

In the Eye of the Beholder:

How Information Shortcuts Shape Individual Perceptions of Bias in the Media

Research has shown that human beings are biased information processors. This study investigates an important potential example of biased information processing: when ex ante assessments of a media outlet's ideological orientation "cause" individuals to perceive bias. We conduct an experiment in which subjects evaluated the content of a news report about the 2004 presidential election identified as originating from CNN, FOX or a fictional TV station. Our results suggest that in an increasingly fragmented media marketplace, individuals not only distinguish between media outlets but, more importantly, outlet "brand names," and the reputations they carry, function as heuristics, heavily influencing perceptions of bias in content. individuals sometimes "create" bias, even where none exists. This suggests that assessments of media content operate on a more nuanced level than has been captured in previous research.

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Are the news media biased? If so, does this imbalance tilt leftward or rightward? The debate on this topic and its implications has raged for decades without resolution. On one end of the spectrum, conservatives, like FOX News anchor John Gibson, claim "The mainstream media, typified by the Big Three newscasts, [is] rooting for the Dems to win and slant coverage to make it happen." (*The Big Story with John Gibson*, 11/1/06). Liberals, like *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman, counter "One of the great jokes of American politics is the insistence by conservatives that the media have a liberal bias" (*New York Times* 11/1/00).

These discrepancies beg the question of whether or not "bias" is an objective characteristic of media content that social scientists can measure with some degree of precision. Certainly, many have tried. Self-described media watchdog groups such as the Media Research Center (MRC), the Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA), and Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR) claim to objectively analyze media content. Yet they routinely disagree on the incidence, severity, and direction of bias in the media. Scholarly attempts to assess media bias are similarly inconclusive (e.g., Efron 1971; Patterson 1993; Sutter 2001, Alterman 2003, Groseclose and Milyo 2005).

An alternative possibility is that "bias" is, at least in significant measure, a matter of perception; a consumer's assessment based more on her own prior beliefs than the actual content of information presented by the media. The most well known manifestation of this alternative -- termed the "hostile media phenomenon" ("HMP") -- holds that, all else equal, ideologues (that is, liberals or conservatives) tend to view the media as biased against their own views (Vallone et al. 1985). While substantial research (e.g., Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken 1994; Gunther and Schmitt 2004; Morehouse Mendez 2004; Peffley, et al. 2001) supports the HMP, we believe further elaboration is necessary to adequately account for, and determine the political implications of, individual perceptions of bias in the contemporary media environment.

For instance, most research on the HMP conceptualizes the "news media" as an undifferentiated mass of information sources that individuals can (and do) reasonably characterize as having a uniform political orientation (Eveland and Shah 2003; Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken 1994; Peffley, et al. 2001). Yet the past two decades have seen a dramatic increase in the number and

variety of news sources. One consequence is that Democrats and Republicans are increasingly likely to differ systematically in their assessments of specific media outlets.

From a strictly economic standpoint, the availability of more news choices is a positive development. After all, individuals are, to a greater extent than in prior decades, able to consume news products suited to their specific tastes. Liberals can consume “liberal” news while conservatives can consume “conservative” news, thereby presumably making everyone “happier.” From the standpoint of democratic theory, however, this trend may have unfortunate consequences. Most notably, if individuals attend to news sources that present only one side of a story, their willingness to fashion compromises may diminish.

For much of the past century, the mass media, especially television, have served as an important common civic space, providing citizens with a shared understanding of their culture, as well as of the major issues and events of the day. If, as recent research (Taber and Lodge 2006) suggests, citizens function as “motivated skeptics” -- seeking out *consonant* information, while attempting to avoid *dissonance* -- then so long as bias is an “objective” characteristic of news content, journalists should be able to offset this propensity, at least to some extent, by offering balanced coverage; that is, by including “both sides” of a story in the same location. However, if perceptions of media bias exist primarily, or even significantly, in the minds of consumers, this represents a particularly consequential case of biased information processing (e.g., Lord, et al. 1979; Redlawsk 2002; Zaller 1992). It raises the possibility that exposure to “balanced” news coverage may actually polarize citizens, which, in turn, may render effective democratic governance more difficult. It also calls into question of whether or how journalists could mitigate public perceptions of bias in the media, especially if, as our research suggests, individuals *create* much of the consonance and dissonance they perceive.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. We begin by developing our theoretical argument, from which we derive a series of hypotheses, which we test via a survey experiment, employing a nationally representative population sample, provided by Knowledge Networks.¹ Our subjects evaluated the content of a single news transcript, variously attributed to FOX News

(henceforth “FOX”), CNN, or a fictional local TV news station. This allows us to investigate the influence of ex ante beliefs concerning the political orientations of specific media outlets on peoples’ perceptions of bias. We conclude by considering the implications of our findings.

THEORY

As many have noted (Hamilton 2003, Baum and Kernell 1999, Webster, et al. 2005), the media environment has changed dramatically over the past two decades. In today’s fragmented media marketplace, news consumers have a myriad of news outlets from which to choose. These outlets differ in many ways, such as their relative focus on local vs. national news, or proportions of hard vs. soft news themes (Baum 2003). Most important for our purposes, contemporary news outlets also vary in providing information that appeals to consumers with different partisan affiliations (Democrats vs. Republicans) and ideological orientations (liberals vs. conservatives).

For instance, according to a 2006 Harris Poll, CNN attracts far more Democrats (42%) than Republicans (19%), while far more Republicans (63%) than Democrats (12%) watch FOX News. In the same survey, 61% of self-described FOX viewers identified themselves as conservative compared to 35% describing themselves as moderate and only 4% as liberal. In stark contrast, CNN’s self-reported audience was 61% moderate, 27% liberal and only 12% conservative.² Self-described conservatives are thus 49 percentage points more likely to watch FOX than CNN, while liberals are 23 percentage points more likely to watch CNN.

Substantial evidence also indicates that -- either through first hand experience or in response to elite cues (Domke et al. 2000; Watts et al. 1999) -- individuals differ systematically in their assessments of the reliability of specific media outlets. In another recent survey (Pew Center 2004a), 45% of Democratic respondents said they believed “all or most” news on CNN, compared to only 25% of Republicans. Across seventeen broadcast, cable, and print outlets addressed in the survey, FOX News Channel was the sole outlet for which Republicans expressed greater confidence (29%) than Democrats (24%).³

Notwithstanding the significant changes in the media environment, citizens presumably process information similarly as in the past, with liberals and conservatives *still* tending to view

new information not explicitly supportive of their political perspective as hostile. Moreover, since they tend to view their position as superior (Vallone et al. 1985), they *should* be as likely as ever to view balanced coverage as inappropriate at best and unconscionably biased at worst.

In its original formulation (Vallone et al. 1985), the HMP holds that ideologues tend to perceive “the media” as hostile to their own perspective. Yet, given the diversity of the current media environment, and the extent to which individuals (rightly or wrongly) perceive some outlets as reflecting perspectives across the full range of the ideological spectrum, we suspect the utility of conceptualizing “the media” as an undifferentiated whole with a uniform political orientation has diminished.

So, while ideologues may have a tendency to view news coverage with suspicion, there is no reason to believe that, given repeated exposure to a media outlet – again, either through first hand experience or indirectly, via cues from trusted elites (Lupia and McCubbins 1998, Popkin 1994, Domke et al. 2000; Watts et al. 1999) – ideologues are incapable of updating that assessment (Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken 1994; Morehouse Mendez 2004). If so, it follows that in the contemporary media environment ideologues will make such determinations primarily on an individual, per-media-outlet basis.

As Vallone et al. (1985) suggest, ideologues are unlikely to be agnostic in their evaluation of media outlets and the content they provide. From their perspective, outlets that are not friendly are, by definition, hostile. Given the diversity of the media environment, it is also possible that ideologues will conclude that an outlet is *not* hostile if they perceive its content as tending to cohere with their own ideological orientation.

In other words, we argue that ideologues are not limited to perceiving only hostility. Rather, by employing a modified “either you’re for me or against me” heuristic, they are likely to divide the world into two relatively clearly demarcated camps: those that are hostile to their ideological perspective and those that are not. This raises the possibility that an individual’s ex ante assessment of the ideological orientation of a specific media outlet will condition subsequent responses to the information it provides.

Additional research (e.g. Druckman 2001a, 2001b; Lupia and McCubbins 1998, Gunther and Schmidt 2004) has shown that individual responses to new information frequently hinge on evaluations of its source. For instance, individuals are less susceptible to persuasion or framing effects when they believe the information source lacks credibility (Lupia and McCubbins 1998, Druckman 2001b). One implication is that if an individual believes, *ex ante*, that a media outlet is hostile (friendly), she is more (less) likely to perceive information from that outlet as biased in favor of the opposing ideological perspective.⁴

This, of course, begs the question of *how* individuals evaluate the credibility of media messages. In general, we suspect ideologues base such assessments on the extent to which an outlet provides information perceived as confirming or challenging their pre-existing beliefs (Popkin 1994, Zaller 2002, Lupia and McCubbins 1998). In short, ideologues will tend to view a source as credible when they perceive it as typically providing confirmatory information and non-credible when it does not. More importantly, once they make this determination, the media outlet label functions as a heuristic, affecting how they perceive subsequent information from that outlet.

Research in social cognition theory, in turn, suggests that people use heuristic cues, or cognitive shortcuts, in order to manage the flood of information that washes over them daily (Fiske and Taylor 1984; Hastie 1986). Indeed, Popkin (1994) argues that typical individuals can use heuristics in order to make reasoned political judgments without a great deal of information. A prior belief that a given media outlet is, or is not, hostile can act as an important judgmental heuristic (Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken 1994; Kahneman, et al. 1982).

If, as we contend, ideologues distinguish between differing media outlets, this raises the possibility that they may assess the content of those outlets in part through reliance on a relatively simple heuristic: the outlet label. Hence, if a conservative ideologue believes that, say, CNN has a liberal bias, this will facilitate the discounting of information from CNN. This also increases the likelihood of perceiving balanced coverage on CNN as having a liberal slant. Alternatively, if the same conservative believes FOX has a conservative bias, this will facilitate greater acceptance of information from FOX. It will also reduce the likelihood that she will

perceive balanced coverage as hostile. Either way, the “FOX” and “CNN” brand names function as an information shortcut, allowing her to *assume* that the news presented by this outlet is either hostile or sympathetic to her ideological orientation.

Hence, a media outlet’s brand name may serve as a powerful information shortcut. By “assuming” that information from a given outlet is “probably dissonant” or “probably consonant” through reference to a single, easy-to-use information shortcut, an individual can save substantial time and cognitive energy. A hypothesis follows.

H1: Heuristic Hypothesis. Exposure to a media outlet “brand name” will affect individuals’ perceptions regarding the ideological content of news presented by that outlet in a manner consistent with their prior beliefs concerning the outlet’s political orientation.

It also follows from this argument that the stronger an individual’s perception regarding an *outlet’s* ideological hostility, or non-hostility, the greater the extent to which the label will mediate that individual’s perceptions of bias in news *content*. For instance, if a liberal believes that a specific outlet has, say, a *moderately* conservative ideological orientation, she is likely to view information from that outlet with less suspicion than information from an outlet she believes is *extremely* conservative. A second hypothesis follows:

H2: Heuristic Intensity Hypothesis: The relationship predicted in H1 will strengthen as the heuristic value of an outlet label strengthens.

Because, in turn, political sophisticates are more likely to *perceive* ideological valence in information (Zaller 1992), they are presumably also more likely to *ascribe* ideological valence to media outlets. Hence, the outlet labels are likely to hold greater heuristic value for these individuals. An additional hypothesis follows.

H3: Political Awareness Heuristic Hypothesis: The relationship predicted in H1 will strengthen as political awareness increases.

This argument does not imply that individuals no longer develop assessments of the ideological orientation of the mass media as a whole. Clearly, they do. Moreover, global

assessments of “the media” should affect how individuals interpret information from a specific outlet. However, if an individual has ascribed an ideological orientation to a given outlet, the heuristic value of the outlet label should have a greater effect on her evaluation of content from that outlet than her global assessment of the media. A final hypothesis follows.

H4: Familiarity Hypothesis: The heuristic value of a *familiar* media outlet label will mediate an individual’s perceptions of media content *more* than a global assessment of the media as a whole.

DATA AND METHODS

Design. We investigate whether varying the information that identifies specific media outlets influences consumers’ perceptions of literally *identical* substantive news content. We implemented this experiment with a national population sample of 1014 individuals who participated in a series of Web TV-based surveys conducted by Knowledge Networks.⁵

[Table 1 here]

After completing a pre-experiment survey, all subjects read an identical news transcript reporting on the 2004 presidential election (see Appendix) that varied only in its presumed source. We randomly assigned subjects to a version of the transcript designed to appear as having originated on either CNN, FOX, or a fictional TV news station (KNWZ), with all identifying information, including reporter names and the outlet logo, altered to insure consistency with the outlet identification (including fictional reporter names for the unfamiliar station).⁶ We divided the transcript into eight segments, including one quote from each major party candidate, as well as six comments that were, to the greatest extent possible, “balanced” (in terms of positive, negative, and neutral references to the candidates).⁷ Subjects read each comment and evaluated whether and to what extent it was favorable to or critical of Senator Kerry and President Bush.⁸

Dependent Variable. After reading each transcript segment, subjects read the following prompt: “The coverage of JOHN KERRY (GEORGE BUSH) in the above section was:...” We then presented six response options for each candidate: (1) “Very favorable”, (2) “Somewhat favorable”,

(3) “Balanced/Even handed”, (4) “Somewhat unfavorable,” (5) “Very unfavorable” to Kerry (Bush), and “No coverage of Kerry (Bush).”⁹ Our dependent variable is the sum of all eight Bush evaluations (each varying from 1 to 5), minus the sum of all eight Kerry evaluations (each also ranging from 1 to 5). The resulting scale runs from -32 to +32 with -32, representing maximum relative favorability toward Kerry, 0 representing neutrality or balance, and +32 representing maximum relative favorability toward Bush ($\mu = 1.37$ and $\sigma = 6.4$).¹⁰

Independent Variables. Our key causal variables are based on the distance between respondents’ self-assessed ideological orientations and their ratings (on identical 7-point scales) of the ideological orientations of CNN and FOX, as well as, for the unfamiliar outlet, the distance between themselves and their global assessments of the ideological orientation of “the mass media.”¹¹ We interact each resulting “ideological distance” variable with the treatment conditions, as well as with political knowledge (based on the number of correct responses to five factual knowledge questions, normalized to a 0-1 interval, where $\mu = .49$ and $\sigma = .28$). We also include controls for subjects’ demographic characteristics.

STATISTICAL RESULTS

The Heuristic Hypothesis (H1) and its corollaries predict that, upon exposure to a media outlet’s “brand name,” individuals will tend to perceive the content from that outlet as consistent with their prior beliefs concerning the outlet’s ideological orientation (H1), that the stronger the heuristic value of an outlet label, the greater the extent to which the label will mediate perceptions of bias (H2, the Heuristic Intensity Hypothesis) -- a tendency that will become stronger as political awareness increases (H3, the Political Awareness Heuristic Hypotheses) -- and that the heuristic value of a familiar outlet label will mediate an individual’s perceptions of media content more than global assessments of the media (H4, the Familiarity Hypothesis).

Table 2 presents three OLS models testing these hypotheses. In Model 1, which tests H1 and H2, we employ, as our key causal variables, the aforementioned ideological distance indicators. In order to determine the effects of ex ante assessments of the ideological orientation

of individual outlets relative to respondents' self-reported ideologies, we interact our ideological distance indicators with the treatment to which a given respondent was exposed.

[Table 2 here]

In Table 3, in turn, we employ a statistical simulation procedure (King et al. 2000) to transform the coefficients from Table 2 into expected values of the dependent variable, at different levels of the key causal variables, as well as to estimate the statistical significance of the differences in the dependent variable – net perceived favorability of coverage for Bush, relative to Kerry – as the causal variables vary.

[Table 3 here]

In order to test the Heuristic Hypothesis (H1), it is necessary to determine the effects of differing assumptions concerning media outlet ideological leanings. Section A of Table 3 presents 12 scenarios concerning subjects' assumptions regarding FOX and CNN, depending on whether the subject identifies herself as a liberal, moderate, or conservative, and whether she rates FOX and CNN as liberal or conservative.¹²

Before interpreting the results, it is important to note that not all of the scenarios are similarly common. While a substantial number of subjects considered FOX significantly more conservative than CNN, few held the opposing position, and *none* rated FOX as extremely liberal while rating CNN as extremely conservative. Overall, only 6.6% (N=17) of liberals (including "leaners") rated FOX as liberal or extremely liberal. This compares to 44% (N=114) of liberals who rated FOX as conservative or extremely conservative. Nearly precise inverse percentages obtain for conservatives, with 7.1% (N=24) rating CNN as conservative or extremely conservative, compared to 43% (N=146) rating it as liberal or extremely liberal. The implication is that the expected values for the less common scenarios derive from a quite small number of cases. Consequently, even though the scenario in which respondents believe, *ex ante*, that FOX is liberal and CNN is conservative is associated with a large value on the ideological distance scale, the results based on this scenario should be interpreted with caution, as they are less reliable than those based on the other scenarios.

Conversely, we anticipate the strongest and most reliable results for the opposing scenario – in which subjects perceive FOX as conservative and CNN as liberal – as this scenario is much more common and also entails substantial ideological distance between the outlets.¹³ The other two scenarios – in which subjects perceive the outlets as either similarly liberal or conservative – should fall in between. While the ideological distance between the outlets is, by definition, small, a fair number of subjects fall into these categories. Hence, we anticipate relatively weak, but reasonably reliable, results for these two cases.

With these assumptions in mind, we turn to the results in Table 3 (Section A). Beginning with the 12 instances where subjects rate the two outlets as having distinct ideological orientations (shown in the top half of the table), we see that in *every* case (liberals, moderates, and conservatives), subjects' evaluations are consistent with their prior assumptions concerning the outlets' ideological orientations. In other words, in *each* case where subjects rate CNN as more liberal than FOX, *ex ante*, they subsequently perceived the CNN version of the transcript as *more* favorable to Kerry, relative to Bush, than the FOX version. Conversely, in *every* case where subjects rated FOX as more liberal than CNN, *ex ante*, they subsequently rated the FOX version of the transcript as more favorable to Kerry than the CNN version. Moreover, as expected, the magnitude and significance of the differences are larger for the relatively common cases in which subjects considered FOX more conservative than CNN, compared to the far less common cases where they considered CNN more conservative than FOX.

For instance, among liberals who considered FOX extremely conservative and CNN extremely liberal, those exposed to the FOX treatment rated the transcript as nearly a full standard deviation more favorable to Bush, relative to Kerry, than their counterparts who saw the CNN treatment (3.453 vs. -2.567, for a difference of 6.02). The corresponding difference among self-described conservatives was slightly more than two-thirds of a standard deviation (-3.173 for FOX vs. -7.458 for CNN, for a difference of 4.285). These results represent strong support for H1.

To test the Heuristic Intensity Hypothesis (H2), we contrast the magnitude of the effects of varying outlet labels for subjects who see no ideological difference between the outlets with the effects for subjects who *do* perceive the outlets as ideologically distinct. In the relatively common case where subjects perceive CNN as more liberal than FOX, for *each* of the six possible comparisons the effects of varying outlet labels are larger among subjects who perceive a clear ideological distinction between FOX and CNN, relative to those who consider both outlets ideologically indistinguishable. Among liberals who perceive FOX as more conservative than CNN, moving from a FOX to a CNN label is associated with a .94 standard deviation increase in perceived favorability toward Kerry (-6.021, $p < .01$). The corresponding effects among liberals who perceive both outlets as equally conservative or liberal are .54 (-3.445, $p < .05$) and .27 (-1.710, $p < .01$) standard deviation increases in perceived favorability toward Kerry, respectively. Among conservatives, the respective differences are .67 standard deviations for the corresponding ideologically distinct case (-4.285, $p < .01$), compared to .27 (-1.710, $p < .01$) and .005 (.029, *insig.*) standard deviations for the ideologically equivalent cases, respectively. Finally, among moderates, the corresponding differences are .81 standard deviations (-5.153, $p < .01$), compared to .40 (-2.577, $p < .01$) and .13 (-.842, *insig.*) standard deviations, respectively.

In the less common scenario, where subjects perceive CNN as far more conservative than FOX, a similar pattern arises in only three out of six scenarios. Yet, as noted, these results are based on a far smaller sample and so must be considered less reliable, and hence a less valid test of the hypothesis. Nonetheless, even given this limitation, our results support H2 in 9 out of 12 (or 75%) possible scenarios where subjects perceive an ideological gap between FOX and CNN.

Turning to the Political Awareness Heuristic Hypothesis (H3), which predicts that outlet labels are likely to hold greater heuristic value for political sophisticates, we turn to a second investigation – shown in Model 2 of Table 2 -- in which we interact our political awareness indicator with the several treatment conditions and ideological distance measures. This allows us to compare the magnitude of the gap in perceptions of identical media content between politically sophisticated liberals and conservatives, on the one hand, and their less-sophisticated

counterparts, on the other. Sections B and C in Table 3 summarize the substantive results from this analysis for subjects one standard deviation below and above the mean level of political knowledge, respectively. The results strongly support H3. In both the CNN and FOX versions, the gap between liberals and conservatives is larger among high-knowledge subjects (Section C) than among their low-knowledge counterparts (Section B) in 10 out of 12 cases, and considerably so in most instances. None of the differences among low-knowledge subjects are statistically significant, while 9 out of 12 differences among high-knowledge subjects are significant. Moreover, in the latter case, all three insignificant relationships arise for comparisons where, on the surface, meaningful differences seem least appropriate or reliable: the rare case where conservative subjects rate FOX as extremely liberal and CNN as extremely conservative, as well as among liberals and moderates who rate both CNN and FOX as similarly conservative.

As one would expect, in turn, the largest effects for all three groups of subjects emerge in the most common scenario overall: among those who rate FOX as conservative and CNN as liberal. The differences in this case between low- and high-awareness subjects varies from .71 standard deviations on the favorability scale (with CNN rated as 4.53 points more favorable to Kerry) among liberals, to 1.32 and 1.76 standard deviations among moderates (+8.82 points) and conservatives (+11.27 points), respectively. Taken together, these results strongly support H3.

Finally, Model 3 of Table 2 tests the Familiarity Hypothesis (H4), which predicts that the heuristic value of a *familiar* outlet label will mediate an individual's perceptions of media content *more* than a global assessment of the media. For this test, we interact the treatment conditions with the difference between subjects' self-ideological ratings and their global assessments of the media's ideological orientation. We then compare the effects of variations in such assessments with those from the prior model, where we employed subjects' ratings of the specific outlets' ideological orientations.

At Table 4, we once again transform the coefficients into expected values. The results again strongly support our hypothesis. Comparing the "difference" column in the top and bottom sections of the table, we see that for both the FOX and CNN treatments, and among liberals and

conservatives, variations in assessments of the specific outlets' ideological orientations affect perceptions of identical media content substantially more, both in magnitude and statistical significance, than variations in global assessments of the media's ideological orientation. Among liberals and conservatives, varying perceptions of FOX from extremely conservative to extremely liberal yields a .60 standard deviation increase in perceived favorability toward Kerry (from 3.289 to -.525 and from -.525 to -4.340 for liberal and conservative subjects, respectively, $p < .01$). The corresponding effect of varying a subject's global media assessment is a statistically insignificant .34 standard deviation increase in favorability toward Kerry for both liberals and conservatives and an also insignificant .31 standard deviation increase for KNWZ-labeled transcripts.

[Table 4 here]

For CNN, again among both liberals and conservatives, varying perceptions of the network from extremely conservative to extremely liberal is associated with a .87 standard deviation increase in favorability toward Kerry (from 3.531 to -2.029 and from -2.029 to -7.590 for liberal and conservative subjects, respectively, $p < .01$). As before, the corresponding effect of varying a subject's global media assessment is smaller: an insignificant .36 standard deviation increase in favorability toward Kerry for both liberals and conservatives.¹⁴

Table 5 summarizes our findings, as well as identifying the tables where we have presented the results for each hypothesis. The last column indicates that the proportion of tests supporting our hypotheses ranges from a low of 75% (for H2), to a high of 100% (for H1 and H4). Overall, we find support for our theory in an impressive 88% of all hypothesis tests (35 out of 40 total possible comparisons). Moreover, this summary is based on an extremely conservative criterion. *Every* instance of an unsupportive result emerges for either the *least* common scenario (where FOX is perceived as extremely liberal and CNN as extremely conservative) or for instances and among subjects where we arguably *should* have found insignificant results. Consequently, our results *could* reasonably be interpreted as perfectly supporting our predictions.

[Table 5 here]

CONCLUSION

The question of whether or not the media are ideologically biased remains controversial. While this study will certainly not resolve this debate, it has clarified the conditions under which typical individuals are likely to perceive “the media” -- or, more precisely, individual media outlets -- as ideologically hostile.

Our results are broadly consistent with Vallone et al’s (1985) finding of a hostile media phenomenon, along with those of subsequent studies concerning the importance of ideology and political sophistication. We extended this argument by applying the implications of recent research on information processing -- including the roles of source credibility and heuristic cues - - to the questions of whether and when individuals will perceive balanced news as hostile. We found that ex ante assessments concerning the ideological slant of a media outlet matter a great deal. Merely by varying the identifying information in a news report from that of an outlet perceived as liberal (conservative) to one perceived as conservative (liberal), we induced subjects to evaluate the report’s content as significantly more conservative (liberal). The implication is that the heuristic effect of outlet labels extends beyond conditioning whether or not an individual is prone to accept or reject a given message -- the emphasis of most prior research on biased information processing (e.g., Zaller 1992, Taber and Lodge 2006) -- to influencing how individuals perceive the actual *content* of information. In other words, not only do citizens disproportionately counter-argue dissonant information while accepting consonant information, but they sometimes also “create” consonance and dissonance even where none actually exists. This suggests that the effects of outlet labels on perceptions of bias, and any consequent effects on political attitudes, emerge through an interaction between heuristics and biased information processing.

The implications of this tendency may be profound. As noted at the outset of this study, an increasingly ideologically fragmented media may be gradually eroding the common space, and with it the shared cultural understanding, that the mass media once provided. If news consumers “tune out” outlets deemed hostile in favor of those they consider friendly, the result

may be a less tolerant (Mutz 2002) and more politically polarized (Huckfeldt, et al. 2004; Sunstein, 2001) society. Our findings also raise a potentially more troubling possibility, that, depending on the prior beliefs of individual consumers, even exposure to relatively “balanced” coverage may have a similar polarizing effect.

Our experimental design does not allow us to assess whether or not the media are, in fact, ideologically biased. However, our results do strongly suggest that perceptions of bias are not a *purely* objective response to media content. Rather, our findings lend strong support to the notion that, to a significant extent, like perceptions of information in general, perceived bias in the mass media is indeed in the eye of the beholder.

Several recent studies (Groseclose and Milyo 2005, Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006) have devised sophisticated indices aimed at accurately gauging the true ideological slant of media outlets and, by implication, the gap between the *actual* coverage the media provide and the *ideal* of balanced coverage. Their results indicate that mainstream (TV and print) media news outlets are at most *modestly* slanted in one or the other direction. For example, Groseclose and Milyo find that *CBS Evening News* is about as left-of-center as Sen. Joseph Lieberman (D-Ct), who, in 2006, was forced to run for re-election as an Independent after losing a Democratic primary to a more left-leaning opponent. They also find that FOX’s “Special Report” is about as right-of-center as Sen. Susan Collins (R-Me), an avowed centrist.

Our research helps account for why substantial portions of the American public perceive this apparent relatively small “objective” gap as a vast chasm. More importantly, it suggests that the significance of media bias for American politics stems less from the objective “truth” of its presence, absence, or magnitude, than from consumers’ *prior beliefs*. After all, as we have shown, consumers will tend to “find” bias when they look for it, *whether it exists or not*.

APPENDIX: TRANSCRIPT FOR EXPERIMENT

Below is the text of the “CNN” treatment. (The “FOX” and “KNWZ” treatments are identical, except for the identification of the program, including the logo, and the reporters.) The logos associated with the three treatments were as follows:



[Section 1] WOLF BLITZER: Good evening. We start tonight with the presidential candidates on the attack. Today with just 13 days left in the campaign, John Kerry was explaining why he believes the president does not understand the problems of ordinary people while, for President Bush, the message was mostly about why Senator Kerry's plans will leave Americans worse off

[Section 2] BLITZER: From now on, this race is going to be fought in ten battleground states, four of them are in the Midwest and today the candidates were following each other's footsteps in Wisconsin. We begin with CNN's Jonathan King, traveling with the Bush campaign in Milwaukee. Carl.

[Section 3] JONATHAN KING REPORTING: In traditionally Democratic Wisconsin, where over 40,000 jobs have been lost since President Bush took office, the President refocused the debate on what polls demonstrate is his strongest appeal: voters believe that he will wage a more effective war on terror than his Democratic rival.

[Section 4] PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH: In this time of choosing, I want all Americans to know you can count on me to fight our enemies and defend our freedom.

[Section 5] KING: Although the president has led the race in almost every statewide poll taken since the Republican convention, the Kerry campaign is quick to point out that the Senator has closed the gap to just a few percentage points in the last few days. Jonathan King, CNN, Milwaukee. Wolf.

[Section 6] BLITZER: Thank you, Jonathan. CNN's Candy Crowley is traveling with the Kerry campaign. Candy. What's the latest?

CANDY CROWLEY REPORTING: Wolf. The Kerry campaign spent the day desperately trying to keep the spotlight on domestic issues, repeatedly citing unconfirmed reports in the St. Louis Dispatch that President Bush is privately telling supporters that, if reelected, he plans to privatize Social Security.

[Section 7] SENATOR JOHN KERRY: My fellow Americans, on November 2, Social Security is on the ballot and it's a choice between one candidate who will save Social Security and another who will undermine it.

[Section 8] CROWLEY: While Kerry's new focus on domestic issues appears to have reversed his slide among women voters and he now leads President Bush by as much as a 10 points, the Kerry campaign did express concern about recent polls that indicate that President Bush has gained ground among blacks, with 18 percent of black adults saying they would like to see Mr. Bush win in November.

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TABLE 1. Summary of Subjects Characteristics

Total Number of Subjects	1014 ^a
% Liberal	.14 / .25 ^b
% Conservative	.21 / .33 ^b
% Male	.50
% African American	.10
% White	.73
% Hispanic	.10
Mean Age	46
Mean Education Level	“some” college
Mean Annual Family Income	\$35-\$40,000
Mean % Correct of Five Factual Political Knowledge Questions	.49

^aDue to missing data the total N in our statistical analysis varies from 928 to 938.

^bFirst percentage *excludes* liberal and conservatives or Democratic and Republican leaners; second percentage *includes* leaners.

TABLE 2. OLS Analyses of Correlates of Individual Perceptions of Media Bias

<i>Independent Variables^a</i>	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
FOX Identification	.641 (.542)	-.344 (1.010)	1.053 (.506)*
CNN Identification	-1.070 (.502)*	-.774 (1.079)	-.957 (.495)*
FOX Ideology Distance	-.088 (.189)	-.065 (.195)	.380 (.183)*
CNN Ideology Distance	.478 (.244)*	.528 (.241)*	.846 (.245)***
Media Ideology Distance	-.181 (.261)	-.157 (.266)	-----
FOX ID x Fox Ideology Distance	.731 (.285)**	.052 (.418)	-----
CNN ID x CNN Ideology Distance	.439 (.263)^	-1.209 (.555)*	-----
KNWZ ID x Media Ideology Distance	.569 (.263)*	-1.065 (.526)*	.503 (.284)^
FOX ID x Media Ideology Distance	-----	-----	.369 (.289)
CNN ID x Media Ideology Distance	-----	-----	.380 (.304)
FOX ID x Political Knowledge	-----	3.095 (1.172)**	-----
CNN ID x Political Knowledge	-----	.482 (1.466)	-----
KNWZ ID x Political Knowledge	-----	.919 (1.465)	-----
CNN x Ideology Distance x Knowledge	-----	2.534 (.857)**	-----
KNWZ x Ideology Distance x Knowledge	-----	2.453 (.687)***	-----
FOX x Ideology Distance x Knowledge	-----	.897 (.497)^	-----
Ideology	-----	-----	-1.366 (.463)**
Black	-.239 (1.215)	-.268 (1.207)	-.054 (1.207)
White	-.147 (.912)	-.198 (.912)	-.091 (.904)
Hispanic	.377 (1.128)	.415 (1.128)	.397 (1.138)
Political Knowledge	1.145 (.843)	-----	1.090 (.846)
Family Income	.032 (.055)	.033 (.054)	.038 (.056)
Age	.015 (.014)	.015 (.014)	.014 (.014)
Male	-.160 (.408)	.007 (.406)	-.162 (.404)
Southern Resident	.063 (.432)	.144 (.426)	.022 (.430)
Internet Access	-.818 (.424)*	-.831 (.424)*	-.757 (.421)^
Education	.161 (.135)	.143 (.134)	.161 (.132)
Constant	-2.680 (1.377)*	-2.632 (1.534)^	2.591 (2.314)
R ²	.10	.13	.10
	N=928	N=928	N=928

^a $p \leq .10$, * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$

TABLE 3. Net perceived pro-Bush Content in News Transcript, as outlet label and perception of outlet ideological distance changes (D.V.= Bush average minus Kerry average)

Subject Ideology	A. Overall			B. Low Political Awareness			C. High Political Awareness		
	Treatment (Outlet Ideology)		Diff.	Treatment (Outlet Ideology)		Diff.	Treatment (Outlet Ideology)		Diff.
	<u>FOX</u> <u>Con[†]</u>	<u>CNN</u> <u>Lib[†]</u>		<u>FOX</u> <u>Con[†]</u>	<u>CNN</u> <u>Lib[†]</u>		<u>FOX</u> <u>Con[†]</u>	<u>CNN</u> <u>Lib[†]</u>	
Liberal	3.453	-2.567	-6.021**	-0.175	-2.162	-1.987	4.659	-1.858	-6.517**
Moderate	0.140	-5.013	-5.153**	-1.732	-1.644	+0.088	2.618	-5.713	-8.331**
Conservative	-3.173	-7.458	-4.285**	-2.25	-1.127	+1.123	0.578	-9.567	-10.145**
	<u>Lib[†]</u>	<u>Con[†]</u>		<u>Lib[†]</u>	<u>Con[†]</u>		<u>Lib[†]</u>	<u>Con[†]</u>	
Liberal	2.551	3.417	+0.866	-1.213	-3.198	-1.985	0.578	5.851	+5.273*
Moderate	-.762	.972	+1.736	-1.732	-2.68	-0.948	-1.463	1.996	+3.459^
Conservative	-4.075	-1.474	+2.601	-2.25	-2.162	+0.088	-3.503	-1.858	+1.645
	<u>Con[†]</u>	<u>Con[†]</u>		<u>Con[†]</u>	<u>Con[†]</u>		<u>Con[†]</u>	<u>Con[†]</u>	
Liberal	6.315	2.870	-3.445*	-0.175	-3.198	-3.023	4.659	5.851	+1.192
Moderate	3.002	-.425	-2.577**	-0.694	-2.68	-1.986	2.618	1.996	-0.622
Conservative	-0.311	-2.020	-1.710**	-1.213	-1.127	+0.086	0.578	-1.858	-2.436**
	<u>Lib[†]</u>	<u>Lib[†]</u>		<u>Lib[†]</u>	<u>Lib[†]</u>		<u>Lib[†]</u>	<u>Lib[†]</u>	
Liberal	-0.311	-2.020	-1.710**	-1.213	-2.162	-0.949	0.578	-1.858	-2.436**
Moderate	-3.624	-4.466	-0.842	-1.732	-1.644	+0.088	-1.463	-5.713	-4.250**
Conservative	-6.937	-6.911	+0.029	-2.25	-1.127	+1.123	-3.503	-9.567	-6.064**

**p<.01, *p<.05, ^p<.10

† Note: "Con" denotes outlet perceived as "extremely conservative" and "Lib" denotes outlet perceived as "extremely liberal".

TABLE 4. Difference in Perceived Favorability, as Subject Ideology and Global Media Assessment or Individual Outlet Assessments Vary (National Population Sample)

<u>Treatment</u>	<u>Subject Ideology</u>	<u>Media/Outlet Conservative</u>	<u>Media/Outlet Liberal</u>	<u>Difference</u>
Individual Outlet Assessments				
FOX	Liberal	3.289	-0.525	-3.814**
FOX	Conservative	-0.525	-4.340	-3.814**
CNN	Liberal	3.531	-2.029	-5.561**
CNN	Conservative	-2.029	-7.590	-5.561**
Global Media Assessment				
FOX	Liberal	7.371	5.195	-2.176
FOX	Conservative	5.195	3.019	-2.176
CNN	Liberal	5.497	3.177	-2.320
CNN	Conservative	3.177	0.857	-2.320
KNWZ	Liberal	6.661	4.648	-2.013
KNWZ	Conservative	3.641	1.628	-2.013

**p<.01, *p<.05, ^p<.10

TABLE 5. Summary of Hypotheses, Test Results, and Locations

<u>Hypothesis</u>	<u>Where Tested?</u>	<i>Proportion (%) of Tests Supporting Hypothesis</i>
H1(Heuristic Hypothesis)	Table 3	12/12 (100%)
H2 (Heuristic Intensity Hypothesis)	Table 3	9/12 (75%)*
H3 (Political Awareness Heuristic Hypothesis)	Table 3	10/12 (83%)**
H4 (Familiarity Hypothesis)	Table 5	4/4 (100%)
OVERALL TOTALS		35/40 (88%)*

*The three tests not supporting hypothesis derive from relatively uncommon scenario (where subjects perceive FOX as liberal and CNN as conservative), resulting in an extremely small number of observations.

** The two tests not supporting hypothesis derive from the scenario (where subjects perceive both FOX and CNN as conservative), for which the smaller coefficients for political sophisticates are arguably consistent with our theory.

NOTES

¹ This experiment was funded by TESS (Time-Sharing Experiments for Social Sciences) and conducted by Knowledge Networks (www.knowledgenetworks.com).

² This survey is available at: http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll/index.asp?PID=679

³ Individuals also differ systematically in their assessments of the ideological orientation of the mass media as a whole. For example, in a 1998 Gallup Poll, Republicans were 34 percentage points more likely than Democrats to perceive a liberal bias (52 vs. 18%), while Democrats were 12 percentage points more likely to perceive a conservative bias (25 vs. 13%).

⁴ We do not, in this study, investigate the effects of variations in assessments of ideological bias in media outlets on individual *attitudes*. However, if one accepts the fairly modest assumption that assessments of bias are significantly related to credibility assessments, then it follows fairly clearly from prior research on the importance of source credibility for persuasion that assessments of bias ought to affect the extent to which media content influences attitudes. While we did not ask subjects to rate the “credibility” of specific media outlets, and therefore cannot directly test that assumption, the survey data presented at the outset of this paper clearly suggests such a relationship.

⁵ We replicated the study with a second subject pool consisting of 932 college students, including UCLA undergraduates and students from Los Angeles area community colleges. The results closely mirror those from the national sample. Hence, we report only the latter results herein. The student replication results are available upon request.

⁶ To ensure consistency across treatment conditions, we created a logo for the unfamiliar outlet.

⁷ Out-of-sample pre-testing indicates that ideological moderates perceive the “valence” of the fictionally labeled transcript as statistically indistinguishable from perfect ideologically balance.

⁸ The candidate quotes are actual quotes from President Bush (*ABC World News Tonight*, 10/18/04) and John Kerry (*Anderson Cooper 360 Degrees*, 10/20/04).

⁹ “No coverage” responses were set to the mean.

¹⁰ For example, if a subject rated all eight segments as “Very unfavorable” to Bush ($1 \times 8=8$) and “Very favorable” to Kerry ($5 \times 8=40$), the formula returns a value of -32 .

¹¹ The global media assessment item is based on a 5-point scale.

¹² Because OLS is a linear estimator, the predicted effects if subjects perceive one or both outlets as moderate necessarily fall in between those where both outlets are perceived as opposing in ideology. Hence, we omit these results, which are conceptually less interesting.

¹³ This scenario also routinely emerges in public opinion surveys (e.g., Pew Center 2004b).

¹⁴ To address potential concerns regarding external validity in our study, we constructed a second experiment, where we recruited 110 undergraduates to code nearly 400 randomly selected and unedited news reports from the fall 2000 presidential campaign, from ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN, FOX, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*. The results, reported elsewhere (Baum and Gussin 2004) offer further support for our key hypotheses.