact, Washington Post Fact Checker, Full Fact, JTBC Fact Check, Pagella Politica, and VoxUkraine (mission statements provided in the introduction). This condition serves as the baseline because it represents the fact-checking ideal of holding politicians accountable through evidence-based corrections (Graves, 2016; Kessler, 2014). Treatment 1 (popular culture only) resembles the approach taken by Snopes (U.S.) or 20 Minutes (France), which focuses on urban legends, hoaxes and rumors.[10] Treatment 2 (science only) resembles FactCheck.org's SciCheck section, Science Feedback (U.S.), and Agence Science-Presse (Canada), whose fact-checking coverage focuses on scientific issues. Treatments 3 and 4 represent the mixed coverage of partisan politics plus one other topic area, which resembles the

[10] Snope's mission statement states that their coverage focuses on "urban legends, hoaxes, and folklore" (Snopes, n.d.); 20 Minutes' charter says that it "highlights […] daily lives, deals with urban lifestyles" (20 Minutes, 2006).

approach of LeadStories (U.S.), GhanaFact (Ghana), Lupa (Brazil), or YouTurn (India).[11] Mixed coverage can also take place when time-sensitive issues drive fact-checking sites to cover topics beyond their usual focus (e.g., June 2020 during a novel pandemic, Figure 1A).

Table 1 presents the headlines that were used in the experiment. In the baseline condition, participants were presented with six headlines on partisan issues. Four of the headlines were in the form of corrections. For these headlines, I employed topics where political elites of both parties had made misstatements (Wood & Porter, 2019), so that the misstatement could be associated with either party. Two other headlines were presented as interrogative statements without party references. Topic-party associations were randomized, so that the results do not hinge on specific topic-party associations. To ensure partisan balance in coverage, party references were randomly assigned in a way that two of the four corrective headlines challenged Republicans and two challenged Democrats.

[11] LeadStories and GhanaFact signal their focus—politics and health/environment—on the website headers (LeadStories, n.d.; GhanaFact, n.d.); Lupa states that its coverage follows "politics, economics, cities, culture, education, health and international relations" (Lupa, n.d.); YouTurn introduces "Political fact-checking" and "Health and medicine" as their focus areas (YouTurn, n.d.).

Table 1. Headlines for Experimental Stimuli

Coverage	Topic	Headline
Partisan Politics	Black teenager pregnancy	What [Republicans/Democrats] get incorrect about the pregnancy rate among black teenagers
	Gun violence	[Republican/Democratic] Party offers misleading statistics on gun violence
	Solar power labor market	Are there more jobs in solar than oil in the US?
	Abortion	What [Republicans/Democrats] get wrong about the number of abortions over time
	Immigration	[Republican/Democratic] National Committee misrepresents the deportation rate of illegal immigrants
	Defense spending	Has US defense spending decreased in recent years?
(Non-political) Popular Culture	Cultural figure	Atlanta's celebrity groundhog, General Beauregard Lee, claims he predicts weather better than Punxsutawney Phil in Philadelphia – it's mostly true according to meteorologists
	Sports	What really causes home field advantage in sports – and why it's on the decline
	Cartoon	Claim that Disney's Goofy character actually is a cow lacks evidence
	Food	Map of America's favorite restaurants goes viral – but it's mostly inaccurate
	Movie	Which movies and shows is Netflix losing versus gaining this year?
	Sports	What we know about Tokyo Olympics – it will happen, but when?
(Non-political) Science	Nanotechnology	Scientists debunk misunderstandings about nanotechnology
	Artificial sweeteners	Does drinking one diet soda a day really increase the risk of dementia and strokes?
	Radiation and mobile phone	Scientific reasons why mobile phone towers don't pose a radiation risk
	Physics/astronomy	Study says universe is expanding faster and is younger than previously thought
	Genetics/biology	Are dogs really 99.9% wolf, according to genetic analysis?
	Bioengineered artificial organs	Study on the prospect of artificial kidneys soon replacing dialysis

Note. More information about original fact-checking articles that informed the headline content is available in Section 1.1 of supplementary materials (Tables S1, S3, and S4).

In Treatment 1 (pop culture only), six popular culture topics were adopted from the news stories that other studies used as non-political contexts: cultural figure (Graves, 2016, p. 90), home field advantage in sports (Mutz, 2007), Olympics (Settle & Carlson, 2019), cartoon characters (LaMarre et al., 2014), food and movies (Yu, 2016). Headline wordings were adapted

from actual fact-checking articles published by Snopes and AP News (details in Section 1.1 of supplementary materials).

For Treatment 2 (science only), the headlines addressed scientific issues that lacked partisan relevance. I avoided scientific issues where facts have positive or negative implications for political parties, such as climate change and fracking (Kahan, 2015). Based on Kahan (2015) and Pew Research Center (2015), I chose issues that were generally unrelated to partisan controversies, such as radio waves from cell phones, artificial sweeteners, nanotechnology, astronomy, and biology. Headline wordings were designed to resemble fact-checking articles published by the SciCheck section of FactCheck.org, adapting examples from Snopes, Full Fact, and AP News (details in Section 1.1 of supplementary materials).

Treatment 3 (partisan politics & pop culture) displayed six headlines, consisting of three headlines randomly chosen from the six partisan topics and three randomly chosen from the six popular culture topics. Treatment 4 (partisan politics & science) also displayed six headlines, where three were randomly selected from the six partisan topics plus three randomly chosen from the six scientific topics. In both treatment conditions, to keep the balance of partisan headlines, three partisan issues were selected in a way that one challenged Republicans, one challenged Democrats, and one had no party reference. In all experimental conditions, the order of headlines was randomized.

Measures

Source credibility perceptions were measured as the perceived credibility of a news source (news credibility; Meyer, 1988) and two underlying dimensions of source credibility, perceptions of shared interest and expertise (Lupia & McCubbins, 1998).[12]

Perceived News Credibility. After reading the headlines, respondents indicated the degree to which they thought the website could be described as follows: "is fair," "is accurate," "is unbiased," "tells the whole story," and "can be trusted," on a five-point scale ranging from "not at all" to "a great deal" (Tsfati, 2010; Pingree et al., 2013). News credibility perception was measured as the composite score, constructed as the average, of the five items.

Perceptions of Shared Interest and Expertise. Because different experimental conditions involved a broad range of topics beyond politics, instead of adopting question wordings in Lupia and McCubbins (1998) that were specific to political topics, I adopted a set of items applicable to news sources that report on broader topics. I adopted items that ask participants to indicate the degree to which they perceive the website's reporters "are concerned about public interest," "watch out for your interest" (Meyer, 1988), "are well trained," and "are experienced" (Jensen, 2008), on a five-point scale ranging from "not at all" to "a great deal." The composite score of the first two items constituted the measure of perceived shared interest,[13] and the latter two were used to measure perceived expertise.

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[12] These measures capture different aspects of source credibility assessments. News credibility reflects the traits expected for credible news outlets (Meyer, 1988), whereas shared interest and expertise are relevant to the traits expected for a credible source to be persuasive (Lupia & McCubbins, 1998).

[13] In the source credibility literature, "shared interest" and "trustworthiness" are conceptually similar. This study adopts shared interest, defined as the extent to which the listener and speaker

Results

To analyze how topical scope of news coverage affects perceived source credibility, I used ordinary least squares (OLS) with robust standard errors using the preregistered model specification (Table S12). Factor analysis on the five news credibility items, two perceived shared interest items, and two perceived expertise items suggested a three-factor solution, where the related items loaded together on each factor as expected (Tables S14-S15). Each measure had acceptable internal reliability (Cronbach's α): .91 (news credibility), .90 (shared interest), and .85 (expertise).

Topical Scope Effects of Mixed and Specialized Coverage

Figure 3 illustrates the treatment effects of popular culture or science coverage, compared to politics-only coverage (baseline condition) presented at the center. To the left of baseline condition, mixed and specialized coverage conditions of popular culture topics (Treatments 1, 3) are shown. To its right, mixed and specialized coverage conditions of scientific topics (Treatments 2, 4) are presented. For each treatment condition, the existence of a horizontal bar with asterisks indicates a statistically significant difference compared to the baseline (Democrats: blue bars on the top, Republicans: red bars on the bottom).[14]

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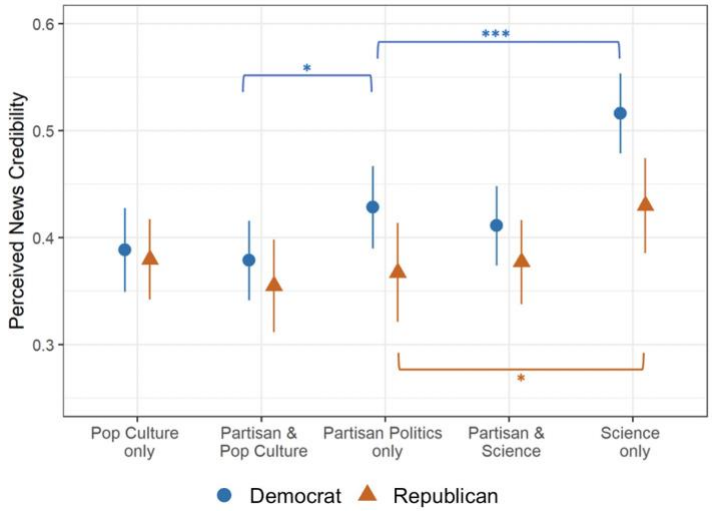
want similar outcomes (Lupia 2016, p. 87). For reference, trustworthiness is defined as the communicator's intent to communicate most valid assertions (Hovland et al., 1953, p. 21; 'honesty' in Wallace et al., 2020).

[14] For example, from Table S12, the treatment effect of Treatment 1 (scientific only) compared to baseline (political only) is the coefficient estimate [Science] for Democrats and [Science + Science×Rep] for Republicans. The subgroup analysis provides the same estimates of conditional treatment effects (Table S13).

Figure 3. Topical Scope Effects on Perceived News Credibility



Note: Means and 95% confidence intervals by experimental conditions. Perceived News Credibility was coded to range from 0 to 1. Asterisks indicate statistically significant differences from the baseline ("Partisan Politics only"); *$p < .10$; **$p < .05$; ***$p < .01$. The estimates are derived from Table S12.

The Mixed Coverage Hypothesis predicted that, compared to politics-only coverage, covering both partisan and popular culture topics would increase source credibility perceptions. However, expanding the scope of coverage to include popular culture in addition to partisan issues had minimal impact on perceived news credibility among Republicans (–0.01, $p = .69$) and decreased news credibility among Democrats (–0.05, $p < .10$). Although the Specialized Coverage Hypothesis predicted that popular culture-only coverage would increase perceived credibility compared to politics-focused coverage, there was no significant treatment effect among Republicans (0.01, $p = .69$) and Democrats (–0.04, $p = .16$).

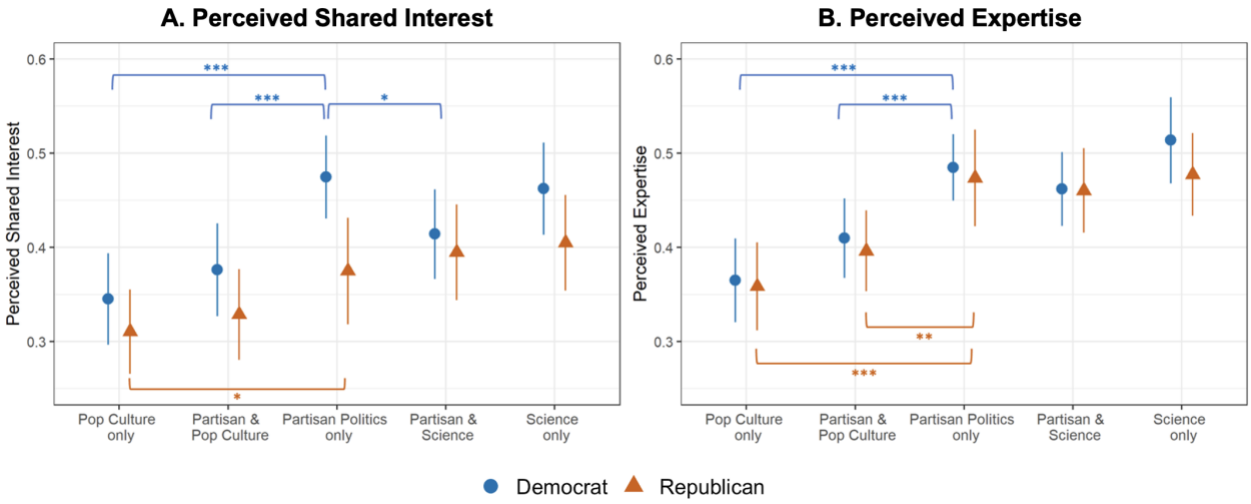
The Mixed Coverage Hypothesis also predicted that broadening coverage to include both scientific and partisan issues would increase perceived source credibility, compared to politics-only coverage. This expectation was not met; the inclusion of scientific issues did not significantly affect perceived news credibility compared to the baseline among Republicans (0.01, $p = .75$) and Democrats (–0.02, $p = .53$). However, the results were consistent with the

Specialized Coverage Hypothesis, which predicted science-only coverage would increase source credibility perceptions compared to politics-only coverage. Compared to politics-only coverage, perceived news credibility significantly increased when the source covered only scientific issues, among both Democrats (0.09, $p < .01$) and Republicans (0.06, $p < .10$).

Topical Scope Effects on Perceived Shared Interest and Expertise

I further examined how topic coverage scope affected the perceptions of shared interest and expertise, two underlying dimensions of source credibility assessments (Lupia & McCubbins, 1998). As shown in Figure 4, inclusion of popular culture topics lowered perceived shared interest and expertise. Compared to politics-only coverage, when the source covered both partisan and popular culture topics, perceived shared interest significantly decreased among Democrats (–0.10, $p < .01$) but not Republicans (–0.05, $p = .22$). Popular culture-only coverage significantly decreased perceived shared interest among both partisan groups (Republicans: –0.06, $p < .10$, Democrats: –0.13, $p < .01$) compared to politics-only coverage. The negative effects of popular culture coverage were even stronger on perceived expertise. Compared to politics-only coverage, perceived expertise significantly decreased among both partisan groups when the source covered partisan and popular culture topics (Republicans: –0.08, $p < .05$, Democrats: –0.08, $p < .01$) or only popular culture topics (Republicans: –0.12, $p < .01$, Democrats: –0.12, $p < .01$). On the other hand, coverage of scientific topics did not meaningfully affect perceived shared interest and expertise compared to politics-only coverage, except for mixed coverage of partisan and scientific issues, which lowered perceived shared interest among Democrats (–0.06, $p < .10$).

Figure 4. Topical Scope Effects on Perceived Shared Interest and Expertise



Note: Means and 95% confidence intervals by experimental conditions. All variables were coded to range from 0 to 1. Asterisks indicate statistically significant differences from the baseline ("Partisan Politics only"); *p < .10; **p < .05; ***p < .01. The estimates are derived from Table S12.

Overall, people tended to perceive lower levels of shared interest and expertise when a source covered popular culture, compared to when it covered partisan or scientific issues. This finding implies that people tend to attribute greater professional value to serious public affairs coverage—such as politics and science—than popular culture coverage, consistent with the news hierarchy in the journalistic field (Graves & Konieczna, 2015). Similar to the finding on perceived news credibility, the results on perceived shared interest and expertise suggest that fact-checking coverage of partisan or scientific issues is seen as more credible across partisan groups, compared to coverage of popular culture.

Topical Scope Effects of Popular Culture vs. Scientific Coverage

While I hypothesized that broadening the coverage to non-political topics, either scientific or popular culture, would increase perceived source credibility, different types of non-political coverage unexpectedly diverged in how each type affected source credibility assessments. The

results suggest that science coverage is more conducive to increasing credibility than popular culture coverage.

When all five conditions are compared, science-only coverage was perceived as most credible in terms of news credibility among both Democrats and Republicans (Figure 3). In contrast, popular culture-only coverage significantly lowered perceived source expertise and shared interest (Figure 4). Compared to politics-only coverage, mixed coverage of partisan and scientific issues did not meaningfully affect perceived news credibility, whereas mixed coverage of partisan and popular culture topics lowered perceived news credibility, shared interest, and expertise (Figures 3-4).

Partisan Differences in Topical Scope Effects

Across all treatment conditions and source credibility measures, there were no noticeable partisan differences in the relative magnitude of treatment effects. As shown in Table 2, there was no statistically significant difference in the treatment effects between Republicans and Democrats.

Table 2. Partisan Difference in Topical Scope Effects

Treatment	Perceived News Credibility		Perceived Shared Interest		Perceived Expertise	
(Base: Partisan only)	Difference	t-statistic	Difference	t-statistic	Difference	t-statistic
Pop Culture	0.05	1.26	0.07	1.31	0.005	0.10
Science	–0.03	–0.59	0.04	0.82	–0.03	–0.56
Partisan + Pop Culture	0.04	0.88	0.05	1.03	–0.002	–0.05
Partisan + Science	0.03	0.65	0.08	1.58	0.01	0.21

Note: Difference refers to the partisan difference in treatment effects (treatment effect among Republicans – treatment effect among Democrats), and corresponding t-statistics from t-test of difference are presented in *t-statistic* columns. Partisan differences in treatment effect are captured by the coefficient estimates [Condition × Rep] in Table S12.

Discussion

To examine whether politics-focused coverage helps or hinders the public reputation of evidence-based news sources such as fact-checking sites, this study examines how the topical scope of news coverage affects source credibility perceptions. While I hypothesized that coverage of non-political topics, either science or popular culture, would improve credibility of a news source, surprisingly, each topical scope had different reputational consequences. First, compared to politics-only coverage, exclusive coverage of non-political scientific topics improved perceived news credibility among both partisan groups. However, mixed coverage of partisan and scientific topics rather decreased perceived shared interest among Democrats. Second, coverage of non-political popular culture topics—either exclusively or mixed with partisan topics—worsened perceived news credibility among Democrats, and decreased perceived shared interest and expertise among both partisan groups. Third, there were minimal partisan differences in treatment effects, implying that Democrats and Republicans similarly reacted to different topical scopes compared to politics-only coverage.

This study speaks to how news coverage choices may affect the perceived credibility of evidence-based news sources. The results suggest that people expect serious reporting rather than entertainment reporting from credible fact-checking sites, and find the sites less credible overall when they focus on less serious topics. This finding further implies that the public likely shares the notion of the hierarchy of news (i.e., serious public affairs coverage is central to reputable journalism).[15] Coverage of partisan politics, a typical area of public affairs coverage,

[15] The field of journalism "has a clear center in the journalistic imagination: the serious public affairs reporting that builds professional status, wins prestigious awards, and is seen to fulfill the press's Fourth Estate role" (Graves & Konieczna, 2015, p. 55).

fares quite well for source credibility perceptions, compared to other topical scopes. Scientific news, particularly the topics not associated with politics, is conceptually close to serious public affairs coverage, and improves credibility assessments. In contrast, coverage of non-political popular culture, such as sports, entertainment, and lifestyle, worsens credibility assessments.

The results further highlight the value of considering multiple underlying dimensions of source credibility when conceptualizing and operationalizing it (e.g., Lupia 2016; Wallace et al. 2020). Despite minimal partisan differences in treatment effects, Republicans still leaned toward lower levels of perceived news credibility (Figure 3) and shared interest (Figure 4A) compared to Democrats. Interestingly, the levels of perceived expertise were similar across partisan groups (Figure 4B); Even Republicans rated a source moderately expert (near .50) when it covered politics and/or science. The results suggest that people might assess different aspects of source credibility differently. News credibility assessment (e.g., fair, accurate) could be more susceptible to partisan politics and elite rhetoric (e.g., conservative politicians' critique of the media and fact-checking; Meeks, 2020; Shepherd, 2021), whereas expertise assessment (i.e., well-trained, experienced reporters) might be more relevant to how much the covered topics are seen as easy or accessible. Further research is needed to clarify the mechanisms.

Several design choices limit the external validity of this study, but the findings still have real-world implications. First, at least a subset of the population gets exposed to fact-checking by directly visiting these sites (e.g., web traffic data during election cycles; Graves et al., 2016; Hassan et al. 2017). This study provides insights into how individuals would assess a news source based on a set of headlines they encounter on a fact-checking site or a news site. Second, it is highly likely that individuals accurately perceive the topical diversity of a source based on a set of headlines, as indicated by the manipulation check results (Table S10). In real-world

settings, the topical scope could be even more salient as a cue for source assessments, because most fact-checking and news sites indicate their core areas of reporting on the top of their website or in their drop-down menus. Yet, because social media has become an important route for consuming fact-checks (Brandtzaeg et al. 2018; Shin & Thorson, 2017), direct visits to a site might no longer be the modal way of fact-checking exposure. Future research may examine the relationship between topical scopes and credibility assessments in the context of social media.

This study points to important avenues for future research. First, how do different contexts of politics-centered coverage or corrective information influence source credibility perceptions? Future research can consider political news in non-partisan contexts (e.g., a city council's hearing about a public park) or different reputational consequences of the coverage that corrects misstatements about data (e.g., statistics) versus other types of claims (e.g., policy outcomes). Second, a valuable extension of this study could be to use web tracing data to examine whether people's interest in fact-checking varies by topics covered (e.g., visits to fact-checking sites, sharing fact-checking posts on social media). Third, intraparty divisions may matter (e.g., MAGA vs. old-school Republicans; Cooper et al. 2023), but the current study lacked statistical power to examine within-party differences (Table S16). Future research can use an adequately powered sample to investigate heterogeneity within parties. Lastly, because the current study was conducted among the U.S. public, cross-country research is needed, for instance in countries with a multi-party system or a state-controlled media system.

This study generates suggestions for fact-checkers and a wide range of communicators—journalists, government officials, scientists, and civil society organizations—who want to build credibility in evidence-based news sources. In these endeavors, a focus on politics could be an effective strategy compared to mixed coverage of partisan politics and other topics. It is

important to be cautious in diversifying the scope of coverage. In particular, broadening coverage to popular culture likely harms the reputation of evidence-based sources.[16] Covering both politics and science is less risky, although it may harm shared interest perceptions. Overall, specialized coverage of partisan politics or science likely promotes greater credibility than covering popular culture.[17] For the enterprise of fact-checking, the motivating case of this study, the breadth of topics relatively more favorable to fostering credibility is to focus on more serious topics such as politics or science, while avoiding lighter types of topics such as entertainment, sports, and lifestyle.

Declaration of interest statement: This work involves no conflicts of interests and was approved by the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board.

Data availability statement: The study materials, data, and code are available at: https://osf.io/nx3t6/.

[16] Snopes, a fact-checking site focused on popular culture topics, is widely used and liked. Mechanisms other than topical scope may explain how Snopes has expanded its readership.

[17] In a slightly different, but related, context, public trust in scientists deteriorated upon an academic journal's endorsement of a presidential candidate (Lupia, 2023). Because fact-checking involves (factual) endorsement or disapproval, mixed coverage of politics and science may have implications for the perceived credibility of not only fact-checking sites but also science.

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