

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

**A Self-Categorization Explanation
for the Hostile Media Effect**

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The hostile media effect is a phenomenon in which partisans on both sides of an issue perceive neutral media reports to be biased against their side. Three experiments were performed to test a self-categorization explanation. In Experiment 1, the effect was amplified when partisan identity was salient and attenuated when a shared identity was salient. In Experiment 2, the effect manifested when the media source was an outgroup, but not an ingroup. In Experiment 3, an attack on Democrats was perceived as less biased when attributed to a Democrat than when attributed to a Republican. The effects in Experiments 2 and 3 were amplified by partisanship. The findings are consistent with self-categorization theory and difficult to reconcile with other explanations.

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Balanced media content is often perceived as biased. A particularly striking example is found in the hostile media effect (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985), a phenomenon in which partisans on *both* sides of an issue perceive the same content as biased against their side. In the first empirical demonstration, Vallone et al. (1985) presented partisans with TV news coverage of the 1982 massacres of Muslim refugees by Christian militias in Lebanon. Both pro-Israeli and pro-Arab partisans perceived the reports as biased, perceived more unfavorable than favorable references to their side, and believed that upon viewing the content, neutral observers would become sympathetic to the opposition.

There is much evidence for the hostile media effect. Vallone et al.'s (1985) study has been replicated (e.g., Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994), and further evidence found for perceptions of newspaper editorials, TV coverage of intergroup relations, and election campaigns (e.g., Arpan & Raney, 2003; Duck, Terry, & Hogg, 1998; Gunther, Miller, & Liebhart, 2009; Matheson & Dursun, 2001). The hostile media effect generalizes across issues, media, and populations.

However, several questions remain. There is little work on causal mechanisms, and what exists has mostly employed correlational methods. Furthermore, most

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explanations adhere to a (largely) 1980s metatheory which assumes that partisans, but not nonpartisans, are captive to biased social cognitions. Indeed, since Vallone et al. (1985), most researchers have assumed that partisans charge bias because of faulty information processing—evaluative, categorization, and memory biases have all been proposed as explanatory mechanisms. If it could be shown that there are circumstances under which partisans *do not* charge bias when their group is attacked, this would challenge the assumption that the effect is rooted in automatic, faulty information processing. Moreover, the mechanisms that have been proposed are mostly short-range theories that apply only to the hostile media effect. A more general explanation would be valuable.

This article develops and tests a self-categorization explanation (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). The core idea is that social reality is defined through agreement with people subjectively defined as ingroup members. Groups enable us to extract meaning from—and thus to act upon—patterns of social agreement and disagreement. As such, the self-categorization explanation places the root cause of the hostile media effect in cognition that is designed to make sense of group memberships. In fact, there is evidence for a closely related idea. Several studies find that hostile media perceptions are greater among people who are more strongly committed to their ingroup (Ariyanto, Hornsey, & Gallois, 2007; Duck et al., 1998; Matheson & Dursun, 2001). The self-categorization account complements this work and generates novel, and untested predictions. In what follows, current explanations for the hostile media effect are identified and critically evaluated, and the self-categorization explanation is elaborated and tested in three experiments.

Current explanations for the hostile media effect

The different standards explanation

Vallone et al. (1985) proposed that partisans bring to the media a polarized world view that is created, over time, by biased assimilation. Biased assimilation is a phenomenon in which people uncritically accept information that confirms their views, but ignore or discount contrary information (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979). When partisans compare their polarized worldview with balanced media reports, the contra-information is perceived as highly discrepant from their position, and the reports are thus perceived as biased. This suggests that the more extreme one's attitude, the more extreme one's judgment of media bias, as is the case (Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994; Schmitt, Gunther, & Liebhart, 2004; Vallone et al., 1985). However, the different standards explanation is, at best, a partial explanation. A mechanism is needed to explain when and why partisans switch between hostile media perceptions and biased assimilation. Furthermore, the different standards approach explains the hostile media effect by appealing to yet another bias, biased assimilation. We should just as well ask what causes biased assimilation.

Selective recall and selective categorization

Vallone et al. (1985) themselves argued that the different standards explanation is incomplete because partisans do not simply evaluate the media differently, they seem to perceive it differently. Indeed, partisans in their study perceived that the majority of TV coverage favored the opposing side. Vallone et al. proposed that this could be attributed to either selective recall, a process in which opposing arguments are more salient and thus memorable than confirming arguments, or to selective categorization, a process in which partisans categorize both opposing and neutral content as hostile to their position.

Two studies contradict the selective recall explanation. Giner-Sorola and Chaiken (1994), and Schmitt et al. (2004) both found that partisans recalled more information that *supported* their position than opposed. Further, Arpan and Raney (2003) found no associations between partisanship and memory. Partisans may selectively recall few opposing arguments, but weight them more heavily than sympathetic arguments. This hypothesis is yet to be tested, however.

There is mixed evidence for selective categorization. Schmitt et al. (2004) presented partisans with statements, and asked them to define them as supporting, opposing, or neutral to their position. One group of partisans categorized the majority of arguments as opposed to their position, but the other engaged in biased assimilation. Further, Gunther and Liebhart (2006) used the same measure, and found that it partially mediated an experimental induction (see the reach hypothesis below) that affected the magnitude of hostile media perceptions.

Although there appears to be evidence for selective categorization, it should be noted that the measures taken as evidence of the effect (i.e., percentages of opposing and favorable information in news reports, and the categorization of excerpts) are the same items used to measure the hostile media perception. Arguably, these researchers have mistaken measures of the hostile media perception for a mediating variable. Further still, the selective categorization explanation is vulnerable to the very same problems as the different standards explanation.

The reach hypothesis

Gunther and Schmitt (2004) observed that hostile media perceptions are found in mass media contexts where many people are potentially influenced, and that biased assimilation is found in private contexts where only oneself is potentially influenced. Gunther and Schmitt thus argue that the hostile media effect will manifest when media reach is high, and biased assimilation when media reach is low. In a first test, proponents and opponents of genetically modified foods read an article that was attributed to a student essay or a newspaper editorial (thus confounding reach with the source of the article). Nonetheless, hostile media perceptions were evident in the news article condition, and biased assimilation in the student essay condition.

To address the confound, Gunther and Liebhart (2006) manipulated source (student vs. journalist) and reach (a seminar essay vs. *USA Today*), and found that the article was perceived as biased when attributed to *USA Today*, but not to a student

essay. However, the source and reach manipulations interacted on manipulation checks, suggesting the presence of confound. Reach and source effects may be operating independently, but it is not clear if reach, source, or some other factor is also operative. To further disentangle effects, Gunther et al. (2009) manipulated reach at three levels; however, the hostile media effect was not in evidence. Instead, evaluations of the article ranged from neutral in the high-reach condition to favorable in the student essay condition. More problematically still, Detenber, Chew, Quek, Tan, and Tay (2008) found hostile media perceptions for a low- but not high-reach message that was directed at an outgroup audience. Finally, no novel mediating psychological mechanisms have been identified to account for reach effects (i.e., Gunther & Liebhart, 2006, found that selective categorization partially mediated the reach effect). There is modest evidence for the reach effect, but research is needed to disentangle confounding variables, and to identify novel mediating processes.

Social judgment theory

Using social judgment theory (Sherif, Sherif, & Nebergall, 1965), Choi, Yang, and Chan (2009) argued that the hostile media perception is driven by ego-involvement. According to social judgment theory, the greater the distance between one's attitude position and that found in communications, the greater the likelihood that the communications will be contrasted from one's position (Hovland, Harvey, & Sherif, 1957). Further, the more ego involved in the person, the wider the latitude of rejection, and the greater the likelihood of contrast. Consistent with this, Choi et al. found that the perceived effect of media on values, but not self-interest, is associated with hostile media perceptions.

Social judgment theory provides a persuasive explanation for the hostile media effect. However, very little research has tested the theory, and none has tested distinctive predictions (Choi et al.'s 2009 findings are also consistent with the different standards explanation). More importantly, self-categorization theory generates predictions that social judgment theory cannot.

The self-categorization explanation

Self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987) is a social cognitive account of the processes that govern the functioning of the self-concept, and it does so by extending social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). For example, self-categorization theory has provided explanations for group polarization, stereotyping, social influence, group cohesion, leadership endorsement, the third-person perception, the operation of group norms, and gender-language links (for overviews see Hogg & Reid, 2006; Reid, Giles, & Harwood, 2005).

The starting assumption is that the self-concept is made up of semi-independent self-images, and that an important component of the self-concept is social identity. We perceive ourselves and others in terms of social identities, such as gender, age, political party, and so on. According to self-categorization theory, social identities

are cognitively represented as clusters of traits that best define the ingroup relative to particular outgroups—groups are cognitively represented as prototypes. When an ingroup prototype is activated, it is internalized and it becomes a basis for social perception and judgment. In other words, people self-stereotype.

Identities vary in the extent to which they are relevant to self-definition, and thus social judgment—they vary in salience. Social identities that fit, and thus make sense of social comparisons are those that become salient. For example, Democrats and Republicans would represent themselves by their political group identities during a policy debate or election cycle. However, when war with a foreign nation is imminent, shared identification as Americans is likely, and political differences will move into the background. At the same time, people internalize and conform to prototypical ingroup traits. Indeed there is much evidence that social identity salience is associated with increases in the persuasiveness of ingroup defining attitudes, ingroup favoritism, and self-stereotyping (for an overview see Hornsey, 2008).

However, the extent to which any given individual perceives an identity as salient depends on their position relative to others. A debate among Democrats and Republicans is unlikely to have any effect on the judgments of people who are unaligned with either group. However, the more extreme the position of individuals within the Democrat and Republican parties, the more likely that they will react to debate as members of their respective groups. Like the different standards explanation, and social judgment theory, the more partisan the observer, the greater the hostile media perception. Unlike these explanations, however, this should only occur when partisan identity is psychologically salient. Formally, under Hypothesis 1: If self-categorization theory is correct, the hostile media perception will increase as a function of partisanship when partisans' identities are salient, but not when an alternative identity is salient. This prediction is tested in Experiment 1.

But why are partisans' judgments of media reports more extreme than those of nonpartisans? According to the different standards explanation, partisans acquire a polarized world view from years of biased assimilation. However, if self-categorization theory is correct, the operative mechanism is not biased assimilation, but metacontrast. According to the metacontrast principle (Campbell, 1958; see also Haslam & Turner, 1995), identities become salient as a function of the extent to which they make sense of patterns of relevant stimuli, such as distributions of attitudes. Formally, metacontrast is cognitive mechanism that places stimuli into categories, and does so by maximizing the ratio of intracategory similarities to inter-category differences among stimuli. Thus, metacontrast magnifies similarities among attitudes that are close to one's own, while simultaneously magnifying differences between one's own attitudes and those that are distant.

Unlike biased assimilation and social judgment theory, the metacontrast process is not driven purely by the distribution of information relative to personal attitudes. Rather, people can also use group membership as a cue to the veracity of information. People expect to agree with and trust ingroup members, but not outgroup members.

For partisans, this means that a content-neutral news report will be more likely to be perceived as containing ingroup favoring information when the source is an ingroup member (i.e., the likelihood of assimilation increases), but more likely to contain outgroup favoring information when the source is an outgroup member (i.e., the likelihood of contrast increases). In other words, hostile media perceptions will occur when media sources are outgroup members, but biased assimilation will occur when media sources are ingroup members. Further, unlike other work which shows source effects (e.g., Arpan & Raney, 2003; Gunther & Liebhart, 2006), the degree to which people rely on ingroup information and discount outgroup source information will be amplified by partisanship. Formally, under Hypothesis 2: The more partisan the social perceiver, the more assimilation of ingroup sourced information (i.e., biased assimilation), and the more contrast from outgroup sourced information (i.e., hostile media perceptions). This prediction is tested in Experiment 2.

This logic can be pushed further. Ingroup sourced reports should be perceived as less biased than outgroup sourced reports, as previously found (e.g., Arpan & Raney, 2003). However, self-categorization theory generates a rather more provocative hypothesis. There is evidence that source information can combine to override content (e.g., Cohen, 2003), and there is evidence that people have less sensitive reactions to criticisms that come from ingroup than outgroup members (e.g., Hornsey & Imani, 2004). If self-categorization theory is correct, people will use ingroup source information as a critical cue as to whether information is trustworthy or not. Even if the information is an attack, self-categorization theory predicts that it will be perceived as more biased if attributed to an outgroup than ingroup source. Further still, the more partisan the social perceiver, the greater the reliance on ingroup versus outgroup sourced information, thus amplifying the source effect. Formally, under Hypothesis 3: Ingroup sourced attacks will be perceived as less biased than outgroup sourced attacks, and the extent of this effect will increase with partisanship. This prediction is tested in Experiment 3.

Experiment 1

Self-categorization theory predicts that people's judgments of media bias will reflect their position in the political spectrum, and the extent to which partisan identity is salient. We can expect that partisan identity is chronically salient, and not easily manipulated experimentally. However, like Duck et al. (1998), one way to catch a glimmer of this process may be to ask people to provide their reflections on the media without providing a stimulus. Merely asking political questions should render political identity somewhat salient, and so the hostile media effect should manifest. However, if we first draw people's attention to political party differences (without stating what they are), this should heighten the salience of political identity, and thus increase the size of the hostile media effect. On the other hand, if we first draw people's attention to a shared American identity, this should render political differences less salient, and the hostile media effect should be diminished. Given that this study was

conducted in 2004 at a high point of political divisiveness between Democrats and Republicans, any accentuation or reduction of the hostile media effect would be a good evidence for the self-categorization explanation.

Method

Participants and design

One hundred thirty four American undergraduates ($n = 34$ male, $n = 99$ female, $n = 1$ gender undisclosed) participated in exchange for course credit ($M_{\text{age}} = 20.17$ years). The study was administered as a pencil and paper questionnaire. Participants' political position was measured (as a continuous variable on a 7-point scale), and they were randomly assigned to one condition of a between-subjects salience induction (control, political position salient, American identity salient). Participants then estimated media bias.

Materials and procedure

The survey, described as a "news media pilot questionnaire," was accompanied with the experimental manipulation. In the control condition, the opening of the questionnaire stated that "The purpose of this questionnaire is to get your views of the news media in general." There were no further instructions.

In the political salience condition, the opening of the questionnaire read:

In recent times the differences between Republicans and Democrats have become highly polarized. Many of the issues discussed in the media are seen very differently by Republicans and Democrats. In this context, it is important to gauge people's views of the media.

In the American identity salience (i.e., low political identity salience) condition, the opening read:

With increasing globalization, it has become apparent that the media differs across countries and cultures. Al Jazira has become the voice for much of the Arab world, both within the United States, and in the Middle-East. Given these changes, it is important to gauge people's views of the news media in the United States.

Participants stated their political position on a single item: "How would you describe your political position?" (1 = *strongly in favor of Republicans* to 7 = *strongly in favor of Democrats*). This scale was reflected so that Democrats are on the left and Republicans on the right.

Several questions measured the hostile media effect (cf. Vallone et al., 1985). Participants were first asked: "How would you describe the mainstream media?" (1 = *biased against Republicans* to 7 = *biased in favor of Republicans*).

Next, participants were asked “In the media, what percentage of remarks would you say are in favor of:” with blank spaces for estimates for Republicans and Democrats. The percentage of remarks said to favor of Democrats was reverse scored.

Finally participants were asked “How do you see the personal views of news coverage editors?” (1 = *anti-Republican* to 7 = *pro-Republican*).

These items were z -transformed, and the mean taken as a measure of hostile media perceptions ($\alpha = .79$). Larger numbers equal more hostile media perceptions against Democrats.

Manipulation checks were not included as they may undermine the salience induction.

Results and discussion

The General Linear Model (GLM) tested H1 (political position was a continuous moderator, and experimental condition a between-subjects variable). This analysis showed a large effect of political position on hostile media perceptions ($F(1, 128) = 40.93, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .24$), but this was moderated by political position ($F = 3.28, p = .041, \eta_p^2 = .05$; see Figure 1). Regression was used to test the simple slopes of political position on hostile media perceptions within each condition (unstandardized coefficients are reported throughout). As predicted, there was a significant hostile media perception in the control condition ($b = -0.18, t = 3.36, p = .001$), a sharpened slope in the political comparison condition ($b = -0.35, t = 4.81, p < .001$), and an attenuated slope in the international comparison condition ($b = -0.13, t = 2.61, p = .01$).

Without viewing stimuli, participants’ judgments of media bias against their political ingroup increased with political extremity. Consistent with self-categorization theory, however, the extent of the perceived bias varied as a function of identity salience and partisanship. Partisans perceived more media bias directed at their

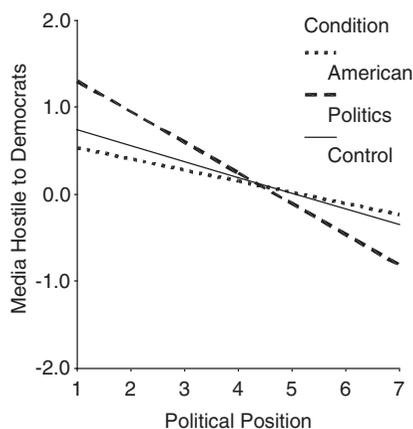


Figure 1 Experiment 1, political position by identity salience interaction on (z -transformed) perceptions of hostile comments in the media directed at Democrats.

ingroup when reference was first made to political differences, less when no political references were made, and least when participants first judged differences between American and foreign media.

It is possible that participants' attention was directed at different media across conditions. In the American identity condition, the manipulation referred to Al Jazira. However, if participant's thoughts were affected by beliefs about this source, then a strong hostile media effect should have manifested, but it did not.

Experiment 2

A core prediction of self-categorization theory is that people are influenced by ingroup- but not outgroup-defining information (Turner et al., 1987). When it comes to relatively diffuse and arbitrary information like attitudes, a strong cue to information credibility is the group membership of a source. People assimilate information when attributed to an ingroup. When the same information is attributed to an outgroup, however, it will be contrasted from one's position, and hostile media perceptions will result (cf. Arpan & Raney, 2003). Self-categorization theory predicts further that partisans will be particularly ready to search for and construct distance between ingroup and outgroup. The more partisan the social perceiver, the more that these biases (assimilation of information from an ingroup source, hostile media perception of an outgroup source) will be in evidence. In this experiment undergraduate students evaluated horse-race poll reporting in the lead up to the 2008 U.S. federal election.

Method

Participants and design

Two hundred thirteen ($n = 32$ females, $n = 80$ males, and $n = 1$ gender undisclosed) American undergraduates completed a pencil and paper questionnaire in exchange for course credit ($M_{\text{age}} = 19.39$). The first independent variable was the single-item measure of political position, and the second was a manipulation of the source of a polling report which reported on the progress of Hilary Clinton and Rudy Giuliani in the presidential primaries. Order of poll reporting for Clinton and Giuliani was counterbalanced. Hostile media measures followed.

Materials and procedure

The article was described as an opinion piece by a fictitious author (Roger Martin) and was attributed to either the "Economic policy institute, a Democrat think tank and polling agency," or to the "American enterprise institute, a Republican think tank and polling agency."

Before reading the article, participants reported demographic information, and indicated their political position: "How would you describe your political position?" (1 = *strongly in favor of Democrats* to 7 = *strongly in favor of Republicans*).

The article (from CNN), "Clinton vs. Giuliani on drive to 2008," began on the second page, and was headed with photographs of Giuliani and Clinton. The article

that followed reported on the races between Clinton and Obama on the Democrat side, and Giuliani and McCain on the Republican side. The polling information was chosen because it offered equal status information on the two candidates, and offered a nonconfrontational and balanced report. For Clinton, polling showed that she “has rebounded to a 15 percentage-point lead over Illinois Sen. Barack Obama for the Democratic presidential nomination,” whereas for Giuliani it was stated that “Among Republicans, former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani maintained a 14-point lead over Arizona Sen. John McCain for the Republican presidential nomination.”

After the polling report, information on voter perceptions was offered. Both descriptions were close to the same length and contained equal numbers of positive and negative statements. For example, for Clinton (a polling report was included for Giuliani, and counterbalanced):

Potential Democratic primary voters see Sen. Hillary Clinton as a more experienced leader than her major rivals for the 2008 Democratic nomination, according to a poll released Monday. They also see her as having the most clearly articulated policy agenda. However, Clinton did not score as high when registered Democrats were asked which of the candidates is the most likable and the most honest. And a quarter of those polled don't think she can beat the Republican standard-bearer in the general election if she gets her party's nod.

Dependent measures

Dependent measures followed on a third page. The instructions asked participants to provide their impressions without referring back to the article. A check on the source manipulation asked participants to identify the political views of the author.

The valence of the article was measured for both candidates: “How positive was the article about [Hillary Clinton/Rudy Giuliani]?” (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very*).

Estimates of the percentage of positive information was then asked for both the candidates: “Of the information about [Hillary Clinton/Rudy Giuliani], what percentage would you say was positive”? An 11-point scale from 0 to 100 in increments of 10% followed.

Perceived bias of the writer of the article was measured: “Overall, would you say that the person who wrote this article was strictly neutral, or was he biased in favor of one party?” (−4 = *strongly in favor of Democrats* to 4 = *strongly in favor of Republicans*).

The items for Clinton were reverse scored, and z-transformations of all items were produced. This codes all scores in the direction of increasing bias in favor of Giuliani. Doing so produces a reliable index of hostile media perceptions ($\alpha = .89$).

Results and discussion

Participants indicated whether they thought the political affiliation of the writer was Democratic or Republican. No participants failed this check. The order of polling information had no effects.

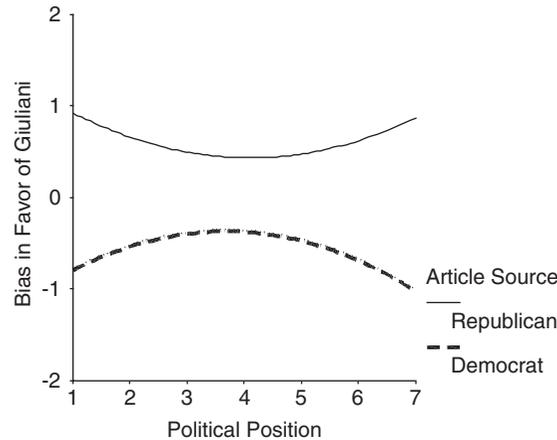


Figure 2 Experiment 2, curvilinear political position by source of polling information interaction on perceived (z-transformed) bias in favor of Giuliani.

Under H2, it was predicted that the polling information will be judged as biased when attributed to an outgroup, but not ingroup source, and that the size of this discrepancy would increase with political partisanship. This means that a curvilinear by linear interaction should result. To test this hypothesis, political position is mean centered, a squared term is created, the source manipulation is dummy coded, and terms for a linear interaction (i.e., political position centered by source) and a curvilinear by linear interaction (i.e., political position squared by source) are computed.

The regression model showed a strong source effect ($b = 0.84$, $t(207) = 6.27$, $p < .001$). Participants perceived the Republican source as favoring Giuliani more than the Democrat source. However, there was also a curvilinear by linear interaction ($b = 0.11$, $t = 2.62$, $p = .01$; see Figure 2). Consistent with H2, when the source was a Democrat, there was a negative curvilinear effect of political position on hostile media perceptions ($b = -0.06$, $t = 2.02$, $p = .045$). However, when the source was a Republican, there was a positive (but marginal) curvilinear effect of political position on hostile media perceptions ($b = 0.05$, $t = 1.69$, $p = .093$).

Experiment 2 confirmed that even with a run-of-the-mill polling report, and no direct interparty competition, participants, including those who are politically neutral, perceived the source of the report to be ingroup favoring (as did Ariyanto et al., 2007; Arpan & Raney, 2003; Gunther & Liebhart, 2006). Unlike these studies, however, there was also evidence for the metacontrast hypothesis—the extent of these perceived biases was greater for partisans. When the source was an ingroup member, ingroup favoritism was perceived—partisans saw more favorable information about their candidate than the outgroup candidate. When the source was an outgroup member, however, partisans saw more favorable information about the outgroup candidate, consistent with the hostile media effect.

Experiment 3

An alternative explanation for the hostile media effect is found in social judgment theory (Sherif et al., 1965). According to social judgment theory, people judge attitude statements relative to their own position. The more discrepant statements are from an individual's position, the more likely that a contrast effect will be found. Thus, the more ego-involved people are (e.g., the more partisan they are), the wider the latitude of rejection, and thus the greater the likelihood of a contrast effect, or hostile media perception.

However, self-categorization theory provides a different explanation for assimilation and contrast effects (see Haslam & Turner, 1995). According to self-categorization theory, the likelihood of assimilation and contrast depends on the individual's position (as social judgment theory predicts), but it also depends on the extent to which stimuli represent ingroup versus outgroup positions. In other words, the information contained in communications may actually be an attack on one's ingroup, but so long as that attack comes from an ingroup member, people will assimilate the information, not contrast it as social judgment theory predicts. There is, in fact, evidence for this. Cohen (2003) found that the group membership of a source overrode the ideological content of policy statements, and Hornsey and Imani (2004) have found that people respond more negatively to attacks that come from outgroups than ingroups. If self-categorization theory is correct, however, a yet more provocative hypothesis can be generated. Namely, the more partisan the social perceiver, the greater the likelihood that ingroup information will be relied upon, even when the information is an attack on the ingroup.

Method

Participants and design

One hundred thirty-three American undergraduates ($n = 15$ males, $n = 118$ females) participated in exchange for course credit ($M_{\text{age}} = 20.90$ years, $SD = 1.55$). The study was administered as a pencil and paper questionnaire. Political position was measured as a continuous variable on a 7-point scale, and participants were randomly assigned to one condition of a source induction (Republican vs. Democrat source), and read an article that attacked Democrats. Participants then completed measures of hostile media perceptions.

Materials and procedure

Participants were supplied with a one-page print out of Christopher Hitchens' review of Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*. The original article, *Unfairness 9/11: The lies of Michael Moore*, appeared in the magazine *Slate*. Hitchens' article is a polemical piece that is scathing of Moore's film, and of Democrats. The opening sentence states:

One of the many problems with the American left, and indeed of the American left, has been its image and self-image as something rather too solemn, mirthless, herbivorous, dull, monochrome, righteous, and boring.

The version presented to participants did not add any material to Hitchens' review, but it was shortened to one page. The accompanying adverts and formatting were taken from the online article. The one place that the article was altered was to conform to the experimental induction. In the Democrat source condition, it was stated that "Christopher Hitchens is a member of the Economic Policy Institute, a non-profit Democrat think tank," whereas in the Republican source condition, it was stated that "Christopher Hitchens is a member of the American Enterprise Institute, a non-profit Republican think tank."

Before reading this article, participants were verbally informed by the experimenter that it was important that they read the article carefully, because they would be asked questions about the content.

Measures

The questionnaire opened by measuring demographics, gender and age, followed by the 7-point single-item measure of political position (1 = *strongly in favor of Democrats* to 7 = *strongly in favor of Republicans*). Manipulation checks asked participants to note the stated political position of the author of the article. Two further checks measured the degree to which the review was positive of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, and Democrats (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very*). A final item asked participants whether they had heard of Christopher Hitchens (yes, no). Seven participants claimed to know the identity of Hitchens, however, the findings are not altered by removing these participants and so they are retained.

Dependent measures were similar to those used in Experiment 2. Participants estimated bias in the writer of the article; the percentage of remarks that "favored Republicans," "favored Democrats," or "were neutral" (the percentage of comments favoring Democrats was subtracted from that favoring Republicans); and agreement with the comments. Perceived bias in the writer and the percentages of comments favoring Republicans were *z*-transformed, and this formed an acceptably reliable measure of hostile media perceptions ($\alpha = .69$).

Results and discussion

Manipulation checks

Participants ($n = 14$) who failed the source manipulation check were excluded, a priori, from analysis (as in similar studies, e.g., Ariyanto et al., 2007). Given that there are a relatively large number of manipulation failures, logistic regression tested whether political position, experimental condition, or their interaction predicted the likelihood of failing the source check. There was no evidence for any effects, which suggests that there is no problem with nonrandom loss of participants. This leaves $N = 119$.

It is assumed that the article would be evaluated as relatively negative of both *Fahrenheit 9/11*, and of Democrats. In the case of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, a GLM tested for the effect of political position (as a centered independent variable), experimental condition, and the interaction term. There were no significant effects for source, or for the

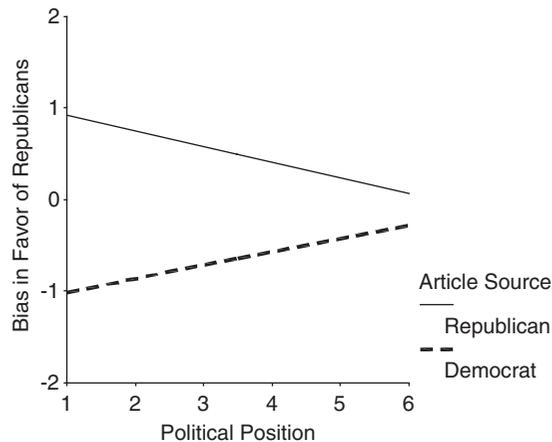


Figure 3 Experiment 3, source by political position interaction on perceived (z-transformed) bias in favor of Republicans.

interaction between political position and source. There was a main effect for political position, however ($F(1, 115) = 4.81, p = .03, \eta_p^2 = .04$); the article was perceived as relatively less negative as political position moved to the right. However, the grand mean ($M = 1.41$) was significantly different from the midpoint of the scale ($t(118) = 40.89, p < .001$) and this remained true across the range of political positions.

A GLM tested the degree to which the article was favorable to Democrats. A main effect of source showed that the article was perceived as more favorable to Democrats when the writer was a Democrat ($M = 3.54$) than when a Republican ($M = 2.54; F = 22.39, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .16$). However, the grand mean ($M = 3.04$) was significantly below the midpoint of the scale ($t = 8.84, p < .001$). The source manipulation and the valence of the article were perceived as intended.

Hostile media perceptions

A GLM showed a strong effect for the source of the article on bias perceptions ($F(1, 115) = 56.24, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .33$). The Republican source was perceived to be more biased in favor of Republicans ($M = 0.52$) than the Democrat source ($M = -.67$). However, this source effect was qualified by political position ($F = 14.64, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .11$; see Figure 3). As predicted, the difference in the degree of perceived bias between the Democratic and Republican source was greater for those on the left (i.e., 1 standard deviation below the scale midpoint, $SD = 1.47$; $b = 1.65, t = 9.73, p < .001$) than for those on the right (i.e., 1 standard deviation above the scale midpoint; $b = 0.72, t = 4.19, p < .001$). Further to this, as political position moved to the right, the Republican source was perceived as less biased in favor of Republicans ($b = -0.26, t = -2.58, p = .011$), but when the source was a Democrat, as political position moved to the right, bias was perceived to increase ($b = 0.15, t = 2.32, p = .022$).

Agreement with content

A source effect shows that participants were more in agreement with the content of the article when delivered by the Democrat ($M = 4.31$) than Republican ($M = 3.80$; $F(1, 115) = 12.04, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .10$), and as political position moved toward the right ($F = 101.87, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .47$). However, these main effects were qualified by an interaction ($F = 7.17, p = .009, \eta_p^2 = .06$). Participants on the left agreed more with the article when the source was a Democrat than when a Republican ($b = 0.82, t = 3.50, p = .001$), whereas participants on the right did not differ in agreement by source ($b = 0.30, t = 0.80, p = .42$). Furthermore, as political position moved to the right, participants were more in agreement with the comments in the article. However, this effect was stronger when the source was a Republican ($b = 0.90, t = 9.84, p < .001$) than when a Democrat ($b = 0.53, t = 4.88, p < .001$).

Participants in Experiment 3 read an attack on Democrats. Despite the fact that this was an attack, and that it was perceived as such, participants on the left perceived the writer to have little bias when he was thought to be a Democrat, but a strong bias when he was thought to be a Republican. While there was a strong effect for partisanship on agreement with the article, this too was greater for left partisans when the writer was a Democrat than when a Republican.

Consistent with self-categorization theory, participants' political loyalties overrode the content of an attack. These findings take further research on norm endorsement (Cohen, 2003), and related work on the intergroup sensitivity effect (e.g., Hornsey & Imani, 2004). Cohen's research showed that Democrat and Republican participants supported policies so long as they were perceived to be supported by party leaders, even when the policies were sharply opposed to party ideology. The findings of this experiment show that even attacks on an ingroup are perceived as relatively unbiased when they come from an ingroup opinion leader. Further, the degree to which this occurred was moderated by partisanship. Partisans, who would presumably have more of a stake than nonpartisans in ignoring or discounting criticisms, as social judgment theory predicts, were actually the most likely to agree with the information in the attack.

General discussion

Three experiments supported a self-categorization explanation of the hostile media effect. Experiment 1 showed that partisans' perceptions of media bias were amplified when their political identity was salient, and attenuated when their identity as Americans was salient. Experiment 2 showed that neutral news reports of polling information was perceived as ingroup favoring when attributed to an ingroup source, but as hostile when attributed to an outgroup source. Further, there was evidence that the extent of both of these perceptions were amplified by partisanship. Notably, Experiment 3 showed that the more extreme Democrat participants were the less bias they perceived when an attack on their group was attributed to a Democrat, but the more bias they perceived when the attack was attributed to a Republican.

These findings extend previous work that has shown an effect of partisan identification on hostile media perceptions (e.g., Ariyanto et al., 2007; Duck et al., 1998; Matheson & Dursun, 2001). The current experiments go further because they show that hostile media perceptions depend on an interaction of partisanship with identity salience, and an interaction with the source of media reports. Like this earlier research, these findings are consistent with the idea that hostile media perceptions represent a form of ingroup favoritism. However, partisans saw ingroup sources as ingroup favoring, but outgroup sources as outgroup favoring. In other words, the ingroup source manipulations in these experiments reversed the hostile media effect (i.e., produced biased assimilation), and further still, the extent of the reversal increased with partisanship. Partisans evidently perceive the media as both more in favor of their position *and* as more hostile to their position than nonpartisans.

The findings of these experiments also present a challenge to current explanations. At the outset, it was argued that if the different standards explanation is at work, at minimum, a mechanism is needed to explain when and why partisans switch between biased assimilation, and hostile media perceptions. It might be argued that self-categorization theory provides this mechanism—ingroup sources produced biased assimilation, and outgroup sources produced hostile media perceptions. However, according to the different standards explanation, there is a causal sequence. The more people use biased assimilation, the more partisan they become, and as a result the more they perceive the media as hostile. Importantly, this causal sequence was not observed in the current experiments. Namely, both biased assimilation and hostile media judgments were produced by partisanship, source, and salience variables.

Further still, self-categorization theory generated (confirmed) predictions that the different standards explanation, and the selective categorization explanations cannot. Specifically, Experiment 1 showed that the extent of hostile media perceptions changed with the context in which partisans made their judgments, and Experiment 3 showed that hostile information can be perceived as less hostile when attributed to an ingroup member. Given that self-categorization theory also explains other media judgment phenomena (e.g., Reid & Hogg, 2005), and other social psychological phenomena that the different standards and selective categorization explanations do not, parsimony weighs heavily in favor of self-categorization theory.

The findings are also difficult to reconcile with the reach hypothesis. Experiments 2 and 3 showed that partisans judged attacks on their group as unbiased when attributed to an ingroup but not outgroup source, and this occurred absent any variance in reach. For the reach hypothesis to explain these findings, it would have to be shown that people think the media have greater reach when the source is an outgroup than ingroup source, which would appear unlikely.

As demonstrated in the past (Haslam & Turner, 1995), self-categorization theory generates predictions that cannot be generated by social judgment theory. In this respect, Experiment 3 was particularly important. Social judgment theory predicts that as partisanship increases, the higher the likelihood that information will fall into a latitude of rejection, and thus produce hostile media perceptions. However,

Experiment 3 showed, contrary to social judgment theory, that when the source was an ingroup member, the more partisan the social perceiver was, the *less* the hostile media perceptions.

A further benefit of the self-categorization approach is that it is a relatively simple matter to generate further hypotheses. If the self-categorization explanation is correct, then the reach effect should be moderated by the degree to which a relevant identity is rendered salient by the reach of a medium, and/or by assumptions about the social relationship between self, source, or audience (Detenber et al., 2008). It may be that student essays are not particularly likely to produce hostile media perceptions to the extent that people assume an ingroup (or at least not outgroup) relationship with such sources. Very similar arguments can be generated for evidence that shows differences in the size of the hostile media effect across populations (e.g., where there is intergroup conflict and thus salient identity), and topic knowledge.

Of course, these experiments are not without limitations. While predicatively valid, a single-item measure of political position was employed throughout. It may be that a multiple-item measure that incorporates ideological dimensions would produce different findings. Each study also made use of undergraduate participants who are not particularly knowledgeable or involved in politics. So, it would be worthwhile to test whether these findings can be replicated among committed partisans. On the other hand, most researchers have assumed that highly emotive issues and entrenched partisanship are necessary for the hostile media perception to manifest. These studies show that this is not the case. Previous studies may have lacked the power to detect effects because partisanship has been treated as a categorical variable in analysis of variance, rather than as a continuous variable in more powerful regression models.

In conclusion, these experiments suggest that partisans perceive media to be hostile as a function of identity salience, and the extent to which they judged the source as being either an ingroup member (in which case the hostile media effect is reversed), or an outgroup member (in which case a hostile media effect is in evidence). The outgroup membership of a source appears to be a necessary condition for partisans to charge media bias.

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Une explication de l'effet des médias hostiles basée sur l'autocatégoriesation

Scott A. Reid

L'effet des médias hostiles est un phénomène par lequel les partisans des deux côtés d'un enjeu perçoivent des reportages médiatiques neutres comme étant biaisés à l'encontre de leur position. Trois expériences ont analysé une explication basée sur l'autocatégoriesation. Dans l'expérience 1, l'effet était amplifié lorsque l'identité partisane était saillante. L'effet était atténué lorsqu'une identité partagée était saillante. Dans l'expérience 2, l'effet se manifestait lorsque la source médiatique était exogroupe, mais pas endogroupe. Dans l'expérience 3, une attaque sur les Démocrates était perçue comme étant moins biaisée lorsqu'elle était attribuée à un Démocrate que lorsqu'elle était attribuée à un Républicain. Les effets des expériences 2 et 3 étaient amplifiés par l'esprit de parti. Les résultats sont conformes à la théorie de l'autocatégoriesation et difficiles à concilier avec d'autres explications.

Mots clés: effet des médias hostiles, assimilation biaisée, identité sociale, autocatégoriesation, jugement social

Selbstkategorisierung als Erklärungsansatz für den Hostile-Media-Effekt

Der Hostile-Media-Effekt ist ein Phänomen, bei dem Parteianhänger beider Seiten einen neutralen Medienbericht als gegen ihre Position gerichtet wahrnehmen. In drei Experimenten testeten wir Selbstkategorisierung als Erklärungsansatz dafür. Im ersten Experiment wurde der Effekt verstärkt, wenn die Parteilinie des Anhängers offensichtlich war und abgeschwächt, wenn eine gemeinsame Ausrichtung offensichtlich war. Die Wirkung verfestigte sich, wenn die Medienquelle eine Outgroup und keine Ingroup war (Experiment 2). Im dritten Experiment wurde ein Angriff auf die Demokraten als weniger tendenziell wahrgenommen, wenn dieser einem Demokraten im Vergleich zu einem Republikaner zugeschrieben wurde. Die Wirkungen in Experiment 2 und 3 verstärkten sich durch Zugehörigkeit zu einer Partei. Die Ergebnisse stehen im Einklang mit der Selbstkategorisierungstheorie und sich nur schwer mit anderen Erklärungsansätzen in Einklang zu bringen.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Hostile-Media-Effekt, tendenziöse Assimilation, soziale Identität, Selbstkategorisierung, soziale Bewertung

Una Explicación de la Auto-Categorización para el Efecto los Medios Hostiles

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Resumen

El efecto hostil de los medios es un fenómeno en el cuál los partidarios de ambos lados de un asunto percibido como reporte neutral de los medios es prejuicioso en contra de su lado. 3 experimentos pusieron a prueba la explicación de la auto-categorización. En el experimento 1, el efecto fue amplificado cuando la identidad de los partidarios fue más notable y fue atenuada cuando la identidad compartida fue más saliente. En el experimento 2, el efecto manifestado cuando la fuente de los medios era un grupo externo, pero no el propio grupo. En el experimento 3, un ataque a los Demócratas fue percibido como menos tendencioso cuando fue atribuido a un Demócrata que cuando fue atribuido a un Republicano. Los efectos de los experimentos 2 y 3 fueron amplificados por el partidismo. Los hallazgos fueron consistentes con la teoría de la auto-categorización y fueron difíciles de reconciliar con otras explicaciones.

Palabras Claves: Efecto hostil de los medios, Asimilación tendenciosa, Identidad social, Auto-categorización, Juzgamiento social.