

The Neglected Power of Elite Opinion Leadership to Produce Antipathy Toward the News Media: Evidence from a Survey Experiment

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Abstract Today, most Americans dislike the news media as an institution. This has led to considerable debate about why people dislike the media and how their public standing could be improved. This paper contributes to this literature by using a survey experiment to test the effect of several different considerations on evaluations of the media. It finds, consistent with the broader literature on political persuasion, that elite partisan opinion leadership can powerfully shape these attitudes. Additionally, it finds that tabloid coverage creates antipathy toward the press regardless of predispositions and that horserace coverage has a negative effect on opinions among politically aware citizens on both sides of the political spectrum. Contrary to some claims in the literature, this study finds no detectable effect of news negativity.

Keywords News media · Trust · Party cues · Survey experiment · Public opinion · Media bias

Introduction

In the United States, opinions toward the news media as an institution have become dramatically more negative over the past 40 years. For example, when the General Social Survey (GSS) probed respondents' "confidence" in a variety of societal institutions in 1973, confidence in the press was reasonably high and similar to other institutions. However, from the early 1990s on, the press has consistently been one of the most disliked institutions in the GSS confidence battery (see Cook et al. 2000;

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Cook and Gronke 2001; Fallows 1996; Tsfati 2002; Gronke and Cook 2007).¹ Antipathy toward the news media is of special concern because recent studies suggest it has important consequences for political behavior. Those with negative attitudes toward the institutional press tend to use alternative rather than mainstream news sources (Tsfati and Cappella 2003; Tsfati 2002; Ladd 2006b), to resist media agenda setting (Tsfati 2002) and priming (Miller and Krosnick 2000), and resist new information about valence issues (Ladd 2006b) and consequently vote less based on current national conditions and more based on predispositions (Ladd 2008).

There has been substantial scholarly attention to the sources of media evaluations in the fields of political science, psychology, and communication. One of the most well established sources of negativity toward the media is the “hostile media phenomenon” (or “hostile media effect”) (Christen et al. 2002; Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken 1993; Vallone et al. 1985). This refers to the tendency of people with divergent prior opinions on an issue, when consuming the exact same news report, all to view the report as biased against their views. Based on this body of work, it seems, at least among those highly involved in political controversies, that any exposure to news tends to produce negative evaluations of the specific source and even possibly of the press as an institution.

Yet, this leaves several unanswered questions. First, as overall levels of news exposure have not dramatically increased over the past 40 years, other factors must also be producing the public’s increasingly negative attitudes toward the media.² What are these? Second, one prominent explanation for the hostile media phenomenon is that, among a substantial portion of subjects, it results from prior negative evaluations of the media source (Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken 1993).³ Yet this simply begs the question. What variables produce this pre-existing hostility toward the press? While the literature presents several possible explanatory variables, some with persuasive evidence behind them, there is no scholarly consensus on which of these other factors shape attitudes toward the news media and thus might help to explain why these attitudes have become so negative over time.

¹ Since 1973, Democrats have almost always had significantly higher confidence levels than Republicans in the GSS. However, this gap has consistently been small in magnitude, much smaller than the decline in confidence among both groups (as well as independents) over these years. See Cook et al. (2000), Cook and Gronke (2001), and Gronke and Cook (2007) for more detailed analyses of the GSS data.

² Rather than a change in the overall level of media consumption, it appears that changes in the media landscape have caused some people to increase, and others to decrease, their news consumption (Prior 2007). Because the hostile media phenomenon affects those with strong views on issues, it is possible that increasing opinion polarization among the mass public over the past 40 years (along with an increase in news exposure among the politically interested, as documented by Prior (2007)) caused the hostile media phenomenon to affect more people, reducing aggregate support for the press. However, there is disagreement among scholars over whether mass opinion has become more polarized, with some arguing that it has (Bartels 2000; Hetherington 2001) and some claiming that only political elites have become more extreme (Fiorina et al. 2005). If the former view is correct, the hostile media phenomenon may be an important source of the aggregate increase in negative attitudes toward the news media. Yet if the latter view is correct, the hostile media phenomenon is probably not a source of this trend.

³ Baum and Gussin (2008) and Anand and Tella (2008) also find that prior beliefs about the source have a major influence on the amount of bias perceived in news reports.

This paper works to improve our understanding of the sources of public opinion toward the news media as an institution with a simple survey experiment. This research design allows one to estimate the effects of a series of explanatory variables, while using random assignment to hold other variables constant.⁴ Below, the next section reviews relevant existing research into political persuasion and the causes of negative attitudes toward the media. That is followed by the “[Theory](#)” section, which outlines my expectations, the “[Research Design](#)” section, which describes the survey experiment used in the analysis, and the “[Results](#),” “[Discussion](#),” and “[Conclusion](#)” sections.

Opinion Change and Attitudes Toward the News Media

Scholarship on the formation of mass opinion is vast. However, one of the most ubiquitous findings is that elite rhetoric can influence opinions, especially among those who are politically engaged and have the same political predispositions as the messenger. To take just a few examples, the opinions of politically aware citizens tended to follow the rhetoric of political elites who shared their predispositions during World War II (Berinsky 2009), the Vietnam War (Zaller 1991, 1992, pp. 102–103) and the first (Zaller 1994) and second (Jacobson 2007) Gulf Wars. Panel surveys show that when citizens’ opinions do not match the stances of the party they identify with, their opinions tend to move into conformity with their partisanship rather than the reverse (Miller 1999). Experiments find that liberals and conservatives tend to support whatever welfare policy politicians from their own political party are supporting, even when that policy is contrary to the subject’s ideology (Cohen 2003). Opinion leadership like this is also empirically consistent with studies of “cue-taking,” where citizens base their political choices on endorsements by like-minded political elites (Lupia 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Sniderman et al. 1991).

Given this, it is reasonable to suspect that elite rhetoric may influence attitudes toward the news media. Several studies find evidence consistent with this. Watts et al. (1999) find that perceptions of media bias in the 1988, 1992, and 1996 presidential campaigns were more strongly related to claims of media bias by campaigns and opinion commentators than to the tone of news coverage of the candidates.⁵ Gunther (1992) finds that political engagement, which can expose citizens to elite messages (Zaller 1992, 1996), is strongly related to perceptions of newspaper bias. Those who consume news from alternative media outlets, such as conservative talk radio and political web sites, where party messages are forcefully

⁴ Specifically, observed and unobserved covariates are balanced between treatment and control groups in expectation.

⁵ In another study of these three campaigns, Domke et al. (1999) find that charges of liberal media bias were more likely to appear in campaign coverage when journalists were covering Republican candidates relatively favorably and giving them more opportunities to get their message out, a result the authors argue indicates that claims of bias are a Republican political strategy, rather than a response to biased coverage.

transmitted,⁶ tend to trust the institutional media less (Barker and Knight 2000; Jamieson and Cappella 2008; Jones 2004; Ladd 2006b; Tsfati 2002; Tsfati and Cappella 2003).⁷ Also, perceptions of news bias tend to correlate with discussion with ideologically similar individuals, where elite messages can be spread, but not with political discussion in general (Eveland and Shah 2003).

Despite the prominence of elite opinion leadership in public opinion scholarship, most literature on attitudes toward the news media emphasizes other influences. In addition to the aforementioned literature on the hostile media phenomenon, some authors claim that consumption of negative and cynical political coverage creates antipathy toward the press (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Fallows 1996; Jamieson 1992; Lichter and Noyes 1996; Patterson 1993; Sabato 1991, 2000). Gronke and Cook (2002, p. 9) argue that the press often plays the role of “critic of the established order.” This may hurt the media’s popularity because Americans tend to dislike disagreement and criticism in their political institutions (e.g. Hibbing and Theiss Morse 1995, 2002). Patterson (1993, p. 20) points out that confidence in the press declined over the same decades when reporters were increasingly focusing on negative aspects of political candidates and developing a professional norm rewarding negative coverage. In their thorough investigation of the effects of cynical styles of news, Cappella and Jamieson (1997, p. 31) note that reporters who provide positive coverage are often accused by their peers of being “shills” or “in the tank” and present evidence that, in the mass public, cynicism about politics is correlated with cynicism about the media (214–215).⁸ On the other hand, several recent experimental studies of contentious televised political debate have cast doubt on this notion. Arceneaux and Johnson (2007) fail to find a significant effect of viewing a contentious cable political talk show on general media trust, while Mutz and Reeves (2005) find that uncivil political debate has no detectable effect on evaluations of a television program’s informativeness and actually increases assessments of how entertaining it is.⁹

Two other prominent explanations are often put forward for the public’s distrust of the media. A school of thought asserts that the public dislikes the news media as a result of consuming news that focuses on the “game” of politics, such as the selfish motivations and strategies of politicians, poll results, and the campaign horserace generally, rather than on policy (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Jamieson 1992; Lichter and Noyes 1996; Patterson 1993). Patterson (1993, p. 74) observes that, during these same recent decades, there was a reduction in what he calls “policy

⁶ In separate content analyses, both Barker and Knight (2000) and Jamieson and Cappella (2008) find that criticism of the institutional news media is one of the most frequent topics on Rush Limbaugh’s radio program.

⁷ Jones (2004) finds that talk radio is only associated with media distrust among conservatives.

⁸ Cappella and Jamieson (1997, pp. 139–159, 214–215) find that cynicism about politics is correlated with cynicism about the media. They also use an experiment to test the effect of cynical news coverage on an index of political cynicism. However, they did not experimentally test the effect of cynical coverage on attitudes toward the news media.

⁹ Findings that televised incivility does not reduce media evaluations are particularly striking because some of the same (or very similar) experiments find that incivility does reduce trust in Congress, politicians, and the entire system of government (Mutz and Reeves 2005), while increasing general arousal and decreasing thermometer ratings of the least liked person in the debate (Mutz 2007).

schema” coverage and an increase in “game schema” coverage. Finally, some argue that the tendency of conventional news outlets to cover celebrities, sex-scandals and other topics once largely confined to tabloid sources reduces public respect for the media, pointing out that this trend has also grown over these same decades (Emery et al. 2000; West 2001).¹⁰ In conclusion, while the public opinion literature emphasizes the role of elite influence, authors who specifically focus on attitudes toward the media tend to emphasize consumers’ reactions to several styles of news coverage, such as negativity, horserace coverage, and sensationalism, as causes of opinion change.

Theory

Survey-Based Attitudes and Attitude Change

The design of this study relies on memory-based theories of the survey response (see Tourangeau 1987; Tourangeau and Rasinski 1988; Tourangeau et al. 2000; Zaller 1992; Zaller and Feldman 1992). In this perspective, respondents

... carry around in their heads a mix of only partially consistent ideas and considerations. When questioned, they call to mind a sample of these ideas... and use them to choose among the options offered (Zaller and Feldman 1992, p. 580).¹¹

Thus, an attitude, as measured in a survey, is the evaluative tendency produced by the “considerations” usually brought to bear when responding to a survey probe about an “attitude object” (Eagly and Chaiken 1993, pp. 4–6).¹² Opinions change when individuals bring different considerations to bear and those new considerations prompt different evaluations. This could occur either because the individual absorbs new salient considerations or because existing but previously nonsalient considerations are brought to the “top of the head” (Taylor and Fiske 1978). Either way, one method to investigate why attitudes toward an object tend to change is to examine the effects of various considerations on the survey response. That is the approach pursued here.

¹⁰ Even if sensationalist coverage may be as good (or better) at informing the public (Baum 2002, 2003, 2006; Zaller 2003), consuming this type of news may, at the same time, reduce consumers’ respect for the news media. In her in-depth interviews with a small group of citizens over the course of a presidential campaign, Graber (1984) finds a tendency among her subjects to complain about the simplification and triviality of news, while still choosing to consume that type of news rather than seeking more substantive media outlets. Tsafati and Cappella (2005) examine this tendency to watch news programs one reports disliking and find it be concentrated among those high in “need for cognition.”

¹¹ Some work offers more complicated models of the “cognitive architecture” without necessarily being inconsistent with this simple description. For a review, see Taber (2003, pp. 439–446).

¹² This is consistent with the conventional psychological definitions of an attitude as “a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor” (Eagly and Chaiken 1993, p. 1) or “an evaluative integration of cognitions and affects experienced in relation to an object” Crano and Prislis (2006, p. 347).

This study employs a survey experiment to make various considerations salient in people's minds and to examine the effect of those thoughts on media evaluations. How should we describe this approach? In this area, the academic jargon can often confuse more than clarify. Specifically, the terms "framing" and "priming" are frequently used in the persuasion literature, but with often inconsistent definitions (for reviews, see Chong and Druckman 2007; Althaus and Kim 2006). Chong and Druckman (2007) propose clarifying these concepts by defining framing broadly, to encompass any process by which an expressed opinion changes because of changes in the relative salience of considerations related to the attitude object (105). Within this framework, they classify priming as a type of framing, where the consideration made salient is a "separate issue dimension or image used to evaluate" the object (115). While other scholars may classify things differently, using this typology, this study's approach qualifies as a type of framing, where I make salient a series of different considerations representing variables hypothesized to reduce evaluations of the news media.

The attitude object is the news media as an institution. Cook (1998) argues that the news media function as their own political institution. While investigating the causes of attitudes toward individual media outlets is a worthy endeavor (see Baum and Gussin 2008; Metzger et al. 2003; Turner 2007; Anand and Tella 2008), I set that task aside for now.¹³ This is a more abstract attitude object than a presidential candidate or even Congress or the Presidency, though not necessarily more abstract than other institutions like big business, religion, etc. Fortunately, attitudes toward the institutional news media have been validated in several existing studies. The results indicate they are distinct from general mistrust, ideological direction, or ideological extremism (Tsfati 2002, pp. 50–55), robust to different question wordings (Kohring and Matthes 2007; Ladd 2006a, b), relatively stable over time (Tsfati 2002, pp. 62–66), and prompt an unusually low rate of "don't know" responses (Tsfati 2002, p. 67).¹⁴

Expected Effects and the Role of Predispositions

Public opinion scholarship often finds that political predispositions play important roles in moderating persuasive effects. Among the most important of these are partisan and ideological attachments and political awareness (e.g. Converse 1962, 1964; Zaller 1992).¹⁵ As Zaller (1992) argues in great depth, those who are

¹³ It is important to differentiate clearly between attitudes toward any political institution and attitudes toward its constituent parts, as illustrated by the often wide difference between people's opinion toward their own member of Congress and toward the institution itself (Fenno 1975). Furthermore, my review of major academic surveys and the archives of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research (<http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu>) finds no survey question asking for a simple evaluation of a specific news outlet that has been asked over a number of years comparable to the GSS's confidence question. Consequently, it is less clear how opinions about specific outlets have changed over time, making the question of what might cause those changes somewhat less interesting.

¹⁴ As Tsfati (2002, p. 38) puts it, "people have some mental schema for what 'the media' are" and thus "[m]edia skepticism is targeted toward the mainstream media in general."

¹⁵ Following Zaller (1992), here I use the term political "awareness" interchangeably with similar terms like "sophistication" or "engagement." Though, in theory, these terms could denote different attributes, in the literature they are often treated synonymously because they are so highly correlated in the mass public.

politically sophisticated and hold strong partisan and ideological attachments tend to respond to persuasive political messages differently.

Consequently, in forming my own expectations about persuasive effects, I anticipate these predispositions will play an important role. As the literature predicts that elite messages will be most influential among politically aware individuals who share the messenger's political predispositions, I expect Republican elite messages criticizing the media to influence predominantly politically engaged conservative Republicans and similar Democratic messages to influence predominantly politically engaged liberal Democrats. Based on the existing literature, I suspect that thinking about negativity in news coverage will produce more negative attitudes toward the press. However, because negativity is easy to understand and consists of criticism of politicians on both sides of the political spectrum, I expect the role of predispositions to be minimal. I also expect, consistent with claims in the literature, that thinking about horserace coverage will produce more negative media attitudes. Here, because they know more about, and have more investment in, political issues, I suspect that politically engaged respondents with strong partisan and ideological attachments will be the most offended when coverage eschews issues to report on the horserace. Finally, while I expect tabloid coverage will cause more negative attitudes toward the press, I don't have any clear expectations that awareness or partisan and ideological attachments will play a moderating role because this coverage is easy to understand and has minimal partisan content. In summary, I expect that elite opinion leadership and several other variables prominent in the political communication literature are likely to produce negative attitudes toward the media and that several of these effects will depend on predispositions.

Research Design

To estimate the effects of different considerations on attitudes toward the news media, I employ a survey experiment. In general, experiments are considered the best type of research design for making causal inferences, largely avoiding problems like reverse causation, omitted variable bias and measurement error in the independent variables (Holland 1986; Rubin 1974; Green and Gerber 2002). Survey experiments randomly assign respondents to receive different versions of survey probes and then measure the effects on subsequent responses. When performed in national surveys, they can potentially achieve substantial external validity as well (Piazza et al. 1989; Sniderman and Grob 1996). These advantages have contributed to their recent prominence in political science (e.g. Gilens 2001; Kuklinski et al. 1997; Sniderman et al. 1991; Taber and Lodge 2006).

In contrast, attempts to make inferences about the causes of negative attitudes toward the institutional news media with observational data face serious limitations. There are several ways one could employ observational data for this purpose. One could allow survey respondents to state for themselves why they dislike the media in closed-ended (Dautrich and Hartley 1999) or open-ended (Ladd 2006a; Tsfati 2002) formats. The main problem with this approach is that people are notoriously poor at introspecting about their own psychological processes. Simply put, when people

report what they think has caused their opinions to change, they are often mistaken (Nisbett and Wilson 1977). Another approach would be to see which variables are correlated with negative media attitudes in cross-sectional observational survey data (Bennett et al. 2001; Jones 2004; Kioussis 2001). Unfortunately, it is very difficult with this type of data to rule out reverse causation or spurious omitted variables. A third approach is to look at change over time. However, even when observing changes in media evaluations over the course of several years (Barker and Knight 2000), during a campaign (Dautrich and Hartley 1999) or over several decades (Patterson 1993), it is still difficult to rule out omitted variable bias.

Here, I employ a survey experiment conducted by Knowledge Networks, Inc. Respondents were sampled through random digit dialing. Those who agreed to participate were given a free television with internet access in exchange for periodically answering commercial and academic surveys.¹⁶ Between March 15 and 22, 2007, 1014 respondents answered the questions utilized here, along with a group of other questions unrelated to politics or the news media.¹⁷

In a format similar to that employed by Gilens (2001), respondents were told about a recent news report and asked whether they had heard about it. As in Gilens (2001), I am not primarily concerned with their answers to this question. Instead, I use it to bring various types of news stories to the top of respondents' minds. The question's preface was identical for all respondents:

We are interested in how well the news media gets information out to the public. There are so many news stories these days that most people have trouble following them all.

The news story they were subsequently told about randomly varied among six different versions.¹⁸

Two versions of the question were designed to test how elite messages affect opinions about the media. One mentioned *Democratic elite criticism* of the news media, stating that "Recently, Democratic politicians have criticized the media for being too friendly with President Bush," while another mentioned *Republican elite criticism*, stating that "Recently, Republican politicians have criticized the media for being overly critical of President Bush." To test the prediction that *coverage critical of all politicians* induces people to dislike the media, in another version, respondents were told, "Recently, the media has reported stories that criticize both President Bush and the Democrats in Congress." To test the expectation that people are turned off by the media's focus on *horserace coverage*, another version told respondents, "Recently, the media has reported on President Bush's standing in opinion polls, especially when his popularity has increased and decreased." To test the anticipated effect of *tabloid coverage*, another version told respondents, "Recently, the media has reported on the death of Anna Nicole Smith" (Project for

¹⁶ Data from Knowledge Networks and other firms with similar sampling methodologies have gained increasing prominence in political science research (e.g. Clinton 2006; Hillygus and Jackman 2003; Prior 2007).

¹⁷ For more details on Knowledge Networks sampling techniques, see their website at <http://www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp/index.htm>.

¹⁸ Complete question wordings are provided in the Appendix.

Excellence in Journalism 2007; Shafer, 2007).¹⁹ The sixth and final version of the questionnaire served as the “control.” Those assigned to this condition received the same question preface and were simply asked, “Have you been following stories in the news media recently?” without being reminded of any particular news story or style of coverage.

As the dependent variable, later in the question battery, all respondents were asked to provide ratings on a *media feeling thermometer* ranging from 0 to 100 degrees. As noted above, scholars find that responses to questions about the news media tend to be consistent across different question wordings, including thermometer ratings (Kohring and Matthes 2007; Ladd 2006a, b). Consequently, I use this question with reasonable confidence that the results generalize to other wordings.

As explained in the last section, I expect the effect of several variables to depend on predispositions. Specifically, I am concerned with respondents’ ideology, partisanship, and political awareness. In earlier Knowledge Networks surveys, respondents were asked to place themselves on a seven-point *ideology* scale and on a seven-category *party identification* scale, and to provide their level of *education*, which I use to measure political awareness.²⁰

Results

I calculate treatment effects by comparing thermometer ratings of those who received each treatment with those in the control group. As the treatments are randomly assigned, one simple and concise way to present the results is in the form of a multiple regression. In this setup, each experimental condition is a “dummy” explanatory variable coded 1 if the respondent received the treatment and 0 otherwise. The control condition is the excluded category. In this way, the coefficient for each variable becomes simply the difference in means between the treatment and control groups, with its statistical significance equivalent to a difference-of-means *t*-test.

¹⁹ This example was chosen out of a desire to use a contemporary and well known tabloid story. There had recently been a “feeding frenzy” of coverage of the death of Ms. Smith, a former Playboy Playmate of the Year and reality television star. The story was covered extensively on cable news channels and network newscasts. According to the Project for Excellence in Journalism (2007), between her death on February 10 and her burial on March 2, 2007, Anna Nicole Smith’s passing was the third most covered story in the American news media as a whole, making up 8% of all coverage, behind only “a crucial House vote against the President’s surge policy” (2) and the 2008 presidential race, which each took up 9% of coverage. On cable news channels, 32% of Fox News Channel’s programming, 20% of MSNBC’s programming and 14% of CNN’s programming focused on the Smith story, making it “far and away the biggest cable news story in that period.” On major network morning news shows, it took up 20% of the first half hour of airtime on CBS, 17% on NBC, and 10% on ABC.

²⁰ The education variable has four categories: “less than high school,” “high school,” “some college,” and “a bachelor’s degree or higher.” While others have used asked a series of political knowledge questions to measure political engagement (e.g. Zaller 1992), education has also been used successfully for this purpose (e.g. Berinsky 2009; Zaller 1994).

Table 1 Treatment effects on media feeling thermometer ratings among selected subsamples

	All	Liberal democrats with high education	Conservative republicans with high education	Moderate independents with low education
Coverage critical of all politicians	-3.8 (2.8)	6.1 (11.5)	-2.0 (7.4)	-1.9 (6.2)
Horserace coverage	-1.8 (3.0)	-15.7 (8.0)*	-13.9 (5.3)***	11.4 (8.6)
Tabloid coverage	-7.2 (2.9)***	-9.2 (7.8)	3.5 (7.7)	-3.0 (7.2)
Republican elite criticism	-1.7 (3.1)	3.4 (7.8)	-22.6 (5.0)***	-4.4 (7.1)
Democratic elite criticism	-5.2 (2.9)*	-26.8 (12.2)**	-10.4 (7.2)	10.1 (8.0)
Intercept	50.1 (2.0)***	55.5 (5.4)***	45.0 (4.1)***	47.0 (4.9)***
R^2	0.01	0.23	0.21	0.09
Standard error of regression	22.3	20.4	18.0	21.3
n	1002	50	96	119

Note: Entries are ordinary least squares regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. Data are from a survey experiment conducted by Knowledge Networks, Inc. between March 15 and 22, 2007. The dependent variable is the news media feeling thermometer, which ranges from 0 to 100. The explanatory variables, listed in the left hand column, are coded 1 if the respondent received the treatment and 0 otherwise. All treatments are mutually exclusive and the control condition is the excluded category. Data are weighted by the inverse of their probability of selection into the Knowledge Networks sample. Respondents are categorized as highly educated if their highest level of education is “some college” or higher. All other respondents are in the low education group

* $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$ for two-tailed hypothesis tests

Column 1 of Table 1 shows coefficients from a regression among all respondents, without taking account of predispositions.²¹ As expected, tabloid coverage has a statistically significant effect, reducing ratings of the media by approximately seven degrees. However, contrary to expectations, the effect of negative coverage is small and statistically indistinguishable from zero. To test for the predicted effects of elite criticism and horserace coverage, I start by estimating the same model among several illustrative subsamples. Columns 2, 3 and 4 of Table 1 estimate treatment effects among liberal Democrats with high education, conservative Republicans with high education, and moderate independents with low education.²²

The data show clear evidence of elite opinion leadership. Republican elite criticism has a significant effect among highly educated conservative Republicans, where media ratings are reduced by approximately 23 degrees. Similarly, Democratic elite criticism has a significant effect among highly educated liberal Democrats, reducing ratings by approximately 27 degrees. Also as expected,

²¹ A small number of the 1014 respondents failed to answer the feeling thermometer question and are excluded from this analysis. In other columns of Tables 1 and 2, a few additional respondents are excluded because they did not answer the education, party identification or ideology questions.

²² I separate respondents by party and ideological self-identification in Columns 2 through 4 as a way of exploring the data prior to estimating a full model. Achen (2002) recommends careful data exploration and consultation of existing theory prior to estimating definitive parametric models, as a method of avoiding misspecification and thus improving the robustness of findings. As they should be if data exploration is done correctly, the results from Tables 1 and 2 are very similar.

Table 2 Full model incorporating interactions between treatments and predispositions

Coverage critical of all politicians	-3.6 (2.7)
Horserace coverage	25.7 (16.4)
Tabloid coverage	-6.2 (2.8)**
Republican elite criticism	-10.3 (17.7)
Democratic elite criticism	16.8 (15.1)
Party Id.	-6.4 (16.3)
Ideology	10.4 (18.4)
Education	-1.4 (14.9)
Strength of party Id.	7.5 (6.6)
Strength of ideology	-8.4 (13.0)
Party Id. × ideology	-30.1 (29.0)
Party Id. × education	-3.3 (25.4)
Ideology × education	-18.1 (28.0)
Party Id. × ideology × education	36.4 (46.5)
Horserace × strength of party Id.	-45.0 (23.2)*
Horserace × strength of ideology	-35.7 (24.3)
Horserace × education	-28.8 (24.3)
Strength of party Id. × strength of ideology	-1.4 (16.6)
Strength of party Id. × education	1.2 (11.0)
Strength of party ideology × education	5.5 (21.0)
Strength of party Id. × strength of ideology × education	-0.3 (27.6)
Horserace × strength of ideology × education	50.5 (40.7)
Horserace × strength of party Id. × education	61.0 (33.1)*
Horserace × strength of party Id. × strength of ideology	58.0 (34.6)*
Horserace × strength of party Id. × strength of ideology × education	-110.4 (54.5)**
Democratic criticism × party Id.	-29.4 (42.3)
Democratic criticism × ideology	-59.1 (32.1)*
Democratic criticism × education	-65.2 (23.1)***
Democratic criticism × party Id. × ideology	101.5 (70.9)
Democratic criticism × Ideology × education	160.4 (52.2)***
Democratic criticism × party Id. × education	69.9 (55.9)
Democratic criticism × party Id. × ideology × education	-209.0 (100.6)**
Republican criticism × party Id.	37.8 (28.9)
Republican criticism × ideology	24.7 (34.9)
Republican criticism × education	-6.3 (23.1)
Republican criticism × party Id. × ideology	-49.2 (44.3)
Republican criticism × Ideology × education	11.5 (47.3)
Republican criticism × party Id. × education	-0.5 (39.5)
Republican criticism × party Id. × ideology × education	-41.3 (60.7)
Constant	53.9 (10.3)***

Table 2 continued

R^2	0.16
Standard error of regression	20.9
n	992

Note: For details on the data, presentation of results, coding of the dependent and treatment variables, and the weighting procedure, see the note to Table 1. Conditioning variables are coded to range from 0 to 1, with interior categories evenly spaced between

* $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$ for two-tailed hypothesis tests

horserace coverage reduces evaluations of the media among highly educated liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans by approximately 16 and 14 degrees, respectively.²³

To explicitly model these heterogeneities, Table 2 estimates a regression using all respondents and incorporating the role of predispositions with interaction terms. As prior theory and Table 1's results indicate that the effects of elite criticism will be largest among highly educated ideological partisans, Table 2 models the four-way interactions of both Democratic and Republican elite criticism with party identification, ideology, and education. Additionally, as expectations and Table 1's results indicate that horserace coverage has its largest effects among highly educated ideological partisans on both sides of the political spectrum, Table 2 includes the four-way interaction between horserace coverage, *strength of party identification*, *strength of ideology*,²⁴ and education.

Brambor et al. (2006) and Kam and Franzese (2007) advise interpreting interaction models by calculating substantively relevant marginal effects and the statistical significance of those effects rather than directly interpreting model coefficients. I follow that strategy here. Since presenting and discussing effect estimates for every possible type of individual in a model with several four-way interaction terms would be tedious, instead I present treatment effects among especially illustrative subgroups in Fig. 1.²⁵

Results from Table 2's model with interactions are generally consistent with results from Table 1, increasing my confidence in their veracity. First, there is clear evidence of elite opinion leadership. As Fig. 1 illustrates, Democratic elite criticism's effect is largest in magnitude among highly educated liberal Democrats, where it reduces media ratings by an estimated 48 degrees. In contrast, effects among other illustrative subgroups, such as less educated liberal Democrats,

²³ In an auxiliary data analysis, I tested whether it is necessary to divide respondents by partisanship, ideology, and education, or if the conditioning effects are produced by only one or two of these. When either dividing the sample into subgroups (as in Table 1) or using a pooled model with interaction terms (as in Table 2), I find that, for horserace coverage, Democratic elite criticism, and Republican elite criticism, the effects depend on all three conditional variables.

²⁴ Strength of party identification and strength of ideology are simply a "folding over" of the party identification and ideology variables. Higher values indicate strong identification with either of the parties and strong liberalism or conservatism, respectively, and lower values indicate independence and moderate ideology, respectively.

²⁵ Standard errors on marginal effects that combine the coefficients on two or more interaction terms are calculated by the delta method (Green 1999, p. 118).

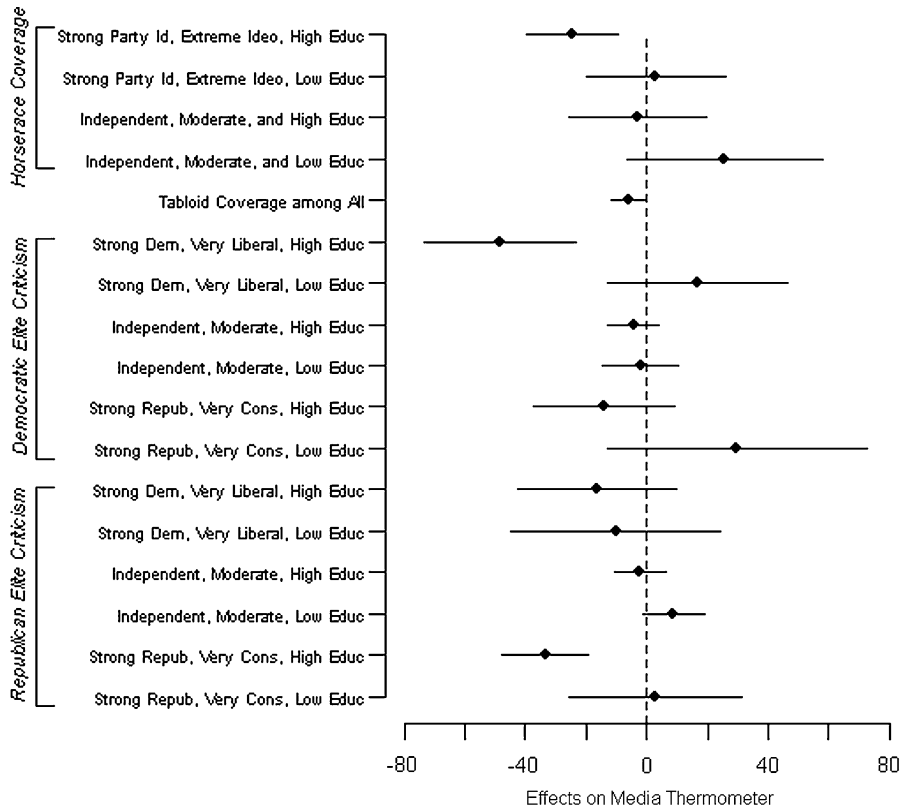


Fig. 1 Estimated effect of treatments among various illustrative groups. *Note:* Dots indicate estimated treatment effects and lines illustrate 95% confidence intervals for the effect of horseshoe coverage, tabloid coverage, Democratic elite criticism, and Republican elite criticism on media feeling thermometer ratings among selected illustrative combinations of predispositions. Estimates are based on the model in Table 2. Among all possible combinations of variables, horseshoe coverage’s effect is only statistically significant among those with strong party identification, extreme ideology, and high education, Democratic criticism’s effect is only statistically significant among liberal Democrats with high education, and Republican criticism’s effect is only statistically significant among conservative Republicans with high education

independent moderates with average education levels, and conservative Republicans with average education levels, are not distinguishable from zero.²⁶ Similarly, Republican elite criticism’s effect is largest among highly educated conservative Republicans, where the model suggests it reduces evaluations by 33 degrees. Its effect is much smaller and insignificant among other groups, such as less educated conservative Republicans, moderate independents with average education levels, and liberal Democrats with average education levels.²⁷ In addition, the effect of

²⁶ This heterogeneity is evident in the large and significant negative coefficients on the two-way interaction between Democratic elite criticism and party identification and the four-way interaction between Democratic elite criticism, party identification, ideology, and education.

²⁷ This heterogeneity is driven by the combination of the large negative coefficients on the three-way interaction between Republican elite criticism, party identification and ideology and on the four-way interaction between Republican elite criticism, party identification, ideology and education. While these

horserace coverage is largest among those with strong party identification, extreme ideology, and high education, where it reduces media ratings by an estimated 25 degrees. The effect is much smaller and not distinguishable from zero among other groups, such as those with strong party identification, extreme ideology and low education or among independent moderates with either low or high education levels.²⁸ Also, as in Table 1, tabloid coverage has a moderate effect (this time of approximately -6 degrees) among all respondents.²⁹ Finally, in the Table 2 model, as in Table 1, critical news coverage has no detectable effect.

Discussion

These results contribute to our understanding of attitudes toward the news media in several ways. First, they reaffirm the importance of elite opinion leadership as a powerful influence on public opinion. Over the past two decades, political scientists have argued that elite influence can explain an increasingly wide variety of phenomena in the public opinion literature, including the rally around the flag effect (Brody 1991), support for foreign conflicts more broadly (Berinsky 2009; Zaller 1992, 1994) and even apparent campaign priming (Lenz 2009). This study indicates that elite rhetoric can also powerfully influence the public's attitudes toward the institutional news media.³⁰

At the same time, of those factors (other than the hostile media phenomenon) that the political communication literature has argued produce antipathy toward the media, I find only some to be influential. Thinking about tabloid coverage reduces media evaluations. Also, thinking about horserace coverage reduces media evaluations among politically engaged individuals on both sides of the political spectrum. However, contrary to some claims in the literature (e.g. Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Patterson 1993; Sabato 2000), but consistent with other recent experimental studies (Arceneaux and Johnson 2007; Mutz and Reeves 2005), I find no evidence that thoughts of negativity and contentiousness in the news produce antipathy toward the press.

The later result is a good example of the utility of experiments. While some political communication scholars have blamed conflict and negativity for turning the

Footnote 27 continued

two coefficients are not individually significant, they are jointly significant ($f = 4.23, p = .015$). However, as Brambor et al. (2006) and Kam and Franzese (2007) note, the quantities whose significance are of primary importance are the estimated effects presented in Fig. 1.

²⁸ This heterogeneity is largely driven by the large and significant negative coefficient on the four-way interaction between horserace coverage, strength of party identification, strength of ideology, and education.

²⁹ While the results in Table 1 indicate some variation in the effect of tabloid coverage, tests using interaction terms indicate that these variations are not statistically significant.

³⁰ It is important to clarify that elite messages in the political world may be simply pointing out negativity, horserace, tabloid coverage or other pathologies in news content. Theorizing that attitudes toward the press are shaped by opinion leadership does not deny flaws in media coverage. However, when flaws in media behavior are noticed only when elite opinion leaders point them out, the causal mechanism is opinion leadership.

public against the media, a growing experimental literature finds that these types of coverage do not induce negative media judgements. If anything, people find this news more entertaining (Mutz and Reeves 2005). This complicates the task of potential media reformers. Do the other consequences of negativity and conflict, like reduced trust in other political institutions and polarized candidate evaluations (Mutz and Reeves 2005; Mutz 2007), mean that this type of coverage should be discouraged, even though people show little sign of disliking it? This is not an easy question, but one the experimental literature forces media critics to confront.

Still, the experiment employed here has limitations. Reminding people about different types of media coverage is different from them consuming that coverage directly.³¹ It is also possible that some effects fade over time, a phenomenon not captured when the dependent variable is measured later in the same survey.³² Gaines et al. (2007) provide a useful discussion of the potential limitations of survey experiments.

However, in this case, I believe the benefits outweigh the drawbacks. The main benefit is that random assignment greatly improves causal inferences. Other than Arceneaux and Johnson (2007) and Mutz and Reeves (2005), most of the literature on declining attitudes toward the institutional press relies on nonexperimental data. Yet, with that approach, any variable that shows a strong trend over the past 40 years, is correlated with opinions toward the media, or that respondents claim changed their opinions, could be put forth as a cause of media attitudes. One can use scores of control variables, but still not satisfactorily rule out omitted variable bias, endogeneity, or rationalization. In contrast, experimental studies like this one ensure that all covariates are, in expectation, balanced between treatment and control groups and that causation runs in the intended direction.

Apart from issues of causal inference, this study's contributions are limited to the explanatory variables it manipulated. It focuses on the most prominent explanations in the scholarly literature on persuasion and political communication. Yet this does not rule out other influences on attitudes toward the media. For instance, criticism from people in one's own party could reduce media evaluations even when the critics are ordinary citizens rather than national politicians. Hopefully, future work can expand our understanding of party influence on media attitudes by testing this possibility. Also, as this study is motivated by an interest in sources of negative media attitudes, it does not test the effect of Democratic and Republican praise of the news media, hard news coverage, or other variables that might improve media attitudes. In addition, this study does not test the hostile media phenomenon because of the extensive existing literature documenting it. Yet, as noted above, any excluded independent variables do not bias the effect estimates of the included variables because of random assignment.

³¹ However, some people may consume little media coverage directly, but hear about prominent news stories from friends. For these individuals, the treatments may be a realistic recreation of their typical exposure to news.

³² These phenomena could possibly lead to either an underestimate as an overestimate of the effects. On the one hand, merely being reminded of a type of news report is a weaker treatment (in other words, a smaller dosage) than consuming such a report directly, possibly leading to downwardly biased treatment effects. On the other hand, if effects fade somewhat over time, this could lead to upward bias.

Overall, these findings present a minor puzzle when compared with recent polls. Surveys, including the one employed here, find that Democrats have significantly (though not dramatically) more positive attitudes toward the press than Republicans (Cook and Gronke 2001; Cook et al. 2000; Eveland and Shah 2003; Gronke and Cook 2002). However, I do not find a tendency for Republicans or conservatives to be more sensitive to the stimuli employed here. For instance, an over-time increase in horserace coverage could be expected to reduce ratings among engaged individuals on both sides of the political spectrum. Furthermore, an increase in tabloid news would reduce media evaluations among all, but not produce a partisan or ideological divide. In addition, elite criticism has the potential to reduce media ratings on both sides of the political spectrum. If anything, educated liberal Democrats are slightly more sensitive to elite criticism than educated conservative Republicans.

While one cannot be certain based on available evidence, there are a few possible explanations for Republicans' persistently more negative attitudes toward the media. First, other factors, not prominent in the existing literature and not tested here, may create negative media attitudes and have larger effects on Republicans. Second, more negative attitudes among Republicans may result from differing levels of elite rhetoric across parties. In the 1988, 1992, and 1996 presidential campaigns, Domke et al. (1999) found that 92–96% of media criticism accused them of favoring the liberal or Democratic candidate. Thus, while elite criticism from each side has a comparable effect on its supporters, the greater volume of Republican criticism may contribute to the gap between the parties in media evaluations.

Finally, it is useful to reconsider some proposals previous authors have put forth to improve the public standing of the news media in light of these results. Patterson (1993) and Cappella and Jamieson (1997) advocate reducing the prevalence of negativity and horserace coverage in various ways. Patterson (1993) suggests increasing the power of parties relative to the press and shortening the presidential nominating process to reduce the prevalence of these coverage styles. In contrast, Cappella and Jamieson (1997, p. 241) argue that presidential campaigns, “by provid[ing] a chance for the public at large to give direct feedback to elected officials and indirect feedback to the press,” tend to reduce these “cynical” styles of coverage.³³

However, if any reform succeeds in reducing the prevalence of negativity and horserace coverage, it will only partially address the problem. These results suggest that reductions in negativity will likely have no effect, while reductions in cynical horserace coverage will only improve media evaluations among engaged individuals with strong political attachments. Unless the press also eschews tabloid stories and political elites tone down negative rhetoric, substantial portions of the population will continue to hold the press in low regard.

Sabato (2000, pp. 153–166) argues that the media should reform by reporting less private information about politicians and maintaining higher standards of news accuracy. These findings suggest that, while reducing the amount of salacious tabloid-style coverage might improve attitudes toward the press somewhat, it will

³³ Lichter and Noyes (1996, pp. 274–280) make a similar argument, while placing special emphasis on the need for campaign coverage that allows the public to interact more directly with candidates and their campaigns.

only eliminate a portion of the problem if other variables are unchanged. In another proposal, Crawford (2006, pp. 142–145) argues that, by acknowledging news errors and the biases of their reporters, media outlets could reduce the level of elite criticism and thus improve their popularity. This study suggests that, if political elites did respond to these reforms by reducing criticism, attitudes toward the media would improve among the politically aware on both ends of the political spectrum, but other variables could continue to generate some dissatisfaction with the press. In summary, because a series of different factors can create negative attitudes toward the media, it may require a variety of different reforms, reducing the prevalence of horserace coverage, tabloid coverage and criticism from opinion leaders, to restore the press to its previous respected status.

Conclusion

Existing scholarship puts forth a number of explanations for the public's antipathy toward the institutional news media, sentiments which have intensified over the past 40 years. This paper employs a survey experiment to estimate the effects of negativity, horserace coverage, tabloid coverage, and elite opinion leadership on public attitudes toward the news media. It finds that media evaluations can be depressed by tabloid coverage regardless of predispositions, horserace coverage among the politically aware with strong political attachments and by elite opinion leadership. Overall, these findings support some previous arguments about the sources of public opinion toward the press. However, accounts that place negativity as a central cause of dissatisfaction with the press or that ignore the power of elite messages may be in need of revision.

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Appendix: Question Wordings

Question 1. (Respondents are randomly assigned to receive one of six different versions of Question 1)

Version A: “We are interested in how well the news media gets information out to the public. There are so many news stories these days that most people have trouble following them all. We want to ask about some stories the news media has reported to see if you happened to hear about them. Recently, the media has reported stories that criticize both President Bush and the Democrats in Congress. Have you heard these stories?”

Version B: “We are interested in how well the news media gets information out to the public. There are so many news stories these days that most people have trouble following them all. We want to ask about some stories the news media has reported to see if you happened to hear about them. Recently, the media has

reported on President Bush's standing in opinion polls, especially when his popularity has increased and decreased. Have you heard these stories?"

Version C: "We are interested in how well the news media gets information out to the public. There are so many news stories these days that most people have trouble following them all. We want to ask about a story the news media has reported to see if you happened to hear about it. Recently, the media has reported on the death of Anna Nicole Smith. Have you heard this story?"

Version D: "We are interested in how well the news media gets information out to the public. There are so many news stories these days that most people have trouble following them all. We want to ask about a story the news media has reported to see if you happened to hear about it. Recently, Republican politicians have criticized the media for being overly critical of President Bush. Have you heard this story?"

Version E: "We are interested in how well the news media gets information out to the public. There are so many news stories these days that most people have trouble following them all. We want to ask about a story the news media has reported to see if you happened to hear about it. Recently, Democratic politicians have criticized the media for being too friendly with President Bush. Have you heard this story?"

Version F: "We are interested in how well the news media gets information out to the public. There are so many news stories these days that most people have trouble following them all. Have you been following stories in the news media recently?"

Answers:

Yes

No

Question 2. (Respondents are shown a number box with range 0-100)

"We'd like you to rate the news media on a scale we call a 'feeling thermometer.' It runs from 0 to 100 degrees. Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable toward the news media. Ratings between 0 degrees and 50 degrees mean that you feel unfavorable toward the news media. If you don't feel particularly favorable or unfavorable toward the news media, you would rate them at the 50 degree mark. How would you rate the news media on this scale? You can use any number between 0 and 100 to indicate how favorable or unfavorable you feel."

Answers:

0–100

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