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Can the Media Create Public Opinion? A Social-Identity Approach

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Abstract

The media remains a powerful presence in U.S. culture. It gives people news of world and local events, it entertains, and it may even function as a companion to children. Because it functions as a window to the outside world, what appears across its landscape actually may become people's reality. Thus, the potential for distorting their view of that world is high if the picture provided is unrepresentative of actual events. For example, the prevalence of violent acts on television has been linked to increased aggression and escalating impressions of a dangerous world, and the overrepresentation of youth and beauty may be a causal factor of eating disorders. In this article, we explore the possibility that the

media may also serve as a powerful creator of the very public opinions it seeks to reflect in its news. Subtle nonverbal cues of newscasters have been shown to influence voting behavior, and the media's overrepresentation of the proportion of blacks in poverty may decrease whites' support of welfare. By portraying a world in which people's opinions are based on their ethnic or demographic group membership, the media may also subtly but powerfully create the very opinions they seek to reflect.

Keywords

media; in-group favoritism; routes of persuasion; out-group homogeneity

It is part entertainer, part educator, part purveyor of social norms.

Much has been written about the effects of the media's constant presence in virtually all homes in America. Years of research alarmingly demonstrate the media's powerful influence on aggressive behavior (National Institute of Mental Health, 1982); current norms of attractiveness are conveyed through pictures in print and video (Silverstein, Perdue, Peterson, & Kelly, 1986), so much so that the finger has often been pointed at these images for the prevalence of eating disorders among women in this country. Watching television is correlated with beliefs about the dangerousness of the world (Rule & Ferguson, 1986): The more violent television one watches, the more dangerous and hostile one expects the world to be. By showing only a tiny and unrepresentative portion of the world through its window, the media may help to create the very world it seeks to reflect.

NEWS AND PUBLIC OPINION

Advertising is one of the most blatant examples of media-induced

opinion. Products that the public easily lived without become necessary staples with successful advertising campaigns (e.g., look at how sales of antibacterial products have skyrocketed in recent years). What is of deeper concern, however, are the more subtle effects of media news on perceptions and opinion. For instance, in 1983, Archer and his colleagues found that men and women are typically portrayed differently in news photographs, with men enjoying more close-up shots than women (Archer, Iritani, Kimes, & Barrios, 1983). Archer et al. dubbed this effect "face-ism," and found that persons depicted in close-up photographs (photographs high in face-ism) were rated as more intelligent than the same persons viewed in more distant shots.

This phenomenon is not limited to gender; in 1994, Zuckerman and Kieffer found that face-ism also varies as a function of the race of the target person. Specifically, whites are pictured in close-ups more often than are blacks. Zuckerman and Kieffer ran a series of studies which indicated that higher degrees of face-ism are affiliated with the attribute of dominance. Thus, the media may very subtly but forcefully convey the message that men and whites are more intelligent and powerful than women and blacks, respectively. As a result, gender and racial stereotypes are firmly anchored in the public mind.

Even more disturbing is the potential for such subtly conveyed impressions and opinions to shape the real world in the form of election outcomes, public policy, and agenda setting. Mullen et al. (1986) established that certain newscasters, all of whom are charged with remaining neutral when reporting the news, leaked their opinions not through verbal content but through subtle nonverbal facial expressions. The authors found that Peter

Jennings smiled significantly more often when discussing Ronald Reagan's 1984 campaign than when discussing the campaign of Reagan's political opponent, Walter Mondale. In the experiment Mullen et al. conducted, these facial expressions were easily picked up by subjects, in the absence of any verbal content. The authors then went on to establish that individuals from five different geographic areas who watched ABC's news with Peter Jennings voted significantly more often for Reagan than did individuals from the same geographic areas who watched the newscasts of NBC and CBS—networks whose newscasters were found to be successful in containing nonverbal leakage of their personal opinions. Although it could be argued that individuals who liked Ronald Reagan in the first place tended to watch Jennings because of his nonverbal approval of the candidate, it could also be argued that Jennings's facial expressions biased the opinions of his viewing public and hence their voting behavior.

Gilens (1996) examined the discrepancies between the actual and media-portrayed racial makeup of America's poor. Gilens sampled every story on poverty in America from the nation's three major news magazines (*Time*, *Newsweek*, and *US News and World Report*) from 1988 through 1992, and then analyzed the content of the accompanying pictures. Of those persons pictured in poverty, 62% were African American, which is more than twice the actual proportion of blacks who make up the American poor (29%). It is likely that such an overrepresentation may lead to exaggerated impressions of how many blacks are in poverty. In fact, several surveys show that the majority of Americans overestimate the proportion of poor blacks, with the majority of Americans believing that there are more blacks than

whites in poverty. Among white respondents to the 1990 General Social Survey, Gilens found a negative correlation between perceptions of the percentage of blacks in poverty and support for welfare: Higher estimates of the proportion of blacks in poverty were related to less support for public assistance. Thus, the media's overrepresentation of blacks in poverty can create the corresponding perception of more blacks in poverty than there actually are, and this perception may lead to less public support for welfare and safety-net programs among white voters.

Gilens (1996) also interviewed editors of the three news magazines concerning their perceptions of America's poor. He found that the editors, who expressed sincere concern that they accurately represent their subject matter, overestimated the proportion of blacks in poverty. Such a tendency to overestimate may lead news editors to select pictures of blacks for stories on poverty more often than is warranted by reality, despite their good intentions; this may serve to further perpetuate misperceptions of the racial makeup of the poor.

SOCIAL IDENTITY AND PUBLIC OPINION

The studies we have summarized were based on the assumption that the perceiver is an unbiased information processor who passively accepts the views offered by the media, and that any distorted views are the logical result of consuming distorted reports. What these accounts did not explicitly consider is that perceivers come equipped with their own motivations and biases through which information is filtered and digested.

One source of bias is the perceiver's social identity. Individuals derive their social identity in part

from the social groups to which they belong (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and thus are motivated to view these in-groups as more correct, more appropriate, and better than out-groups. A wonderful example of how social identity functions as a filter through which people perceive the world is seen in the *hostile media bias* (Price, 1989). Neutral media coverage of a controversial event, such as an election, often results in members of both sides of the controversy perceiving the media as hostile to their own group. Because coverage of both sides of an issue tends to emphasize differences between sides, the perceiver's own group membership is made salient and thus sets in motion the motivation to perceive the in-group as superior and the out-group as inferior. Thus, neutral coverage of the in-group is perceived as unfair and hostile in comparison with the inflated perceptions of the correctness of one's in-group.

Social identity is a powerful sculptor not only of perceptions, but of opinions as well. Research has shown that opinions are often influenced by other members of the in-group. Even when an in-group member presents an opinion that is unpopular and goes against one's natural inclinations, the in-group member still remains a persuasive force, much more so than any out-group member (Mackie, Worth, & Asuncion, 1990). Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) Elaboration Likelihood Model provides some insight as to why this might be so. This model proposes that there are two major routes of persuasion through which attitudes and opinions are changed: the central and peripheral routes. The central route of persuasion describes instances in which the motivated and cognitively capable perceiver reaches an opinion through careful and conscious consideration of all sides of a particular message. Often, however,

the perceiver lacks either the motivation or the ability (e.g., because of time constraints or other pressing issues that drain cognitive resources) to fully process much of the message's information. When this is the case, any number of peripheral cues contained within the message may provide "mental shortcuts" that the perceiver can use to arrive at an opinion or decision.

Advertising strategies successfully employ the peripheral route of persuasion by using peripheral cues (such as providing attractive sponsors of a product or associating the product with humor), for what consumer has the motivation or cognitive resources to fully process all product information when making purchase decisions? In-group membership is thought to function as a peripheral cue in the route to persuasion: With in-group membership comes perceived similarity to other in-group members, and if an in-group member endorses a particular side of an argument, then it stands to reason that the perceiver is predisposed to endorse the same side without necessarily attending to the content of the message (Mackie et al., 1990).

What happens to this tendency when it is coupled with exposure to media that often report news along categorical lines, portraying entire groups as holding opinions that oppose one another? For example, during the 16 months between O.J. Simpson's arrest for murder in June 1994 and the announcement of the jury's verdict in October 1995, major television networks and news magazines consistently reported public opinion by racial category, citing blacks as believing in his innocence and whites as believing in his guilt. A perusal of *Newsweek* during that period reveals more than a dozen opinion polls conducted by the magazine, reporting opinions of Simpson's guilt or innocence, the trial's fairness, the persuasiveness of the

prosecution's or defense's closing arguments, and so on, separately for whites and blacks. As Gunther (1998) wrote, "People learn about public opinion from media coverage, and particularly the coverage of public opinion polls" (p. 487). Does this type of coverage, which emphasizes intergroup differences and intragroup similarities, fuel the tendency to side with one's in-group?

HOMOGENEOUS VERSUS HETEROGENEOUS OPINIONS

We directly tested this potential by manipulating the homogeneity of opinions expressed by in-group and out-group members. In a study designed to mimic the media coverage of the O.J. Simpson case, in which opinions of his guilt or innocence were depicted as largely correlated with racial group membership, subjects viewed a videotape of a peer tribunal in which a fraternity member was accused of vandalizing school property. In this case, subjects' own status as members or nonmembers of Greek organizations served to classify them into the in-group or the out-group. All subjects viewed the same ambiguous tribunal, which was preceded by interviews with the defendant's fellow "students," who were asked to reveal their opinions of his guilt or innocence. Half of the "interviewees" were portrayed as members of Greek organizations, and the other half were portrayed as nonmembers. These interviews depicted opinions of the defendant's guilt or innocence as either completely correlated with group membership (homogeneous condition) or evenly mixed across groups (heterogeneous condition). After viewing the interviews and subsequent tribunal, subjects then rendered opin-

ions concerning the guilt of the defendant and recommended appropriate punishment.

We found that the homogeneity of opinion significantly influenced opinions of the defendant's guilt and the degree of punishment recommended. When opinions of others were homogeneous and shown to be perfectly correlated with group membership, Greek subjects sided with the defendant and non-Greek subjects sided against him. However, this effect completely disappeared when opinions were shown to be mixed evenly across groups. Thus, the perception of heterogeneous opinions completely overrode the tendency to side with one's in-group.

IMPLICATIONS

Not only does the media bias people's perceptions by offering an unrepresentative view of the world at times, but it may also facilitate biased processing of accurate information by presenting that information with an emphasis on intergroup differences. Rather than reporting how the general public feels about certain issues (i.e., the Simpson trial, Clinton's impeachment trial), the media often consistently reports opinions along group lines. We found that such exposure can exacerbate the robust tendency to side with the in-group, perhaps by minimizing the motivation to carefully consider the information at hand. Exposure to mixed group opinions, however, mitigated this tendency. Exposure to heterogeneous opinions may short-circuit the heuristic value normally provided by in-group members, encouraging a more central than peripheral route of mes-

sage processing (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Our results were obtained by exposing subjects to only one brief video detailing the opinions of four in-group and four out-group members. It stands to reason that multiple exposures to homogeneous or heterogeneous opinions would produce even stronger effects. In the real world, people are often exposed multiple times to news broadcasts. Also, in the real world outside the laboratory, discussion with in-group members often ensues after a big news story hits the public. Studies in group polarization (Myers & Arenson, 1972) predict that individuals' opinions will become even more extreme following such discussion.

In summary, on the one hand, multiple news broadcasts that dissect the world into distinct social categories and emphasize group differences have the ability to perpetuate actual differences. On the other hand, news that obscures intergroup boundaries may have an equally great potential to diminish group differences and forge necessary connections. The media, which disseminates information and creates social norms, most likely has the power to build bridges as well as destroy them.

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Note

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