

**Misinformation from Front Groups:
Exposing the Paid Relationship**

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Front groups have become an increasingly prevalent part of political discussion in American society. Defined as “an organization that purports to represent one agenda while in reality it serves some other party or interest whose sponsorship is hidden” (Center for Media and Democracy [CMD], 2013a), front groups exist to influence opinion on almost any issue imaginable. SourceWatch lists almost 200 examples of front groups active on such issues as smoking, abortion, payday loans, teachers unions, and tax reform. Front groups are sometimes referred to as “astroturf groups” because they conduct public relations campaigns that give the impression they represent a large movement of grassroots advocates. In reality, they are supported financially by a few foundations or corporations whose interests they represent but do not disclose. The deceptive use of front groups is specifically called out as a violation of ethics in the Member Code of Ethics for the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA, 2013). In 2005, PRSA issued a professional standards advisory against being paid to promote a particular point of view without disclosing the relationship; another advisory specifically against working for front groups was issued in 2008. Despite these professional guidelines, the number and prevalence of front groups has grown in recent years.

Two examples stand out: Center for Consumer Freedom and Heartland Institute. Center for Consumer Freedom is one of a web of front groups¹ run by Washington, D.C., lobbyist Rick Berman’s PR firm Berman and Co. for the food, alcohol, tobacco, restaurant, and agribusiness industries. It conducts media campaigns to oppose the efforts of scientists, doctors, health advocates, animal advocates, and environmentalists, deriding them as “the Nanny Culture -- the

¹ As of 2011, Rick Berman was found to operate more than 100 front groups, websites, and campaigns under various umbrellas including American Beverage Institute, Center for Consumer Freedom, Center for Economic and Entrepreneurial Literacy, Center for Union Facts, Employee Freedom Action Committee, Employment Policies Institute, First Jobs Institute, and Humane Society for Shelter Pets. Stop HumaneWatch. (2013). Web of Lies: Berman’s Astroturf Empire. Accessed at <http://stophumanewatch.org/blog/web-of-lies>

growing fraternity of food cops, health care enforcers, anti-meat activists, and meddling bureaucrats who ‘know what’s best for you’” (CMD, 2013b). Among CCF’s campaigns is “HumaneWatch,” started in 2010 to undermine the credibility of the Humane Society of the United States which was seeking to pass legislation against extreme confinement of livestock on industrial farms in Ohio and other states. Although Berman’s front groups are set up as nonprofits, meaning they are not legally required to disclose donors, documents leaked by a whistleblower show large payments from agribusiness corporations such as Cargill, Monsanto, Tyson, and Pilgrim’s Pride (CMD, 2013c).

Heartland Institute is a think tank that questions the risks of climate change, hydraulic fracturing, secondhand-smoke, and other issues. An editorial in the journal *Nature* (2011) said Heartland “proclaims a conspicuous confidence in single studies and grand interpretations” and “makes many bold assertions that are often questionable or misleading ... magnifying doubts and treating incomplete explanations as falsehoods rather than signs of progress towards the truth” (pp. 423-424). Science historians Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway (2010) describe Heartland as known “for its persistent questioning of climate science, for its promotion of ‘experts’ who have done little, if any, peer-reviewed climate research, and for its sponsorship of a conference in New York City in 2008 alleging that the scientific community’s work on global warming is fake” (pp. 233-234). Like CCF, Heartland is organized as a nonprofit, meaning it is not required to disclose donors. However, various leaks and investigations have found funding from ExxonMobil (Greenpeace, 2013), the Charles G. Koch Foundation (Littlemore, 2012), and Illinois Coal Association (Mashey, 2012).

Corporations and foundations that fund front groups do so for one reason: They work. Communications theory provides three explanations for the power of front groups. First, dual

processing theories such as the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and heuristic systematic model (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993) propose that people process new information through one of two pathways. Information about issues with which the person is highly involved goes through a central pathway where arguments and evidence are carefully considered and evaluated, while information about issues with which the person is less involved go through a peripheral pathway where it is evaluated by means of heuristic shortcuts. For most people front groups speak to issues of low involvement, and so their origin and arguments are not considered carefully. Second, impression management theory (Goffman, 1959) explains how people and organizations establish and maintain impressions that are congruent with the perceptions they want to convey. Front groups do this by choosing their names carefully and cherry picking the information they communicate to their audience. Third, truth bias (Levine, 2010) predisposes the audience to believe what the front group is saying, regardless of how misleading it may be or whether the group is being paid to make this argument.

Research on misinformation

The question this paper examines is whether exposing the paid relationship of a front group with its corporate funders undermines an audience's belief in its claims. Source credibility theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951) states that an audience evaluates the credibility of a source based on its perceived trustworthiness and expertise. By both these measures, front groups that have been exposed should fail. A front group shown not to have disclosed its financial relationship with corporate donors is not only untrustworthy but also not an impartial expert on the agenda it is paid to promote.

However, research on the transmission of misinformation finds that corrections do not always work and in fact can backfire, making belief in the misinformation even stronger

(Lewandowsky, Ecker, Seifert, Schwarz & Cook, 2012). This backfire effect happens among people who are both highly involved in the issue and highly invested in believing the misinformation. These people are thought to engage in motivated reasoning – they uncritically accept information that fits into their pre-existing paradigm but create counterarguments against information that doesn't (Tabor & Lodge, 2006; Hart & Nisbet, 2012). By rejecting corrections to misinformation through creating counterarguments, these people come to believe the misinformation even more strongly than they did before (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010).

What determines whether people accept or reject corrections to misinformation?

Lewandowsky et al. (2012) posit that personal ideology, or worldview, plays a key role in the persistence of misinformation (p. 118). Opinion poll research supports this proposition. Kull, Ramsay and Lewis (2003) found that Republicans were more likely than Democrats to accept the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, while a CNN poll found Republicans were more likely to accept the claims of “birthers” (Travis, 2010), even after corrective information had been reported on both issues.

Academic research also supports the theory that worldview affects how people process corrections. In one study, Nyhan and Reifler (2010) presented participants with simulated news stories in which politicians made misleading claims that the Bush tax cuts of the early 2000s had increased government revenue or that Saddam Hussein had been harboring weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Half the participants got stories with the misleading claims only, while half got stories that went on to correct the claims with factual information that revenue had actually fallen and WMDs had never been found. Participants were then asked the extent to which they agreed with the misleading claim. Results showed that while the corrections successfully dispelled the misinformation for liberals and moderates, conservatives experienced a backfire

effect in which those who received the correction believe the misinformation even more strongly than those who did not.

In another study, Hart and Nisbet (2012) presented simulated news stories on the potential for climate change to increase the occurrence of West Nile virus among farmers. In one condition the farmers were presented as being in the same state as study participants; in the other, they were presented as being in France; a third control condition received no story. Participants were then asked the extent to which they supported various government actions to mitigate climate change. Results showed that among Democrats, those who read about victims of climate change were more likely to support government mitigation policies than those in the control group. Republicans, however, experienced a backfire effect: Those who read about climate victims were less likely to support mitigation policies – and that lack of support was even more pronounced if the victims of climate change were socially distant.

Why does this backfire, or boomerang, effect occur? Both Nyhan and Reifler (2010) and Hart and Nisbet (2012) point to motivated reasoning, or the “proposition that partisan audiences are motivated to interpret and process information in a biased manner that reinforces the predispositions” (Hart & Nisbet, p. 703). The backfire effect is attributed to a “process by which people implicitly counterargue against any information that challenges their worldview” (Lewandowsky et al, p. 119). Two other studies support the counterargument hypothesis. First, Tabor and Lodge (2006) measured attitudes of participants on two issues – affirmative action and gun control – then presented a series of eight arguments drawn from real interest groups on both pro and con sides of each issue and asked participants to rate the strength of each argument. Although participants were instructed to be evenhanded in their judgments, they rated the arguments they agreed with as significantly stronger, evidence of an a priori effect. However,

they spent significantly more time looking at arguments they disagreed with. To find out why, the researchers conducted a follow-up study in which participants were asked to list their thoughts about two pro arguments and two con arguments. Results showed that participants listed significantly more thoughts against positions they disagreed with than in favor of positions they supported -- and that the more involved they were in the issue, the greater the disparity in the number of counterarguments against incongruent positions over support for congruent ones.

In another study, Prasad et al (2009) examined the false belief that Saddam Hussein was responsible for the terrorist attacks of September 11. Using an innovative technique, the researchers identified 246 people who indicated on surveys that they held this false belief, then conducted “challenge interviews” with 84 who agreed to participate by presenting them with newspaper articles showing the 9/11 Commission had not found evidence linking Saddam to the terrorist attacks, and that President Bush himself had denied any link between Saddam and Al Qaeda. Participants were then asked to justify their beliefs. A few participants denied they held the false belief even though they had filled out the survey to indicate they did, and one participant updated his beliefs by changing his mind to fit the new evidence (researchers termed this “Bayesian updating”). Most, however, used a series of social psychological mechanisms to resist persuasion and maintain their false beliefs in the face of corrective information. These mechanisms included counterarguing, or directly rebutting the correction; attitude bolstering, or bringing information to support the false belief while ignoring the correction; selective exposure, or ignoring the correction without supporting the false belief; disputing rationality, or arguing that opinions do not need to be grounded in facts; and what researchers called “inferred justification,” or retroactively inventing evidence necessary to support the false belief – for example, “We wouldn’t have our troops in Iraq if we didn’t have a good reason” (pp. 150-157).

Front group studies

Studies on correction of misinformation bear directly on an examination of front groups because front groups are paid to promote misleading and often false information about an issue that could hurt its corporate sponsors' profits. For example, Center for Consumer Freedom claims the Humane Society of the United States spends more on pension funds for its executives than it gives to local shelters (HumaneWatch, 2012a), when the HSUS has never been an umbrella organization to fund local humane societies, which have always operated independently (HSUS, 2012). CCF also claims the HSUS has a "vegan agenda" (HumaneWatch, 2012b), when in fact the HSUS has farmer advisory councils in several states and employs a pasture pig farmer as vice president of outreach and engagement (HSUS, 2013). Likewise, the Heartland Institute has held a series of national conferences designed to "call attention to widespread dissent to the asserted 'consensus' on various aspects of climate change and global warming" (Heartland, 2009), when in fact 97 percent of climate scientists agree climate change is happening and humans are responsible (Skeptical Science, 2013). Heartland Institute has also been asked to retract claims that its positions are supported by the Chinese Academy of Sciences (Nuccitelli, 2013) and American Meteorological Society (Halpern, 2013).

Few academic studies have examined whether people believe the false or misleading claims of front groups and how issuing rebuttals or corrections affects these beliefs, and the little research that has been done has come to conflicting conclusions. In one study, Pfau, Haigh, Sims, and Wigley (2007) presented simulated press releases with content pulled from real front-group websites to separate experimental cohorts on three issues: regulation of wetlands development, limits on Medicare prescription drug prices, and mandates to reduce litter. Then simulated news stories were presented to expose each front group as sponsored by a prominent

corporation: National Wetlands Coalition by ExxonMobil, Citizens for Better Medicare by Merck Pharmaceutical, and Keep America Beautiful by Pepsi-Cola. Pfau et al also examined the use of inoculation, or pre-emptive messages warning the receiver of upcoming attempts at persuasion and making them more resistant (McGuire, 1961). For each issue, half the cohort received an inoculation message from a fictitious group called Citizens for Corporate Responsibility at the start of the experiment, while half received a dummy message. The researchers found that while front groups did erode initial attitudes favoring government regulations in each issue area, these effects dissipated when the front groups were exposed as paid by corporate sponsors, and perceptions of both the front group and corporations deteriorated. The study also found that inoculation messages can have a moderate effect in preempting erosion of initial attitudes by the front-group campaign.

By contrast, a study by Cho, Martens, Kim, and Rodriguez (2011) found that disclosing corporate funding for astroturf websites on climate change had no effect on user beliefs. In their experiments, half of the participants were exposed to simulated websites with information from real grassroots activist groups on climate change, and half to simulated websites with information from real astroturf groups. Websites for both the grassroots and astroturf groups had the same name -- Climate Clarity -- and were identical in navigation and structure. However, each set of websites came with one of four conditions for disclosure of funding: no funding information, "Funded with donations by people like you," "Funded by ExxonMobil," and "Funded by grants from the Conservation Heritage Fund." Results showed that users of the astroturf websites had more uncertainty about the causes of climate change and less belief that humans were responsible than users of the grassroots websites. However, contrary to expectations, users of the websites in which corporate funding was disclosed were just as likely

to believe the information as users of the websites in which it was not disclosed. In other words, disclosing the corporate sponsor of the astroturf websites did nothing to mitigate the uncertainty about climate change that these sites engendered.

The current study follows up on previous research by examining the relationship between front-group campaigns and involvement with two current salient issues: climate change, which is expected to have higher involvement and more polarized opinions, and farm animal protection, which is expected to have lower involvement and less polarized opinions. One reason the two previous studies may have come to conflicting conclusions is they presented the corrective information in different ways: Cho et al simply exposed the front group with a sentence noting the corporate sponsor of the simulated website, while Pfau presented a substantive correction to the misinformation in the form of simulated news stories about 450 words long. To test for this variation, this study will include a control group that receives only information from the front group, as well as two experimental groups: one that receives information about the front group's corporate sponsors, and one that receives both information about the front group's corporate sponsors as well as substantive corrections to its false and misleading claims.

Involvement of participants in each issue and their support for or opposition to government regulations to address climate change and farm animal protection will also be assessed.

Participants are expected to fall into one of three categories:

- High involvement and support for regulations to address climate change and farm animal protection.
- Low involvement and no strong opinion about regulations to address climate change and farm animal protection.
- High involvement and opposition to regulations to address climate change and farm animal protection.

The hypotheses are as follows:

H1. Misinformation from front groups will erode support of regulations to address climate change and farm animal protection except among those with high involvement in the issue who strongly supported such regulations in the first place.

H2. Exposing the misinformation as coming from a front group will mitigate the eroding effect among people with low involvement in the issue because they will no longer see the front group as a credible source.

H3. Exposing the misinformation as coming from a front group will have a backfire effect among those with high involvement who oppose regulations to address climate change and farm animal protection.

Next, a follow-up experiment will focus on participants for whom there is a backfire effect to find out what cognitive processes are occurring that result in an even stronger belief in the misinformation. These participants will be presented with both the misleading and false claims of front groups and substantive corrections to those claims in the form of news stories, then asked to write out their responses to both. Responses will be coded to determine the number of times participants cite reasons to support the front-group claims vs. reasons to oppose the correction, as well as strategies they invoke to maintain their beliefs, such as counterarguments, attitude bolstering, selective exposure, disputing rationality, or inferred justification.

In this part of the study, the source of the correction will also be manipulated to see whether it affects belief in misinformation. A large body of research shows that partisans and ideologues tend to view identical content as biased against them, and perceptions of a liberal media bias are widespread among conservatives (Nyhan & Reifler, p. 315). To examine this question, this study will present the correction of the front group misinformation as coming from one of three sources: *The New York Times*, often perceived as supporting government regulation to address climate change and farm animal protection; Fox News, often perceived as opposing government regulation on climate change and farm animal protection; and the Associated Press,

often perceived as neutral about government regulation on climate change and farm animal protection. Because the participants in the second study will be chosen based on their strong involvement with and opposition to regulations on climate change and farm animal protection, it is expected they will employ even more social psychological mechanisms to resist the corrective information if they think it is coming from *The New York Times* than Fox News.

Two clarifications may be necessary here. Although this study focuses on motivated reasoning by people who oppose government regulations to address climate change and animal protection, that does not mean such opposition is always based on misleading or false information. It is possible such partisans will produce facts and evidence completely separate from front-group claims to support their positions, and if so, that will be assessed in the second part of the study. Second, the choice to focus on motivated reasoning by people who oppose regulation on climate change and animal protection also doesn't mean that motivated reasoning occurs only in this group. One could easily study motivated reasoning among highly committed members of environmental organizations such as Greenpeace or the Sierra Club, or of animal welfare organizations such as the Humane Society or PETA. However, at this time in American society, those organizations are not creating front groups to disseminate false and misleading information. If they are disseminating false or misleading information, it is under their own names and being debated as such in the court of public opinion. One important part of this study is to test whether belief in false and misleading information declines if it is found to be coming from a front group. The expectation is such beliefs will decline except among partisans with strong involvement in the issue and commitment to believing the misinformation. If these expectations hold true, then the results will have lessons for communicators of these issues who may wish to frame their messages differently depending on the audience.

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