

Issue stance and perceived journalistic motives explain divergent audience perceptions of fake news

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Abstract

Issue stances have always been an important factor in audiences' news processing, and this study found that audiences' attributions of motives to journalists can also affect news evaluations, particularly regarding whether a story is fake news. By exposing participants in Hong Kong to a news post (N = 215) via an online experiment, the findings suggest participants with opposing issue stances on the extradition bill controversy are likely to perceive the exact same new story as inaccurate and fake to significantly different degrees, consistent with the line of hostile media perceptions research. More notably, the phenomenon can be explained by the motives participants attribute to journalists. Among bill supporters, perceiving the journalists to be advocating mediates the relationship between perceived news inaccuracy and news fakeness; whereas perceiving journalists to be defending the authorities mediates the same relationship among bill opponents. Overall, the importance of motive attributions should not be ignored in journalism studies.

Keywords: cynicism, disinformation, fake news perception, journalistic motives

Issue Stance and Perceived Journalistic Motives Explain Divergent Audience

Perceptions of Fake News

Given the frequent accusations by politicians and the public that media sources are publishing fake news, this study aims to answer the fundamental question of why audiences perceive news to be fake in the first place. The study identifies the underlying mechanism of this phenomenon by taking into account perceived journalistic motives—that is, the motives audiences attribute to the journalists when reading the news. According to the literature on role of the journalist, there are role conceptions upheld by journalists as news providers (Weaver, Beam, Brownlee, Voakes, & Wilhoit, 2009), and there are also role performances played by journalists in real life (Mellado et al., 2017). From an audience perspective, scholars have studied news audiences' expectations of journalistic roles (Tandoc & Duffy, 2016), but little is known regarding how audiences assess the roles played by journalists in reality. To contribute to this line of research, this study proposes that news audiences formulate plausible journalistic motives to interpret the news.

Since people usually cannot be present to witness how journalists make decisions during news production, recognizing journalists' underlying motivations is not straightforward. For instance, if a news story appears to be biased against the government, audiences cannot easily determine whether the journalist is serving as a watchdog or pursuing a personal political agenda. Similarly, if a news story appears to be biased in favor of the government, they cannot easily establish whether the journalist is defending the authorities or simply reporting objectively. This study further proposes that individuals' perceptions of motives are guided by their personal stance on the issue featured in the story. This is consistent with Reeder, Pryor, Wohl, and Griswell's (2005) research, which showed that people who opposed the Iraq War were more likely to perceive self-interested motives behind President Bush's initiation of the war than people who supported the war.

Following the line of hostile media perception research, which shows that partisans with opposing views often interpret news biases differently (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985), this study suggests that observers with dissimilar stances on an issue assess journalistic motives differently and that these assessments are likely to be consequential in predicting perceived news fakeness. Indeed, Struthers, Eaton, Santelli, Uchiyama, and Shirvani (2008) have shown that whether an apology results in forgiveness depends on whether the offender is perceived to have committed a transgression intentionally or unintentionally—in other words, on the offender’s perceived motives. In this sense, the journalists’ perceived motives are expected to relate to whether one accepts or rejects a news message.

Given that people’s attributions of motives to journalists seemingly affect their evaluations of news, this study adopted the motives from the journalistic role performance literature (Mellado, 2015) and investigated how news audiences understand journalists’ motives by exposing study participants in Hong Kong to a news post on a controversial current event attributed to either a pro-government or anti-government source. Through attributing the same news story to two ideologically opposed news outlets, this study drew one main conclusion: participants with opposing political views are likely to perceive the same news story as inaccurate and fake to significantly different degrees, which can be explained by the motive they attribute to the journalist who wrote it. The perception that the journalist was motivated to defend power was found to mediate the relationship between perceived news in terms of accuracy and news fakeness among opponents of Hong Kong’s proposed extradition bill. On the other hand, the perception that the journalist was advocating for the bill was found to mediate the same relationship among supporters of the bill.

The Hong Kong Extradition Bill

Controversy was ignited when the Hong Kong government proposed an extradition bill, titled the Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters

Legislation (Amendment) Bill 2019, which would make mutual legal assistance between Hong Kong and other places, including Taiwan, Macau, and mainland China, possible. Passing the bill would enable authorities in mainland China, Taiwan, and Macau to file extradition requests for suspects accused of criminal wrongdoing. However, the proposed bill drew much attention and criticism. Some feared that Hong Kong's citizens, as well as foreign nationals passing through the city, could be sent to mainland China and subjected to arbitrary detention and unfair trial under China's judicial system. In general, the public feared that the bill would not only erode Hong Kong's legal system but also damage the current business climate in the city. Google Trends (2019) data for the past five years in Hong Kong shows that there has been a sharp rise in people Googling the term "fake news" during the extradition bill controversy, making this controversy an ideal opportunity to study perceived news fakeness.

Media Cynicism

Since it is common to observe news audiences labeling pieces of news as fake (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy, & Nielsen, 2018), it is reasonable to consider the concept of media cynicism. Before defining media cynicism, the meaning of cynicism in general should be clarified. According to the *OED Online*, cynicism refers to the tendency to "disbelieve in human sincerity or goodness" such that a person is dispositioned to "find fault." Put simply, cynics are likely to judge on impulse that others are acting with malicious intent. Accordingly, a media cynic would regularly question the motives of journalists and largely expect the worst of them, particularly those who publish stories contradicting the cynic's opinions. In this sense, when a news audience reads a news story, particularly when it is counter-attitudinal, the media cynics among them are likely to perceive journalists as doing harm, not good. For instance, bill opponents (who are anti-government) will see the media as a mouthpiece of the authorities. On the other hand, bill supporters (who are pro-government)

will see the journalists as advocating for the movement against the bill due to their own personal beliefs. In either sense, these motives tend to be malicious from their perspective.

Perceived Journalistic Motives

Researchers have been documenting a loss of confidence in media outlets for some time (Jones, 2018), together with the proliferation of accusations of fake news (Newman et al., 2018). This study therefore investigated the relationship between perceptions of journalistic motives and the perceptions of fake news, deriving journalistic motives from the journalistic role–performance literature. In this literature (Burke & Reitzes, 1981), *role conception* examines what journalists and news outlets ought to do (Hanitzsch et al., 2011; Weaver et al., 2009), while *role performance* looks at how those roles are actually carried out (Hellmueller & Mellado, 2015; Mellado, 2015). In other words, there is a thread of research on role expectations from a news producer’s perspectives as well as a thread that looks at how those roles are realized in actual news products. Given that both threads examine journalistic roles from the production point of view, this study borrows from the latter to contribute to the subject from the consumption side—the way in which news audiences perceive the journalistic roles to be performed based on reading actual news content. Since public evaluations of the news rely heavily on the final news product, perceived motives relate more closely to role performance, which deals with actual behaviors, than to the ideals of roles on an abstract level (i.e., role conception). In addition, the literature on role performance provides concrete operationalizations of role performance (Mellado, 2015), which can serve as a framework to systematically measure perceived motives.

According to Guo’s (2000) survey of 503 adults in Hong Kong, audiences expect journalists to provide comprehensive, objective, and positive news coverage during a national election campaign. In other words, news audiences do hold opinions regarding what journalists should do, and they also hold expectations of journalists’ roles (Tandoc & Duffy,

2016). Even though journalists are often trained to set aside personal and political pressures to do objective reporting (Gans, 2004), the audiences can see that they sometimes act otherwise. This study, therefore, aims to extend the literature by examining what audiences perceive journalists to have done.

In general, three main perspectives on the professional roles of journalists have been suggested at the perceptual level: the presence of a journalistic voice, the relationships between journalism and those in power, and the way in which audiences are approached by journalism (Donsbach, 2008; Hanitzsch, 2007). Mellado (2015) operationalized these perceptual roles into six overlapping empirical dimensions: intervention, watchdog, loyalty, service, infotainment, and civic. Since Mellado (2015) has empirically studied how journalistic roles are performed through the analysis of news content, this study further incorporates these professional roles into journalism and media studies by exploring how news audiences view the performance of journalists after news content exposure. Given the political context of this study (i.e., the extradition bill controversy in Hong Kong), five journalistic motives are derived by borrowing from the journalistic roles proposed by Mellado (2015). The reason for not incorporating all six is that the news stimuli in this study have nothing to do with personalization nor exposing one's private life (see Appendix A). The infotainment dimension is therefore irrelevant in this scenario.

Defending power. Power defenders adopt a loyal-facilitator role, as described by Mellado (2015), in which journalists defend the powerful. As elaborated by Xu (2005), such roles involve aiding the government's efforts to preserve social harmony and to strengthen national unity. In other words, media outlets function as spokespersons for those in power by supporting official policies (Bishop, 2000) and by helping to create a positive image of officials (Donohue, Tichenor, & Olien, 1995; Pasti, 2005). In Hong Kong, journalists can be loyal not only to the local Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) government

but also to the government of the People's Republic of China. Therefore, audiences who attribute to journalists the motivation to defend power perceive journalists to be defending the interests of both governments, including their policies and images.

Acting as a watchdog. Journalists perceived as watchdogs are viewed as surveilling power (Mellado, 2015). In particular, these journalists are likely to denounce officials' wrongdoing and to hold the government and public institutions accountable (Waisbord, 2000; Weaver et al., 2009). Audiences may sense such motives when they see journalists demonstrating skepticism toward authorities, in particular when they continually question the validity of officials' statements (Clayman, Heritage, Elliott, & McDonald, 2007). In addition, stories of power abuses or accusations of wrongdoing provide a means to enhance the efficiency of the government and protect public interests (Waisbord, 2000).

Mobilization. The mobilization motivation of journalists resembles the civic function dimension proposed by Mellado (2015). From an audience perspective, journalists are actors who allow the public to function effectively as citizens. In other words, journalists intend to encourage public involvement in a variety of political deliberation, protests, and other relevant activities. Overall, citizens are seen as important agents; journalists value such citizen involvement, and therefore consider citizen demands. Such motives help citizens make demands of and question the authorities.

Advocacy. Journalists who act as advocates resonate and perform Mellado's (2015) intervention role; that is, they present their personal opinions and judgments in their news stories. In this current study, audiences are expected to assess journalists' intentions according to journalists' stances on political disputes, together with how they attempt to sway public opinion. Therefore, journalists may advocate for a particular social group and promote changes in favor of that group's interests.

Providing client service. Serving news consumers as clients relates to the service dimension of journalists' role performance (Mellado, 2015), where journalists are perceived as supplying the target audiences of their news outlets with news that resonates with those audiences. For instance, journalists working for an anti-government source (e.g. *Apple Daily*) are motivated to publish anti-government news; journalists working for a pro-government source (e.g. *Ta Kung Pao*) are motivated to publish pro-government news. In this sense, journalists intend to provide information that suits their target audience's interests and fulfils its needs. In this study, this motivation is journalists' desire to cater to audiences' political tastes.

From an audience perspective, working backwards to determine journalists' motives from their content can be problematic, and Mellado (2015) claims that it is challenging to establish journalists' roles simply by examining their output. Since a variety of actions and constraints affect the journalists' output, monitoring only the end product, and not the relevant processes, makes such assessments extremely unreliable. This study tested the five aforementioned journalistic motives simultaneously to understand the effect of each motive on readers' perceptions of news fakeness. Each role was expected to affect this fake news assessment differently, depending on the readers' personal stances on the extradition bill and the political stance of the news source.

Predicting News Fakeness

Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) defined fake news as “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers” (p. 213). This definition is consistent with Wardle's (2017), which describes fake news as fabricated information disseminated to obtain financial or political gains. In other words, the term fake news can be distilled down to two components: first, the content is knowingly false; second, the content is spread tactically to serve strategic purposes, which may be ideological or financial (Tandoc et

al., 2017). According to the aforementioned definitions of fake news, the likelihood that someone thinks something is a lie is based on the likelihood that they think something is inaccurate. Therefore, this study expected a positive relationship between perceived news inaccuracy and perceived news fakeness.

H1: Perceived news inaccuracy relates positively to perceived news fakeness.

Given that *disinformation* describes a false news message published with the deliberate intent to mislead (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017) or cause harm (Ireton & Posetti, 2018), the terms *disinformation* and *fake news* are used interchangeably in this study. In addition, given that the definitions of both terms involve deliberate intent, perceived intent is an essential element in investigating the journalistic motives mentioned in the previous section. When exposed to a news story, audiences are expected to consider the motives of journalists or news outlets. More importantly, perceived accuracy, perceived motives, and perceived fakeness should inter-relate positively, at least according to the existing definitions.

Given that the literature has not yet explored perceptions of journalistic motives empirically from an audience standpoint, this study generated research questions instead of specific hypotheses. For instance, although anti-government individuals are likely to see loyalty to the authorities as a negative motive that compromises the accuracy of the news, it is difficult to conceptualize the ways in which the motivation to serve clients can affect perceived news accuracy and fakeness. As a result, two research questions (RQ1 and RQ2) were posed:

RQ1: Which journalistic motives are associated with perceived news inaccuracy?

RQ2: Which journalistic motives are associated with perceived news fakeness?

Mediation

As discussed, fake news comprises false information and malicious intent (Wardle, 2017). If news audiences consider only news accuracy and not the intent behind publication

and dissemination, misinformation and disinformation are the same. The perceived inaccuracy of news is thus the foundation of disinformation or fake news, two concepts distinguished by the presence of malicious intent. In this sense, the difference between an initial judgment regarding whether a news story contains serious errors and a final judgment of whether the story is fake may depend on the extent to which malicious intent, for either profit or political reasons, is perceived.

RQ3: Which journalistic motives mediate the positive relationship between perceived news inaccuracy and perceived news fakeness, as stipulated in H1?

Motivated Reasoning and Fake News Perception

In addition to contributing to how definitions of fake news are applied, this study considered whether individuals with different stances on an issue perceive inaccuracy, journalistic motives, or fakeness in different ways. According to the theory of assimilation bias (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979), people are likely to view likeminded sources as fair and trustworthy, and to accept information from them without much criticism. Literature on contrast bias suggests that people tend to rate counter-attitudinal information as biased, and are likely to devise counter-arguments. Thus, we expected individuals with dissimilar stances on an issue to perceive news inaccuracy and, in turn, news fakeness differently. When exposed to a pro-government news story, a supporter of the government is likely to perceive it as accurate, whereas an anti-government individual is likely to perceive it as inaccurate.

These expectations are consistent with research on hostile media perceptions suggesting that partisans with different positions on an issue tend to assess media biases in news differently. Literature addressing hostile media perceptions has found evidence that individuals with opposing stances, particularly extreme stances, tend to see media content as biased in favor of the opposing viewpoint. Therefore, partisans with opposing views on an issue may differ in terms of their perceptions of news hostility, depending on their personal

perspectives (Vallone et al., 1985). According to Vallone et al. (1985), the extremely partisan positions that reject balanced information contradicting their strong pre-existing belief systems underlie this phenomenon. Generally, people are substantially more critical of information disagreeing with their personal beliefs than of information confirming them (e.g. Gunther & Schmitt, 2004). People are therefore prone to perceive the motives of journalists with whom they agree as credible and fair, and to perceive counter-attitudinal sources as hostile and having malicious intentions.

H2: When exposed to a news story, participants for and against the extradition bill differ in their perceptions of news fakeness.

H3: When exposed to a news story, participants for and against the extradition bill differ in their perceptions of news inaccuracy.

According to the definition of disinformation, audiences can view journalists as having malicious intent, such as to promote political or financial agendas (Wardle, 2017). Perceived news fakeness pertains to what are viewed as the motivations or intentions of an author. Audiences referring to likeminded sources can be expected to view journalists' motives as "good," that is, supportive of their own positions. Perceptions of inaccuracy and fakeness thus result from audiences' critical attitudes toward a news story, and perceptions of negative motives may occur when information conflicts with audiences' political interests. As such, individuals who experience news as hostile are likely to perceive the journalists responsible as possessing "bad" motives.

As a result, it was anticipated that extradition bill supporters would perceive journalists from anti-government sources as intending to mobilize citizens to join protests, advocating against the bill, and scrutinizing the government's words and actions. Opponents were also expected to view journalists from a counter-attitudinal source (pro-government source) as intending to help the government promote the bill. In other words, anti-

government individuals may be likely to perceive journalists as power defenders, whereas pro-government individuals may be more likely to perceive journalists as advocates. This study therefore extends the literature on hostile media by suggesting that people with opposing stances on an issue are likely to differ in their perceptions of the underlying journalistic motives. Given that literature has not explored the motives perceived by audiences, the related hypothesis formed is similar to H2 and H3; that is, participants with opposing stances should differ in their perceptions of journalists' underlying motives.

H4: When exposed to a news story, participants for and against the extradition bill differ in their perceptions of the (a) power defense, (b) watchdog, (c) mobilization, (d) advocacy, and (e) client service journalistic motives.

Method

An online experiment was conducted in Hong Kong during the extradition bill controversy of 2019, immediately after the second large protest by demonstrators opposing the bill on June 16. Data were collected for four days, and participants were paid for participation. Dynata, previously known as Survey Sampling International, was responsible for the data collection through the company's online panel. After returning a signed consent form, participants reported their attitudes toward the extradition bill. They were then exposed to a Facebook news post concerning the bill, published by either *Apple Daily* or *Ta Kung Pao*. Subsequently, participants answered a battery of questions on their perceptions of the respective journalists' motives, and on their general perceptions of the news post. Finally, they were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Sample

A total of 215 participants, all 18 years or older, were recruited for this study. To ensure that participants read the post carefully, they were required to identify correctly the news outlet that published the post and the platform (Facebook) on which it was published.

The 19 participants who could not correctly identify both the news outlet and platform were eliminated from the survey. The final sample size was 196 participants, of whom 107 were female (54.6%). The sample had an average age of 23.28 years (standard deviation [SD] = 11.68), with a range from 18 to 73 years old, and the majority of participants had a college degree and a monthly family income of HKD 20,000–39,999.

Design and Stimuli

This experiment used a 2 (source ideology: pro-government or anti-government) × 2 (audience issue stance: for or against the extradition bill) experimental design. Participants were assigned randomly to one of the two conditions. Ninety-nine participants (50.5%) read a Facebook news post published by *Apple Daily*, and 97 (49.5%) read a Facebook news post published by *Ta Kung Pao*. The content of both posts was identical. The post featured the headline: “Extradition Bill | Carrie Lam: The Chief Executive does not have the Power to Bypass the Law and Merely Follow the Chinese Government’s Instructions.” The content stated that the chief executive announced that the extradition procedure would be used cautiously, and that criminal suspects would be extradited only if the evidence supporting their extradition was ruled sufficient by the court. The content was adapted from genuine articles published about the bill. To ensure internal validity, the flow of content, layout, length, and date and time of publication for the two posts were identical. To ensure external validity, the design of the news post replicated the layout of a news story published by a news outlet and posted on Facebook (see Appendix A).

Measures

Perceived fakeness. Participants reported the degrees to which they believed the content of the news article they had just read to be (a) invented, (b) fabricated, and (c) considered as a piece of fake news. Items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale from 1

(*completely disagree*) to 5 (*completely agree*). The mean (M) for all three items was then calculated (M = 2.66, SD = 1.00, Cronbach's alpha = .95).

Perceived inaccuracy. Participants were asked to report the extent to which they believed the news they had just read (a) was misleading, (b) contained exaggeration, and (c) involved serious errors. Items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 5 (*completely agree*). The mean for all three items was calculated to measure perceived inaccuracy (M = 3.23, SD = 1.00, Cronbach's alpha = .91).

Similar to how Tandoc and Duffy (2016) adopted survey items from previous surveys of journalistic role conceptions (Hanitzsch, 2011; Mellado et al., 2012) to study what the public expects from journalists, the measures in this study are adopted from Mellado's framework (2015). The items are fairly similar to those of Tandoc and Duffy (2016), but since audiences are socialized to have ideas of what roles the journalists should play in different societies (Tandoc, 2014), the items were adopted to fit the specific context of the extradition bill in Hong Kong.

Power-defender motive. Audience perceptions of the journalist's motivation to defend power were measured by asking participants to what extent they considered the underlying motive of the news post was to demonstrate loyalty to authority, particularly to the two governments in question. More specifically, the participants were asked, with respect to the news they had just read, to what extent they believed the underlying motive was to (a) please the Chinese government, (b) show loyalty to the Chinese government, (c) support the HKSAR government, or (d) defend the HKSAR government's policies. The responses were scored from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 5 (*completely agree*). The mean for all of the items was computed to form a scale representing power defending (M = 2.46, SD = 1.07, Cronbach's alpha = .95). The same scoring system was used to evaluate the following motives.

Watchdog motive. This study measured the motive to fulfil a watchdog role using self-reported responses to the following six questions: To what extent do you perceive the underlying motive of the news post was to (a) hold the chief executive accountable, (b) critique and denounce the governors responsible, (c) inform citizens of the truth, (d) safeguard public interest, (e) monitor the work of the government, and (f) monitor the progress of the extradition bill. The mean for all six responses was then computed ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 0.84$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$).

Mobilization motive. The mobilization motive was measured by asking participants their perceptions of the motives behind the news post, particularly whether the article was (a) encouraging citizen involvement in public discussions regarding the extradition bill, (b) encouraging citizens to join protests related to the extradition bill, (c) encouraging citizens to join activities relevant to the extradition bill, (d) increasing citizens' knowledge regarding the extradition bill, and (e) raising citizens' awareness regarding the extradition bill. The mean of all five responses was computed to indicate the perception of the mobilization motive ($M = 3.01$, $SD = 0.81$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$).

Advocacy motive. To measure whether participants perceived the motive behind the news post was to advocate certain stances, they were asked to what extent they perceived journalists as responsible for (a) advocating their own personal positions, (b) advocating the position of their newspaper, and (c) swaying public opinion. The mean for all three responses was obtained ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 0.82$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .76$).

Client service motive. Participants were asked to report to what extent they agreed that the motivation behind the news story was to (a) fulfil the newspaper's readers' needs and (b) cater to the readers' preferences ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 0.92$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$).

Issue stance. Prior to exposure to the news post, respondents rated from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 5 (*completely agree*) the extent to which they believed the government should

withdraw the extradition bill. To split the sample ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.35$) into two groups for comparison, 40 respondents (20.4%) who agreed somewhat or completely with withdrawal were placed in a group considered to oppose the bill, and 127 (64.8%) who disagreed either slightly or completely with withdrawal were placed in a group considered to support the bill. Those who reported themselves as neither agreeing nor disagreeing ($n = 29$, 14.8%) were excluded from the analysis.

Results

To compare perceptions of news accuracy, journalistic motives, and fakeness between supporters and opponents of the bill (H2, H3, H4), planned comparisons using Bonferroni correction were conducted after the execution of two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to compare the perceived degrees of inaccuracy and fakeness, as well as motives that extradition bill supporters and opponents perceived for each condition (*Apple Daily* vs. *Ta Kung Pao*). Table 1 reveals that the fakeness of the news story published by *Apple Daily* (anti-extradition) was perceived differently by extradition bill supporters ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 0.70$) and opponents ($M = 2.14$, $SD = 0.90$), at a significance level of .01. As expected, the fakeness of a news story published by *Ta Kung Pao* (pro-extradition) was also perceived differently by supporters ($M = 1.98$, $SD = 0.93$) and opponents ($M = 2.86$, $SD = 0.92$) of the bill, at a significance level of .001. H2 is therefore supported: participants supporting and opposing the extradition bill differ in their perceptions of news fakeness when exposed to the same article.

The inaccuracy of the news story published by *Ta Kung Pao* (pro-extradition) was perceived differently by supporters ($M = 2.56$, $SD = 1.06$) and opponents ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 0.86$) of the bill, at a significance level of .001. However, such differences were not observed of the story claiming to be published by *Apple Daily* (anti-extradition). Therefore, H3 is only partially supported, with the support depending on the source. With respect to H4 regarding

perceived journalistic motives, extradition bill supporters ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 0.92$) and opponents ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 0.82$) differed only in their perceptions of the journalistic motive of defending power ($p < .01$) when exposed to a news story published by a pro-extradition source (*Ta Kung Pao*). Therefore, H4a is supported, but not H4b, H4c, H4d, or H4e.

Although not mentioned in the hypotheses or research questions, a main effect of source on the perception of the journalistic motives of mobilization ($F = 22.23$ (1,163), $p < .001$) and advocacy ($F = 10.01$ (1,163), $p < .01$) was demonstrated in the ANOVA results (Table 2). Extradition bill opponents exposed to a news story published by *Apple Daily* ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 0.83$) rated the news as fulfilling a watchdog role more than the opponents exposed to a news story published by *Ta Kung Pao* did ($M = 2.49$, $SD = 0.89$). By contrast, extradition bill supporters judged the news story published by *Apple Daily* ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 0.93$) as catering to clients' interests more than they did for the article published by *Ta Kung Pao* ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 0.83$).

Predicting News Fakeness

Multiple regression analyses were used to test the hypotheses after splitting the participants into two groups according to their positions on the extradition bill (Table 3). To test H1 and H2, perceived news inaccuracy and fakeness were used as criterion variables. Predictors were added into the analysis in three blocks. The first block comprised audience demographics, the second block comprised audience perceptions of inaccuracy, and the last block comprised perceptions of motives. Table 1 summarizes the results. Overall, demographic factors did not contribute significantly to explaining either criterion variable.

As seen in Table 1, perceived news inaccuracy was directly associated with greater perceived news fakeness among bill opponents ($\beta = .37$, $p < .001$, R^2 change = 48.0% among supporters and $\beta = .40$, $p < .001$, R^2 change = 23.5% among opponents), after all other factors were controlled. This positive relationship suggests that the more one believes that news

includes serious errors and misleading or exaggerated content, the more one is likely to judge an article as fake. H1 is therefore supported.

In relation to RQ1 regarding the associations of perceived journalistic motives with perceived news inaccuracy, perceived motives were positively associated with perceived news inaccuracy under two conditions. First, the perceived advocacy motive related positively to perceived inaccuracy among extradition bill supporters ($b = .54, p < .05$). Second, perceiving the journalists as power defenders ($b = .49, p < .001$) as well as client service providers ($b = .22, p < .05$) related positively to perceived inaccuracy among extradition bill opponents. All of the motives in combination explained 58.5% of the variance in perceived inaccuracy. More importantly, with respect to RQ2 concerning the associations between perceived motives and perceived news fakeness, a perception of journalists as advocates ($b = .70, p < .01$) was positively associated with perceived fakeness among extradition bill supporters, and the perception of journalists as power defenders was positively associated with perceived news fakeness among extradition bill opponents ($b = .34, p < .01$).

Mediation. Given that perceived news inaccuracy related significantly to both the perceived advocacy motive and perceived news fakeness, and because the perceived advocacy motive related significantly to perceived news fakeness, whether the perceived advocacy motive mediates the relationship between perceived news inaccuracy and fakeness had to be tested. The 95% confidence interval (CI) for the indirect effect was obtained from 5000 bootstrapping samples (Preacher & Hayes, 2008), and the results supported the mediating role of the perceived advocacy motive in the relationship between perceived news inaccuracy and fakeness ($\beta = .28, SE = 0.10, CI = 0.028 \text{ to } 0.485$) among supporters of the extradition bill.

Among extradition bill opponents, perceived news inaccuracy was significantly related to the perceptions of both the power-defending motive and news fakeness, and the perceived power-defending motive related significantly to perceived news fakeness. Again, based on 5000 bootstrap samples, the 95% CI for the indirect association between perceived inaccuracy and perceived fakeness through perceptions of journalists as power defenders was .293 to .034. Given that zero is not included in this interval, the indirect effect can be said with 95% confidence to be positive ($\beta = .17$, $SE = 0.10$). The results suggest that perceptions of power-defending motives mediate the relationship between perceived news inaccuracy and fakeness among supporters of the extradition bill. Therefore, perceptions of various motives are differently associated with fake news assessments by individuals with disparate stances on the issue.

The indirect effects of the perceived watchdog, mobilization, advocacy, and client service motives were nonsignificant; therefore, only H3a and H3d are partially supported, depending on the stance on the issue. No support was found for H3b, H3c, or H3e.

Discussion

In times of controversy, fake news accusations can be common from supporters of both sides of an issue. To understand the presence of those accusations, this study considers perceived journalistic motives. Similar to how political cynics question the motives of politicians (Agger, Goldstein, & Pearl, 1961), media cynics question the motives of journalists. In general, the findings offer two major contributions. The first is the idea that when news audiences on opposing sides read a news story, they attribute different motives to the journalist responsible for the coverage. The second is that differences in perceptions of journalistic motives formulated to interpret a news story explain why supporters of opposing sides perceive news fakeness to significantly different degrees.

Adopting the five dimensions of role performance proposed by Mellado (2015) to the extradition bill controversy in Hong Kong, individuals with opposing issue stances were found to attribute different motives to the journalist responsible for an identical news post. Extradition bill opponents (who are anti-government) attributed to the journalists responsible the motive of defending the government, while supporters (who are pro-government) attributed the motive of advocating for personal positions on the issue. In the past, studies have found that audiences hold some general expectations about what journalists ought to do, such that Hong Kong adults expected news coverage to be comprehensive, objective, and positive during a national election campaign (Guo, 2000). Nonetheless, this study found that audiences also constantly assess journalistic roles as they read news, particularly thoughts about what the journalists responsible are trying to accomplish with their words. In brief, without being present to witness journalists producing news, audiences generate plausible explanations to interpret a journalist's product.

Further, the motives of defending the authorities and of advocacy lead a story seen as inaccurate to be considered fake news for bill opponents and supporters, respectively. Two conclusions can be drawn from this: (a) extradition bill opponents consider the government-defending motive to do harm against their position, whereas supporters question the journalists' advocacy motive; (b) although perceived inaccuracy was positively associated with perceived news fakeness, the underlying mechanisms between supporters and opponents differ. The relationship was mediated by the perception of the advocacy motive among extradition bill supporters and by the perception of the power defense motive among opponents. This reflects a larger political context, at least in Hong Kong, whereby government supporters are expected to perceive news as fake if they feel advocacy is an underlying motive behind the story; critics of the government are more likely to judge news as fake if they perceive that the underlying motive of the piece is to defend the authorities. Of

the three perspectives on professional journalistic roles (Mellado, 2015), presence of journalistic voice (i.e., the journalist presenting his or her interpretations and opinions) and power relations (i.e., whether the journalist cooperates with those in power) were found to play a role in predicting perceptions of news fakeness, but not audience approach (i.e., journalism encouraging audiences to participate and journalism entertaining audiences). This is not surprising as it has been suggested that market-orientated journalism treating news audiences as consumers is limited when the news is primarily of public interest (Hanitzsch, 2007). Hence, in the case of serious political controversies, what matters is whether audiences view the journalists as taking a more interventionist approach to reporting as well as the distance between the journalists and those in power.

In general, this study demonstrates the impact of news sources on news evaluations. More specifically, news sources had significant main effects on the perceptions of two journalistic motives—mobilization and advocacy—and the anti-government publication *Apple Daily* received higher ratings for both mobilization and advocacy motives than the pro-government publication *Ta Kung Pao*. This is not surprising, because anti-government sources are more likely to support and mobilize engagement with protests against the extradition bill.

More importantly, perceived motives did not exhibit a simple pattern, such that supporters and opponents of the bill did not perceive each motive as significantly different from each other. Only for the *Ta Kung Pao* story did extradition bill opponents rate the news story as more defensive of the government than the supporters did. Therefore, it can be inferred that when people read news from an incongruent source, they are more likely to perceive malicious intent than when reading news from a congruent source. In this sense, the findings are consistent with expectations from hostile media research (Vallone et al., 1985), in which people are substantially more critical of information disagreeing with their personal

beliefs than of information confirming them (e.g., Gunther & Schmitt, 2004). People are therefore prone to perceiving the motives of journalists with whom they agree as credible and fair and to perceive counter-attitudinal sources as hostile and malicious. As such, individuals who experience news as hostile are likely to be critical of the news story and perceive the journalists responsible as possessing malicious motives.

These findings are related to several socially undesirable consequences. First, perceiving some news outlets as producers of fake news may drive individuals to selectively seek likeminded information sources, which may in turn lead to polarization of views (Stroud, 2010). Furthermore, if people always expect the worst from journalists, the low level of trust in and the credibility of media outlets, particularly of outlets supporting views that oppose one's own, may worsen. In fact, Tsfaty and Cohen (2005) have shown that perceiving media content as hostile can not only worsen trust in both media and democracy but also increase individuals' willingness to resist their government with violence. Although not tested in this current research, the protests in the extradition bill movement in Hong Kong did become increasingly violent months after the data collection in June. Since the data were collected after the conflicts with the police at the first two protests, prior to the escalation of tensions between the government and protestors, as well as between the two ideological groups, the findings are expected to be even more prominent as polarization increases.

Overall, the findings support the existing literature on disinformation. While most studies have discussed the definitions of fake news (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Tandoc et al., 2017; Wardle, 2017), however, none of them have applied them practically. This study thus provides empirical data to demonstrate how definitions of fake news function in reality and how the two components of fake news—perceived inaccuracy and perceived motives—explain the variance in perceived news fakeness. In other words, fake news comprises false information and malicious intent (Wardle, 2017), and the deliberate intent to mislead (Allcott

& Gentzkow, 2017) or to cause harm (Ireton & Posetti, 2018) is a core element which should not be ignored in the examination of fake news perceptions. Furthermore, observers with dissimilar stances on an issue might assess motives differently, just as partisans with opposing views often interpret news biases differently (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). Hence, scholars should not expect “perceived motives” to be a one-dimensional concept. Nonetheless, in terms of perceived inaccuracy, differences between extradition bill opponents and supporters were observed only when they were exposed to the news story published by the pro-government source (*Ta Kung Pao*). Thus, the motivated reasoning did not appear in all cases, perhaps due to prior judgments or opinions people hold regarding the sources’ ideologies.

Limitations. Although this study’s findings are informative, its sample was non-representative in terms of age. Data were collected online, and participants in online surveys are younger than those who take part in other types of surveys, meaning the mean age was approximately 23 years. Future research should also investigate patterns of perceptions of journalistic motives and fake news in contexts other than Hong Kong or political incidents. Nonetheless, because the controversy is considered to involve mostly younger adults, the findings are expected generally to reflect the population’s assessment of news reporting of this particular incident.

Conclusion

In summary, audiences consider the authors of material they read and, more importantly, consider the potential underlying motives of those authors. The plausible explanations that audiences use to interpret journalists’ stories have been observed to affect individuals’ assessments of the news, particularly of whether a story is fake news. More notably, observers with different stances on a subject assess motives differently. Reading the same news post, one side perceived journalists as being motivated by a desire to defend the

authorities, whereas the other side perceived them as advocating their own positions and attempting to sway public opinion. This is notable because it suggests that whether the audience accepts ideas expressed in the news depends on whether the journalist reporting them is perceived as having worthy motives. These findings speak in response to the rise of fake news accusations and media cynicism worldwide.

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Table 1. Pairwise Comparisons Between Extradition Bill Supporters and Opponents

		Extradition Bill Supporters		Extradition Bill Opponents		<i>p</i>
		M	SD	M	SD	
Power defenders	Apple Daily	2.14	.95	2.35	.97	
	Ta Kung Pao	3.03	.92	3.67	.82	**
Watchdogs	Apple Daily	3.01	.60	3.34	.83	
	Ta Kung Pao	2.85	.66	2.49	.89	
Mobilizers	Apple Daily	3.39	.73	3.37	.71	
	Ta Kung Pao	2.92	.64	2.59	.74	
Advocates	Apple Daily	3.34	.81	3.16	.81	
	Ta Kung Pao	2.88	.68	2.80	.57	
Client servers	Apple Daily	3.54	.93	3.30	.79	
	Ta Kung Pao	3.18	.93	3.57	.78	
News accuracy	Apple Daily	3.30	1.02	2.93	1.00	
	Ta Kung Pao	2.56	1.06	3.73	.86	***
Fakeness	Apple Daily	2.74	.79	2.14	.90	**
	Ta Kung Pao	1.98	.93	2.86	.92	***

Note. Bonferroni adjusted alpha levels are presented. M = mean; SD = standard deviation. ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 2. ANOVA Results

	Issue stance	Media ideology	Interaction	Adjusted R squared (%)
Power defenders	6.56*	44.45***	1.69**	33.6
Watchdogs	.02	11.50**	5.32*	16.1
Mobilizers	1.65	22.23***	1.42	.20
Advocates	1.04	10.01**	.12	6.4
Client servers	.24	.11	4.45*	1.4
News accuracy	4.84*	.05	19.62***	14.7
Fakeness	.73	.01	20.34***	13.0

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 3. Regression Analysis Summary Predicting News Inaccuracy and News Fakeness

	News inaccuracy		News fakeness	
	Extradition Bill Supporters (n = 40)	Extradition Bill Opponents (n = 127)	Extradition Bill Supporters (n = 40)	Extradition Bill Opponents (n = 127)
Control variables				
Gender	.00	-.04	.06	.14
Age	-.06	-.12	-.08	.04
Education	.09	-.12	.08	-.12
Income	-.01	.08	-.18	.05
R2 change (%)	0.1	6.0	3.9	5.8
News inaccuracy			.37*	.40**
R2 change (%)			48.0	23.5
Perceived Journalistic Motives				
Power defenders	-.24	.49***	.03	.34**
Watchdogs	.02	-.03	.14	.09
Mobilizers	.15	.03	.00	-.10
Advocates	.54*	.03	.70**	.13
Client servers	.16	.22*	-.24	-.29
R2 change (%)	58.5	35.9	18.0	10.5
Total R2 change (%)	46.2	37.4	59.5	34.5

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.