Does Political Orientation Cause Us to See Things Differently?

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The Effect of News Source on Biased Perceptions of Political News
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Abstract
The hostile media effect and biased assimilation both concern biased interpretations of information (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979; Vallone & Ross, 1985). Participants read the same news article with either an NBC News heading or a Fox News heading and were then asked about their perceptions of bias in the article and their attitudes. Results for the hostile media effect were mixed, but we found evidence for biased assimilation.

Introduction
The hostile media effect refers to the tendency for people on a particular side of an issue to view news coverage as biased against their stance, even if this news coverage is objective (Vallone & Ross, 1985). Biased assimilation refers to the tendency for individuals to interpret new information that supports their position more positively than information that does not (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979).

Previous studies have shown that news source impacts the presence of these phenomena. For example, when sports fans read a fictitious news article about an NCAA investigation into their team, they saw it as more biased than did fans who read about a rival team (Arpan & Raney, 2003).

This study examined whether similar effects would occur for political information.

Hypotheses
- Liberals (Conservatives) will rate the article as more biased as a result of reading the article with the NBC News (Fox News) heading, whereas Conservatives (Liberals) will rate the article as more biased against the Conservative viewpoint when it came from NBC instead of Fox.

Method
Participants
- Sample: 150 individuals (68 males, 82 females) between the ages of 21 and 86 in the U.S. obtained through Amazon Mechanical Turk, an online crowdsourcing platform (n = 93 after cleaning, see below).
- Study was pre-registered on Open Science Framework (OSF), and data and materials are available at https://osf.io/na5yu/

Procedure
- Participants read an adapted news article on the U.S. Farm Bill. Half of the participants were randomly assigned to the Fox News (NBC News) heading, whereas the other half were randomly assigned to the NBC News heading.
- Participants completed a manipulation check asking them to identify the source of the article they read.
- Participants who failed this manipulation check were excluded from further analyses.
- Participants then completed a questionnaire regarding perceptions of the article, their preferred news sources, political affiliation, and an adapted subscale of the Partisan Identity Scale (Huddy & Bankert, 2017).
- All scales were on a Likert scale format ranging from 1=Strongly disagree to 7=Strongly agree.

Figure 1.1: The effect of Political Orientation on the Hostile Media Effect

- Participants were categorized into 3 groups based on the political affiliation they indicated they identified most with: “Liberal”, “Conservative”, or “Other”.
- Hostile Media Effect (see Figure 1.1): Liberals perceived the article less positively than did moderates and conservatives, regardless of the news heading, F(2, 92)=3.59, p=.03, r^2=.072, 90% CI:[.004; .157], whereas Conservatives were more supportive when reading the article with the NBC News heading and Liberals more negative after reading the article with the Fox News heading.

Figure 1.2: The effect of News Source on Biased Assimilation

- Biased Assimilation (see Figure 1.2): Liberals were more supportive of the bill when reading the article with the NBC News heading, whereas Conservatives were more supportive when reading the article with the Fox News heading, F(2, 93)=5.47, p=.006, r^2=.105, 90% CI:[.019; .198] as a result of reading the article with the NBC News heading, and Liberal attitudes became more positive F(2, 93)=4.64, p=.012, r^2=.091, 90% CI:[.012; .180] as a result of reading the article with the NBC News heading.

Discussion

- We found support for biased assimilation, as Conservatives’ attitudes towards the U.S. Farm Bill became more negative after reading the article with the NBC News heading and liberals’ more negative after reading the article with the Fox News heading.
- We found limited support for the hostile media effect. Participants generally didn’t rate the article as more biased against their viewpoint, regardless of the news heading.
- Some limitations included an uneven number of participants in each source condition, due to a large number of participants missing the attention check.
- Future research could look at moderators and mediators of the hostile media phenomenon, and as what situations would cause individuals to be more biased in their perceptions.
- Identifying the political contexts and the news sources where biased perceptions are at play is important in our polarized political climate. The hysteria surrounding “fake news” highlights the need for individuals to seek out the most accurate information, especially when it determines their voting choices.

References