Red Herrings: A Model of Attention-Hijacking by Politicians

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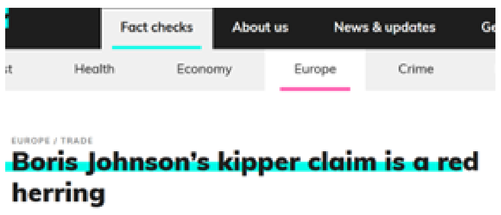
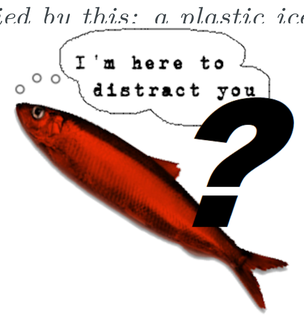
Motivation



"I want you to consider this kipper [...] Brussels bureaucrats who have insisted that each kipper must be accompanied by this: a plastic ice pillow [which he brandishes, audience laughs]."

— **Boris Johnson, during the Conservative party leadership campaign in 2019**



→ Politicians are often accused of sending "red herrings"

- Literally: Strongly-smelling fish...
- Figuratively: Information **disclosed to distract from other information**

→ How do red herrings **affect political outcomes**? How does their use **change with the media landscape**?

The Model

Incumbent i:

- Type *(private information)*:
  1. *Quality:* **Bad** with $Pr = \pi$
  2. *Preference for tale-telling:* "**Newsmaker**" with $Pr = \mu$
- Action: Send **tale** or not ($T_i \in \{0, 1\}$)

$$U_i = \begin{cases} V + BT_i & if \quad i = newsmaker \\ V - \epsilon T_i & otherwise \end{cases}$$

Media:

- If $i = bad$, detects a scandal
- If $T_i = 1$, detects the tale with $Pr = q$ (the **"media attention to tales"**)
- Covers stories $\mathcal{S}_m$; covers all scandals and tales it detects

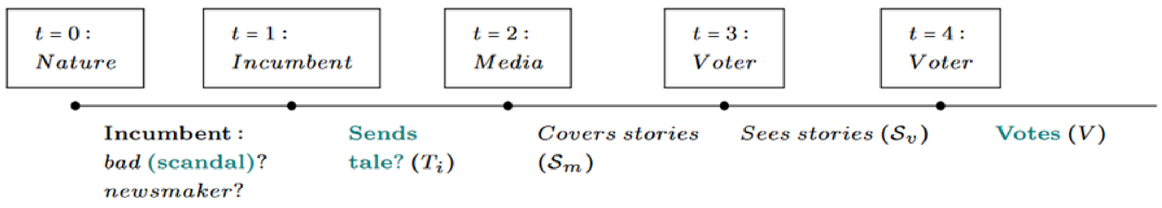
Voter v:

- **Bayesian**
- **Inattentive:** When $\mathcal{S}_m = \{S, T\}$, **sees only the tale** with $Pr = H$
  (= scandal crowded-out!)
- Action: Re-elect the incumbent or not ($V \in \{0, 1\}$)

$$U_v = V1\{i = good\} - (1 - V)1\{o = good\}$$

where o = opponent

Figure 1: Timing of the game



→ *Mechanism:* If **bad** incumbents AND **good newsmakers** BOTH **send tales**...
⇒ the voter may **fail to recognize red herrings**

Main Results

Figure 2: Successful Red Herring Response to the Media Attention to Tales

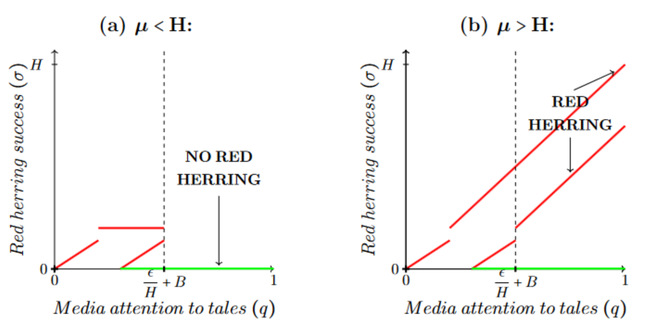
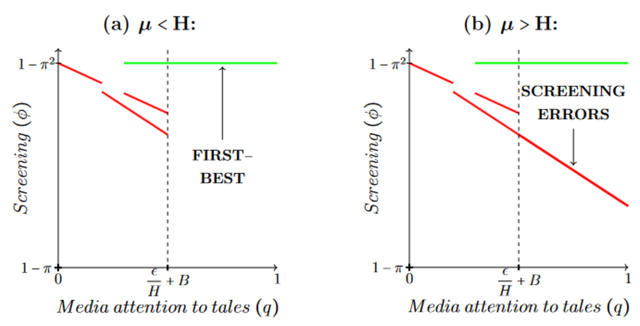


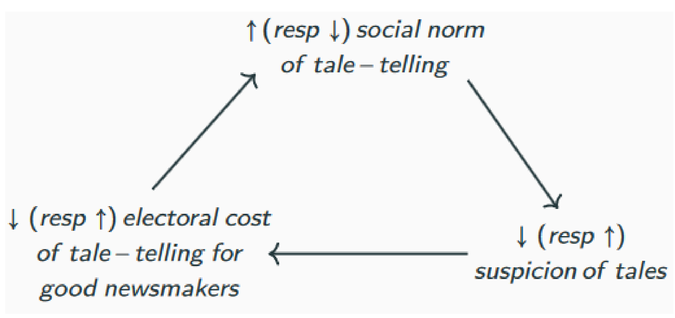
Figure 3: Screening Response to the Media Attention to Tales



1) Multiple Equilibria:

- For intermediate media attention to tales (q), **good and bad PBEs co-exist**

→ Mechanism: Self-fulfilling "**social norm of tale-telling**" *(= share of good politicians who engage in tale-telling)*



2) Media Attention to Tales (q) has a Non-Monotonous Welfare Effect:

1. **Initially, q worsens screening:** Red herrings are more likely to crowd-out scandals
2. **Yet, high q may guarantee first-best screening!**

→ Mechanism: **Good newsmakers are disciplined** and refrain from tale-telling → possible to tell good and bad politicians apart

- Tale-telling = electorally costly for good newsmakers if the voter is **suspicious of tales**
- This **cost increases in** q... while bad incumbents' return to tale-telling increases in q
- When $\mu < H$, *(i.e. few newsmakers / high inattention)*:
  - The voter is suspicious of tales... unless good newsmakers engage in tale-telling more frequently than bad non-newsmakers...
  - ...Impossible for q high!

Extension: Partisan Voters

Assumptions: Electorate divided between:

- α "**non-partisans**" with utility: $V_v 1\{i = good\} + (1 - V_v)1\{o = good\}$
- $\gamma - \frac{\alpha}{2}$ "**supporters**" with utility: $V_v[1\{i = good\} + \beta_s] + (1 - V_v)1\{o = good\}$
- $1 - \gamma - \frac{\alpha}{2}$ "**opponents**" with utility: $V_v[1\{i = good\} - \beta_o] + (1 - V_v)1\{o = good\}$

Results:

1. If electorate = sufficiently pro-incumbent ($\gamma > \frac{1}{2}$ and $\beta_s > 1 - \pi$)
   → Shrinking non-partisanship ($\downarrow \alpha$) makes it easier for red herring senders to be re-elected; Otherwise, it makes it harder.
2. Paradoxically, **making life harder for red herring senders may worsen screening**!

→ Mechanism: Wedge between good newsmakers and red herring senders

- While the latter may need opponent votes to be re-elected, the former do not
- Good newsmakers not disciplined → impossible to perfectly tell good and bad politicians apart

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