

Research Statement

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My research focuses on the media's role in shaping the motivation to participate in politics. It lies at the intersection of the fields of political communication, political psychology, and political behavior. I focus on the media's role because I see it as the most common way in which citizens learn about their government and those shaping public policy. In my work, I have analyzed how traditional news outlets, social media, and political advertising influence our political attitudes and behaviors. I am committed to empirical social science research, and although I tend to rely on quantitative methods, I believe methodology should be tailored to the question at hand. I am an expert in survey research having managed a national, multi-year panel survey. I frequently use experiments to explore causality and have conducted field, laboratory, and survey experiments in my research. In the paragraphs below, I organize a sampling of my projects into two themes: elections and the media and political mis/information. These projects exemplify my current research agenda and the methods I frequently employ.

As a scholar who researches how the media can engage and motivate the public to participate in politics, I find it important to engage in public scholarship. I do this by focusing on research that addresses current problems (such as the misinformation or local newspaper decline), by writing publicly accessible versions of my research for dissemination to non-academic audiences, and through engaging with scholars and practitioners about my work.

Elections and the Media

Much of my research is interested in the media's role in motivating and informing voters. I believe a primary function of the news media is to connect citizens with their political institutions and elections. My research aims to understand how this connection works and why it sometimes falls short.

In a project aimed at increasing youth voter turnout in a municipal election, my colleague Katherine Haenschen and I led a research partnership between UT's Annette Strauss Institute and the *Dallas Morning News* to conduct a field experiment in the 2017 Dallas City Council election. We used the voter file and worked with an advertising agency to randomly assign internet banner ad treatments to nearly 75,000 young potential voters. The banner ads contained different messages and were linked to pages containing election coverage on the *Dallas Morning News* website. When individuals received ads linking to election information and ads reminding them to vote they were significantly more likely to vote compared to our control group. This paper contributes to our understanding of the effect of internet-based turnout appeals and local newspaper coverage in low salience elections. This paper was published in *Political Communication* in 2019. Following our study, my co-author and I went to Dallas to present our findings to the Mayor of Dallas and the publisher of the *Dallas Morning News*.

Combining my interests in elections and the role of the media in creating an informed electorate, my co-author Meghan Rubado and I conducted a longitudinal study of staffing cuts in California newspapers and their political effects on mayoral races. By tracing the newsroom staff of a dozen California newspapers over two decades, we find the severe cuts in staff are strongly connected with negative political outcomes in these communities. We see cuts associated with lower levels of competition and decreased turnout in local races. This paper was published in *Urban Affairs Review* in

2019. My co-author and I wanted to make sure this research spread beyond the world of political scientists, so we interacted with journalist online and agreed to do multiple interviews and podcasts. Coverage of this article was found on *NPR*, *CityLab*, *the Seattle Times*, and *Governing Magazine* among others. We have also received funding from the Knight Foundation to extend this research by conducting qualitative interviews and will translate our findings into a public report.

Political Mis/Information and the Media

People learn much of what they know about politics through the media. As the news media has changed drastically over the past decade, it is important to understand how citizens learn about politics in the new environment. This is particularly important when considering how misinformation can spread on social media. In that vein, my research is also focused on how to contain and correct misinformation on Facebook.

In two studies with the Center for Media Engagement, Natalie (Talia) Stroud and I recruit respondents to interact with a mock News Feed to test Facebook's attempts, along with some of our own improvements, at correcting misinformation. Although we found some evidence that Facebook's approach can decrease the believability of misinformation, the finding is complicated by the fact that it is significantly less effective with Republicans than Democrats, even when controlling for education. Fact-checking appears to have an asymmetric effect – correcting misinformation for many Democrats and having little effect on most Republicans.

In another project with the Center for Media Engagement, Jessica Collier, Talia Stroud and I are working with five fact checking organizations in five countries to test the effectiveness of fact-checking on the Facebook platform. We worked directly with Facebook and ran randomly altered sponsored posts and surveys to over 70,000 users on four continents. With this design we will better understand how to slow down the spread of misinformation and give fact checking organizations practical guidance on how to best use the Facebook platform to fight misinformation. Currently, we have finished running all of the tests and are just beginning to analyze our data.

Outside of the proliferation of misinformation, social media is also changing the way people access reliable news. One important aspect of this is what people learn (and don't) from just seeing a Facebook post. In a project with Nick Anspach and Kevin Arceneaux we randomly assigned subjects to either see Facebook previews of news articles, read the full article, or see no news at all. We find that while learning is happening from the short previews of articles found in your Facebook News Feed, it comes with an additional consequence: audiences who only read article previews think they know more than they actually do, especially individuals who are motivated to seek emotions (high in need for affect). This article was published in *Research & Politics* in 2019. This research was covered in over a dozen news outlets and blogs and was downloaded over 13,000 times – making it one of the most read articles in the journal's history.

As I look to building my research agenda in the next several years, I want to continue to focus on the media's role in making a more informed and motivated public by finding solutions to misinformation in the media, lack of trust in the media, and the decline in local news coverage. I believe my research with Dr. Rubado on the local political effects of newspaper staffing cuts is important and needs further study. For example, are there ways newspapers can recover their status as the watchdog of local government? Or, is the answer hyper-local news publications or non-profit

news media? Are there other political consequences to this decline in local news coverage? These are questions we want to address in future research, and in expanding the project for the Knight Foundation report, we have seen the potential for this project to be made into a book-length project.

I also plan to continue my work on misinformation and believe we have much to learn about how to contain and correct misinformation. For instance, how can we best correct misinformation while not spreading the incorrect information further? Can we devise strategies of fact checking for those who are news consumers and those who tend to avoid the news? By working on these questions, my work has potential to influence how social networking platforms work with media organizations to stem the tide of political misinformation.