



Hostile Media Perceptions: Partisan Assessments of Press and Public during the 1997 United Parcel Service Strike

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This study investigated partisan perceptions of hostile bias in news coverage of the 1997 Teamsters Union strike against United Parcel Service (UPS), and the processes by which Teamster and UPS partisans formed impressions of public opinion regarding the strike. As predicted, both partisan groups perceived neutral news coverage as biased against their respective sides. However, perceptions of hostile media bias did not produce corresponding perceptions of hostile public opinion; instead, partisans appeared to rely on their personal opinions when estimating the opinions of others. Nonpartisan control-group subjects, however, did infer public opinion in part from their subjective assessments of news content. Findings suggest that level of involvement is crucial in predicting the effect that perceived media coverage of social issues will have on perceptions of public opinion regarding those issues.

Keywords hostile media effect, persuasive press inference, projection effect, public opinion, involvement

At one time or another, most people have probably found mass media to be biased. However, even when media coverage of a controversial issue is, by the standards of most individuals, comparatively balanced and objective, people who are highly involved in the issue may see that coverage as unjustly slanted in favor of the opposition (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985; Perloff, 1989; Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994). This partisan tendency to perceive neutral news coverage as one-sided and unfair is called the hostile media effect. While existing studies by Vallone et al., Perloff, and Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken have documented hostile media perceptions, however, they have not examined the potentially important consequences of the phenomenon—consequences such as an actual shift in partisan judgments regarding prevailing public sentiment. It thus becomes useful to ask if perceptions of hostile bias in news coverage result in impressions of public opinion that are similarly biased and distorted.

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An indirect process by which the mass media may influence perceptions of public opinion is the persuasive press inference (Gunther, 1998). According to this hypothesis, people may infer public opinion from their perceptions of the slant of media coverage and their assumptions that such coverage has a substantial impact on others. One implication of the persuasive press inference is that biased or distorted media coverage, while it may or may not influence public opinion, can have a significant effect on perceived public opinion. For example, a 1998 CNN report about the alleged use of nerve gas against suspected American Vietnam War defectors—a story later discredited—may have led individuals to perceive increased antimilitary sentiment among the general public, whether or not public opinion was actually influenced (Thomas & Vistica, 1998).

If the slant of news coverage, real or perceived, is an important impetus behind perceptions of public opinion, as the persuasive press inference suggests, then partisan estimates of public opinion should vary in a direction consistent with the perceived slant of news stories. However, a second perspective suggests that, irrespective of their assessments of media coverage, partisans' own opinions may significantly influence their predictions regarding the opinions of others. The tendency of individuals to see their own opinions and behaviors as relatively common while viewing alternative opinions and behaviors as uncommon is referred to as projection or false consensus (Ross, Green, & House, 1977). If projection is the mechanism by which partisans form impressions of public opinion, then perceptions of public opinion should vary in accord with the personal opinions of the individuals involved.

To what extent do these two often contrary factors, perceived news slant and personal opinion, influence partisans' perceptions of public opinion? The study reported in this article sought to answer this question empirically by asking partisans on both sides of the 1997 Teamsters strike against United Parcel Service (UPS) to rate the bias in a news article and estimate percentages of Americans who supported or opposed the strike. To determine if involvement influenced perceptions of bias and public opinion, a control group of nonpartisans was questioned about the same article. To clarify the source of opinion estimates, participants were also asked about their personal opinions regarding the strike. Bias ratings and opinion estimates were compared to see if UPS and Teamster partisans judged the same article to be biased against their respective sides and to assess what effects perceived bias and personal opinion had on their impressions of public opinion regarding the strike. Analyses of these data resulted in additional interpretations of the effect of perceived news bias on perceptions of public opinion under conditions of high and low involvement.

Hostile Media Effect

Observing an apparent tendency of partisan groups to perceive hostile bias in news coverage considered evenhanded and objective by others, Vallone et al. (1985) attempted to document the tendency and to probe underlying mechanisms by studying partisan perceptions of televised news coverage of the 1982 Beirut massacre. They found that both pro-Arab and pro-Israeli partisans saw the same videotaped news segments as biased against their own point of view. Both groups also tended to believe that viewing the news programs would cause neutral audiences to turn against their side. Additional findings indicated that an association existed between greater knowledge and emotional involvement in the issue and perceptions of hostile media bias. Highly involved pro-Israeli partisans were more likely to view the news programs as biased against Israel, while highly involved pro-Arab partisans were more likely to see the same programs as biased in favor of Israel.

Using the same issue and audience type, Perloff (1989) further explored the relationship between involvement and perceived hostile bias in news coverage. By having nonpartisan students view the same videotaped news footage on the war in Lebanon watched by pro-Arab and pro-Israeli subjects, Perloff was able to demonstrate that in reality the news footage did not change student attitudes toward either Israel or the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Attempts by Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken (1994) to replicate the hostile media effect for a second issue—the U.S. abortion controversy—produced weak and inconsistent results.

Although Vallone et al. and Perloff found support for the hypothesis that partisans perceive news coverage to have a disproportional impact on neutral audiences, their studies stop short of addressing the significant consequences of the hostile media effect. While interesting, hostile media perceptions are primarily important only to the extent that they result in related attitude or behavior outcomes—outcomes such as the perception of an actual shift in public opinion. Thus, this study sought to examine whether perceived bias in news coverage has an effect on partisan perceptions of public opinion and, if so, to identify processes that might underlie the contrasting perceptions of public opinion predicted by the hostile media effect.

Persuasive Press Inference

One way in which perceptions of bias in news coverage may influence perceptions of public opinion is the persuasive press inference (Gunther, 1998). According to this hypothesis, people often draw conclusions about public opinion from their judgments of the slant of media content and their belief that others will be influenced by such content.

Gunther constructs his hypothesis on several assumptions. One is that, based on their subjective assessments of specific news content, individuals form general impressions of media coverage of an issue. Second, believing mass media to have a broad reach, individuals think that this perceived media coverage is what most other people are also receiving.¹ A third assumption is that individuals overestimate the impact that such coverage is having on the opinions of others, a well-supported notion known as the third-person effect (Davison, 1983). Thus, individuals form impressions of public opinion by inferring it from the media coverage they believe others are being exposed to.

To test this hypothesis, Gunther (1998) had subjects read two news articles that had been manipulated to present a favorable or unfavorable slant on two different issues. To the extent that subjects perceived the slant of each article to be favorable or unfavorable, their estimates of public opinion on the issue tended to vary in a comparable direction. Experimental data supported the persuasive press inference hypothesis in conditions both with and without vivid exemplars (Gunther, 1998), and even in the face of contradictory base-rate information (Gunther & Christen, 1999).

Previous experimental tests of the persuasive press inference involved exposing neutral subjects to biased or slanted news stories. In the present study, that configuration is reversed: Biased or partisan subjects are exposed to news content that is ostensibly neutral. Our assumption is that, even when news reports are comparatively balanced and objective, partisan individuals will perceive the reports to be biased against their point of view. To the extent that involvement leads partisans to form distorted impressions of news coverage, the persuasive press inference suggests that they are likely to form biased inferences about the public opinion they expect to result from such coverage. Thus, their perceptions of public opinion should vary in a direction consistent with the perceived hostile slant of news content.

Projection Effect

Taken together, the hostile media effect and the persuasive press inference predict that partisans will mistakenly see others' opinions as increasingly different from their own. There is, however, another well-documented perceptual bias that predicts the opposite effect. This bias is known as projection or false consensus (Ross et al., 1977) or the looking glass effect (Fields & Schuman, 1976)—the tendency of individuals to see their own opinions and behaviors as relatively more common while viewing alternative opinions and behaviors as relatively less common. Marks and Miller (1987) identify four possible theoretical explanations for the projection effect: Selective exposure to similar others may increase the ease with which instances of agreement between self and others are accessed from memory; focus of attention on one's preferred position may increase estimates of consensus for that position because it is the only one in immediate consciousness; perceivers may consider themselves and others as similarly rational beings who are affected in the same way by situational factors such as media coverage and therefore hold similar views; and/or the desire to maintain self-esteem, confidence, and social support may lead individuals to exaggerate the extent of similarity between themselves and others.

Although numerous studies have documented the tendency of individuals to rely on their own attitudes when predicting the attitudes of others (Hoch, 1987), research on the relationship between attitude involvement and magnitude of the projection effect has been inconclusive. For example, van der Pligt, Ester, and van der Linden (1983) showed that subjects with extremely favorable attitudes toward building more nuclear power stations gave higher estimates of the percentage of the Dutch population who shared their opinion than did subjects with moderately favorable attitudes. However, in experiments covering a range of political issues, Fabrigar and Krosnick (1995) found no indication that attitude importance moderated the size of the projection effect. They speculated that the possible impact of important attitudes on consensus estimates may be counterbalanced by greater knowledge concerning the true distribution of opinions in the target population, yielding a null association between attitude importance and the projection effect.

In previous experimental tests of the persuasive press inference, both the perceived slant of news articles and projection of personal opinion were shown to have significant effects on public opinion estimates (Gunther, 1998; Gunther & Christen, 1999). In those studies, however, involvement was assumed to be moderate to low. Thus, an important research question for the present study is whether the hypothesized relationship between perceptions of hostile bias in news content and perceptions of public opinion will hold after controlling for any influence of partisans' own opinions. Should projection overcome the effect of perceived hostile news bias on public opinion estimates under conditions of high involvement, then partisans' estimates of the opinions of others should vary in accordance with their personal opinions. If perceptions of hostile bias in news content do shape partisans' impressions of public opinion, then the persuasive press inference should persist. If both processes are engaged to an equal extent, then the influence of perceived hostile bias and the projection of personal opinions may cancel one another out, leaving no apparent impact of bias on partisans' public opinion judgments.

The Present Study

On August 4, 1997, 185,000 drivers, package sorters, and loaders represented by the International Brotherhood of Teamsters walked off the job after contract talks with UPS collapsed in a dispute over hourly wages, full-time jobs, and pension plans. We believed

the Teamsters strike against UPS to be an appropriate context for the present study because it involved conflicting interests among two highly polarized groups. In addition to using a new issue, partisan classification scheme, and medium, the present study builds on previous hostile media effect research by considering the relationship between perceptions of hostile bias in news coverage and perceptions of public opinion regarding the strike.

Our hypothesis, based on the literature review above, was that highly involved individuals would perceive hostile bias in news coverage that appeared evenhanded and objective to a neutral audience. In analyzing news coverage of the Teamsters strike against UPS, we expected that (a) Teamster partisans would perceive news coverage as biased in favor of UPS, (b) UPS partisans would perceive news coverage as biased in favor of the Teamsters, and (c) nonpartisans would judge the same coverage to be neutral.

Our research question concerned the consequences of these hostile media perceptions. Empirical and theoretical work on the persuasive press inference and projection bias suggests contrary outcomes in the perception of public opinion. One argument is that individuals may form impressions of public opinion by inferring it from the media coverage they believe other people are being exposed to. Thus, perceptions of hostile bias in news coverage, coupled with assumptions of media influence over others, suggest that Teamster partisans would estimate that public opinion regarding the strike is unfavorable, while UPS partisans would perceive it as favorable.

If, however, the inclination to project overrides any assumptions about hostile media influence, then partisans' public opinion estimates would be a reflection of their own views rather than of their views of media content. Although existing research on the relationship between involvement and magnitude of the projection effect is inconclusive, some researchers (e.g., Marks & Miller, 1987) argue that attribution of opinion similarity increases when the issue is personally involving. If this is so, then we would expect Teamster partisans to judge public opinion regarding the strike to be favorable, while UPS partisans would see it as unfavorable.

It is also possible that we would find no net effect, either because both projection and inference processes are operating to an equal extent and cancel each other out or because neither is exerting any influence on public opinion judgments.

Study Design

Participants

Teamster and UPS representatives from two midwestern metropolitan areas were recruited to participate in a study of news coverage of the Teamsters strike against UPS. Ninety-two UPS operations managers and staff personnel, and 100 full-time and part-time UPS workers represented by Teamsters Local 344, consented to participate in the study. Questionnaires were distributed over a 2-week period immediately after a tentative agreement was announced but before union members formally voted to accept the proposed settlement. Due to constraints imposed by the work setting, participants completed and returned questionnaires by mail. Pre-addressed, postage-paid envelopes were provided for the purpose. Eighty-four UPS managers and 51 Teamsters completed and returned questionnaires.²

In addition, 122 undergraduate students were recruited from classes at a large midwestern university. To duplicate study conditions as nearly as possible, students completed and returned questionnaires in campus mail envelopes. Responses to ego-involvement

questions were used to identify 54 students who were “neither pro-UPS nor pro-Teamsters.” These 54 students served as nonpartisan controls for hypothesis-testing purposes.

Stimulus Materials

A two-page news article on the UPS strike was constructed from published newspaper and magazine reports. The news article was identified as an Associated Press newswire story and was formatted to appear as if it had been clipped from the August 16, 1997, issue of the *Los Angeles Times*. The article addressed the lack of progress in negotiations between the Teamsters and UPS and provided background information regarding the two key issues involved in the strike: the union’s proposal for more full-time jobs and the company’s call for a new pension plan limited to UPS workers. The length and sequence of paragraphs in the news article were manipulated to ensure that UPS and Teamster positions on the two key issues received approximately equal coverage and that UPS or Teamster viewpoints were stated first an equal number of times. A pretest of the constructed news article, using a convenience sample of 20 graduate and undergraduate students from the same midwestern university, indicated that students who had neutral attitudes toward both groups also perceived the news article as unbiased.

Procedure and Measures

The questionnaire cover sheet informed participants that the university was conducting a study comparing television and newspaper news coverage of some recent national issues. Researchers wanted to obtain their opinions regarding coverage of one of those issues: the Teamsters Union strike against UPS. Participants were told they would be reading “a recent news article on the issue, clipped from a nationally circulated news publication.” (The same constructed news article appeared in all questionnaires.)

Before reading the news article, participants responded to three questions designed to assess their degree of involvement. As Perloff (1989) states, ego-involved individuals should strongly identify with a partisan group and should possess extreme positions on issues relevant to the group. Measures of involvement (adapted from Perloff) included items assessing participants’ identification with and attitudes toward the Teamsters and UPS. Group identification was determined by asking participants if they generally characterized themselves as “pro-UPS,” “pro-Teamsters,” “both pro-UPS and pro-Teamsters,” or “neither pro-UPS nor pro-Teamsters.” Separate 11-point scales measured general attitudes toward the Teamsters and UPS, with -5 indicating a “very unfavorable attitude,” 0 indicating a “neutral attitude,” and 5 indicating a “very favorable attitude” toward the respective group. Attitudes toward UPS and the Teamsters were measured separately to accommodate the possibility that some respondents had similarly favorable or unfavorable attitudes toward both groups.

After reading the news article, the participants completed a series of questions designed to measure perceptions of bias, perceptions of public opinion, and personal opinion regarding the strike. The first set of questions, adapted from Gunther (1998), addressed perceived article bias. Separate 11-point scales measured perceptions that the article was biased for or against the Teamsters’ or UPS’s side of the issue, where -5 signified “biased against,” 0 signified “not biased,” and 5 signified “biased in favor of” the respective group. The second set of questions, also adapted from Gunther, asked participants to estimate the percentages of Americans who respectively supported and opposed the Teamsters’ strike against UPS in the day or two before the tentative agree-

ment was announced. Separate items were used to measure support and opposition, because the absence of support was not necessarily equivalent to opposition (i.e., some percentage of Americans may have been perceived as neutral). Participants responded by circling percentage combinations on separate 10-point scales, where 1 signified “0–10%” and 10 signified “91–100%.” Participants were also asked how strongly they personally favored or opposed the strike. Possible responses ranged from –5 (“strongly oppose”) to 5 (“strongly favor”), and 0 indicated “neutral/no opinion.” Demographic data were also gathered, including age, gender, education level, political party affiliation, and household income.

Because data were gathered by mail, UPS and Teamster participants could not be debriefed upon completion of the questionnaire. Instead, a statement regarding the nature of the study and the constructed news article was included in the summary of results subsequently provided to the Teamsters and UPS managers. Student participants were debriefed in person following the cutoff date for receipt of questionnaires, which was prior to the formal vote on the proposed settlement.

Results

Attitude scores confirmed that UPS partisans held favorable attitudes toward UPS and unfavorable attitudes toward the Teamsters. Similarly, the attitudes of Teamster partisans were more favorable toward the Teamsters and significantly less favorable (although not actually unfavorable) toward UPS; Teamster and nonpartisan attitudes toward UPS were not significantly different. For the nonpartisan control group, mean scores for attitudes toward UPS and the Teamsters did not differ significantly from 0 (or midpoint) on the 11-point attitude scales, confirming our assumption that nonpartisans held neutral attitudes toward both groups. Among the three groups, differences in attitudes toward UPS, $F(2, 179) = 70.54, p < .001$, and the Teamsters, $F(2, 179) = 162.03, p < .001$, were highly significant.

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for bias and opinion measures by group. As we predicted, both partisan groups viewed the same news article as biased in favor of the other side. Mean differences in perceived article bias toward the Teamsters, $F(2, 184) = 27.77, p < .001$, and perceived article bias toward UPS, $F(2, 185) = 23.95, p < .001$, were highly significant. Multiple comparison tests indicated that Teamster partisans perceived the news article as significantly more biased in favor of UPS than did UPS partisans. UPS partisans perceived the same article as significantly more biased in favor of the Teamsters than did Teamsters. One-sample t tests also confirmed that the nonpartisan control group perceived the constructed news article as neutral toward both UPS and the Teamsters. Nonpartisans were significantly different from both partisan groups on both measures with the exception of the difference between UPS partisans' and nonpartisans' perceptions of bias in favor of UPS.

Measures of personal opinions about the strike produced expected patterns. UPS partisans were virtually united in their opposition to the strike ($M = -4.9$ on a scale from –5 to 5). Teamster partisans tended to favor the strike ($M = 2.9$), although personal opinions varied widely within the group.

Our research question concerned the potential connections between perceived news article bias, personal opinion, and resulting perceptions of public opinion. One outcome, favoring the persuasive press inference explanation, would be public opinion in line with perceived article bias. The data, however, did not appear to support this line of reasoning. Instead, the evidence favored the projection explanation: While partisans

Table 1
Mean perceptions of article bias, perceptions of public opinion, and personal opinions toward strike

	UPS (<i>n</i> = 84)	Nonpartisans (<i>n</i> = 54)	Teamsters (<i>n</i> = 51)
Bias toward Teamsters ^a	1.2 (1.4) _a	.4 (2.0) _b	-1.1 (1.8) _c
Bias toward UPS ^a	-1.0 (1.3) _a	-.4 (2.0) _a	1.1 (2.0) _b
Public opinion opposition ^b	5.1 (1.8) _a	5.2 (1.8) _a	3.4 (1.2) _b
Public opinion support ^b	5.1 (1.7) _a	5.4 (1.1) _a	6.9 (1.1) _b
Personal opinion ^c	-4.9 (.5) _a	.1 (1.9) _b	2.9 (3.0) _c

Note. Row means not sharing a subscript differ ($p < .05$) by Bonferroni test. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

^aScores represent perceptions that the article was biased for or against that group's side of the issue, based on an 11-point scale where -5 = biased against, 0 = not biased, and 5 = biased in favor of.

^bScores represent the estimated percentage of Americans who opposed (or supported) the strike, based on a 10-point scale where 1 = 0-10%, 2 = 11-20%, 3 = 21-30%, etc.

^cScores represent personal opinions on the strike, based on an 11-point scale where -5 = strongly oppose, 0 = neutral/no opinion, and 5 = strongly favor.

believed that the news article was biased in favor of the opposition, their public opinion judgments tended to vary in a direction consistent with their own views on the strike.³ Across UPS, Teamster, and nonpartisan groups, highly significant relationships were found between personal opinion and perceptions that Americans supported ($r = .42$, $p < .001$) or opposed ($r = -.41$, $p < .001$) the strike.

Within the control group of 54 "most neutral" students, we found that, despite a relatively low level of personal involvement in the UPS controversy, some exhibited UPS or Teamster sympathies. The apparent absence of the expected persuasive press inference among UPS and Teamsters partisans led us to wonder whether we would find an effect of perceived slant among student participants as a whole, given evidence of an effect obtained from neutral subjects in previous persuasive press inference experiments (Gunther, 1998; Gunther & Christen, 1999). To examine this possibility, post hoc analyses were conducted using the entire sample of 122 students. The findings revealed no significant relationships between students' attitudes and their perceptions of article bias. With one exception, however, the bias they perceived was directional in favor of the attitudes they held. Among students who identified with one of the two partisan groups, pro-Teamster students judged the news article to be favorable toward the Teamsters ($M = .67$) and unfavorable toward UPS ($M = -.17$). Pro-UPS students viewed the same article as more favorable toward UPS ($M = .94$) and unfavorable toward the Teamsters ($M = -.72$). Although independent-samples *t* tests showed that these differences in perceptions of bias were not significant, the direction of perceived bias was contrary to the hostile media phenomenon.

Post hoc analyses for student participants did reveal significant relationships between perceptions of article bias and perceptions of public opinion that were consistent with those predicted by the persuasive press inference. The correlations between students' attitudes, perceived article bias, estimated public opinion, and personal opinion

are given in Table 2. In the student group, perceived article bias in favor of the Teamsters was positively related to perceptions that Americans supported the strike and negatively related to perceived opposition to the strike. Similarly, perceived bias in favor of UPS was positively related to perceived opposition to the strike; the negative relationship between perceived bias in favor of UPS and perceived support for the strike was also significant. The relationships between perceptions of bias in news coverage and perceived public opinion about the strike remained significant after controlling for personal opinions and preexisting attitudes (see Table 3).

Discussion

This study examined differences in perceptions of news content and of public opinion among three groups of participants. In contrast to previous studies of the hostile media effect, partisan participants were recruited from naturally occurring work groups and were categorized as partisan based on job classification. Attitude measures confirmed that UPS

Table 2
Pearson correlations between student subjects' attitudes, perceptions of article bias, perceptions of public opinion, and personal opinion toward the UPS strike

	Attitude toward Teamsters	Attitude toward UPS	Bias toward Teamsters	Bias toward UPS	Public opinion opposition	Public opinion support
Attitude toward UPS	-.47***					
Bias toward Teamsters	.18	-.14				
Bias toward UPS	-.06	-.02	-.85***			
Public opinion opposition	-.33***	.22*	-.30**	.29**		
Public opinion support	.28**	-.19*	.24**	-.25**	-.74***	
Personal opinion	.70***	-.44***	.21*	-.13	-.43***	.34***

Note. $n = 122$.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 3

Partial correlations between student subjects' perceptions of article bias and perceptions of public opinion, controlling for attitudes and personal opinion

	Bias toward Teamsters	Bias toward UPS	Public opinion opposition
Bias toward UPS	-.85***		
Public opinion opposition	-.24**	.26**	
Public opinion support	.19*	-.23*	-.70***

Note. $n = 122$.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

and Teamster participants strongly identified with their respective partisan groups. The findings also showed that UPS and Teamster partisans reacted to the constructed news article in opposite ways. As predicted by the hostile media effect, both partisan groups perceived the article as biased but disagreed about the direction of the bias: Each saw the article as significantly biased against their own position and in favor of the other side.

However, perceptions of hostile bias in the news article did not appear to influence partisans' estimates of public opinion regarding the strike. Instead, the significant relationship between partisans' personal opinions and their perceptions of public opinion suggests that Teamster and UPS partisans formed their estimates at least in part by projecting their own opinions onto others. Of the theoretical explanations for projection discussed by Marks and Miller (1987), motivational processes probably provide the most satisfactory explanation for these perceptions of public opinion. The need to maintain confidence in their respective positions and to believe that the public supported them during the strike may have led Teamster and UPS partisans to exaggerate the degree of similarity between their opinions and the opinions of the American public.

Such results cast doubt on the presumption made in previous hostile media effect studies by Vallone et al. (1985) and Perloff (1989), but never directly tested in those studies, that a belief in the impact of biased news coverage on neutral others would lead to perceptions of general public opinion that were contrary to partisans' own point of view. Whereas experimental data from those studies indicated that partisans felt hostile coverage would influence a neutral audience against their own side, evidence obtained in the present study suggests that the effect of the "biased" news article on partisans' public opinion judgments, if it exists, is weaker than the countervailing impact of partisans' own opinions. In the present study, the explanation again may be that UPS and Teamster participants, being committed or perhaps even embattled partisans, had a much greater stake in their positions and, as noted above, a stronger motivation to validate those positions via the perception that others shared them. When it came to actually estimating opinion, this need for social support may have eclipsed the tendency among UPS and Teamster partisans to see media coverage—what they viewed as "hostile" media coverage—as a persuasive influence on others.

However, we cannot be certain from these data that the effects observed for partisans were entirely due to projection. It is possible that without a news article stimulus perceived as hostile to their own view, partisans would have been even more extreme in their assimilation of public sentiment. Inferences derived from perceived article bias

may have reduced the “looking glass perception” somewhat, even though opinion judgments continued to reflect the observer’s point of view.⁴

Another possibility is that, being highly involved in the issue, UPS and Teamster partisans may have followed general media coverage of the strike closely and thus had preexisting notions regarding the general slant of coverage that exposure to a single news article in an experimental setting failed to displace. In this instance, however, predictions regarding resulting public opinion would be similar to those for the experimental news stimulus. Consistent with existing research on the hostile media effect, we would expect partisans to perceive the subset of news content they personally had been exposed to as unfairly biased and hostile, and their impressions of public opinion would be expected to be similarly biased and hostile. That partisans were inclined to see public opinion as favoring their own position would seem to lend credence to our contention that personal opinion exerted a countervailing influence that outweighed any effect of inferences drawn from perceived hostile bias in media coverage.

Because personal opinion was measured after exposure to the news article and immediately following the measure of public opinion perceptions, we could not test these conjectures directly. We do know that if the persuasive press inference was operating in this case, it was not so forceful as to bring partisans’ perceptions of public opinion in line with their perceptions of the slant of the news article.

Unlike Teamster and UPS partisans, those students who identified with a particular partisan group exhibited a slight tendency to see article content as supportive of, rather than hostile to, their own outlook. Such differences in the direction of perceptual bias suggest a reason for the difficulty of documenting the hostile media effect in a sample of people other than strong partisans, and they also raise the question of where along the involvement continuum the shift to perceptions of hostile media bias occurs.

Most important, the pattern of bias ratings seems to indicate that attitude measures, by themselves, are not adequately capturing the quality underlying partisanship and involvement that leads to hostile bias judgments. Membership in a formal organization that is actively involved on either side of a dispute seems to impart a deeper sense of commitment and concern that, in turn, enhances the tendency to perceive news coverage as unfairly biased and hostile. It is worth noting that both Vallone et al. (1985) and Perloff (1989), who recruited subjects from partisan student associations, obtained strong evidence of a hostile media effect, while Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken (1994), who relied solely on attitude scores in classifying student subjects as partisan, found that subjects were inconsistent in their bias judgments and tended to categorize items in a direction congruent with their own attitudes. These mixed results, taken together with present findings and other research showing that group membership is a highly significant predictor of the perception of unfavorable media coverage of social groups (Gunther, 1992), suggest a conceptual clarification. While attitude extremity may be necessary, membership in a formal group (with its attendant effects on self-identity and depth of commitment) appears to be a sufficient condition for the hostile media perception.

Students also made public opinion judgments distinctly different from those made by UPS and Teamster participants. Although students’ attitudes had suggestive (but not significant) impacts on their perceptions of article bias, correlations between perceived bias and estimates of public opinion regarding the strike were significant in the directions suggested by the persuasive press inference. The import of this finding is clouded somewhat by students’ own opinions, which tended to vary in the same direction as their perceptions of bias. Nevertheless, correlations between perceived bias and perceived public opinion remained significant even after controlling for student participants’ per-

sonal opinions and their preexisting attitudes, providing some evidence that perceived media bias has an effect on opinion estimates that is distinct from projection and consistent with the persuasive press inference.

What emerges from the study, then, is an expanded model that incorporates three interrelated psychological processes: the hostile media effect, the persuasive press inference, and projection. More than one process appears to be operating when people form impressions of public opinion, and the strategies pursued apparently depend on level of involvement in the issue. When involvement is low, press coverage is more likely to be perceived as congenial, and people are likely to take these perceptions into account when predicting the opinions of others. High involvement, on the other hand, seems to strengthen the projection impulse and lead people to discount the influence of what they perceive as hostile bias in news coverage. As emphasized previously, however, we cannot eliminate the possibility that the assumed influence of hostile media coverage on others offsets the projection effect of personal opinion to some extent. The collision between projection and persuasive press inference processes under high involvement conditions is intriguing and should be examined in future research.

Conclusion

This study extends hostile media effect research in several different ways. It presents an important replication in that it offers reliable evidence of the hostile media effect from a context other than pro-Israeli and pro-Arab student perceptions of televised news coverage of the Middle East. In addition, the issue—the Teamsters strike against UPS—was discrete and arguably less involving in the long term than the diffuse and ongoing Israeli–Palestinian confrontation. Also, the availability of a news report in print provided participants with the opportunity to systematically process arguments favoring both positions on the strike. Despite these methodological differences, any of which could have weakened the predicted hostile media effect, involvement continued to have a strong impact on perceptions of hostile bias in news coverage. The results suggest that the hostile media effect may be found across many types of controversial issues and that the effect is generalizable across print as well as broadcast media.

Most important, the present study builds on previous hostile media effect research by considering the presumed effect of perceived hostile bias in news content on partisan perceptions of public opinion. Whereas past research by Vallone et al. (1985) and Perloff (1989) showed that highly involved people believed negative news coverage would have an impact on neutral others, the present study provides evidence that perceptions of hostile bias are not taken into account or are overshadowed when partisans actually estimate general public opinion. Findings indicate that partisans rely heavily on their personal opinions when estimating the opinions of others. Only those who are less involved in an issue appear to infer public opinion, at least in part, from their subjective assessments of news content, as predicted by the persuasive press inference.

The differing patterns observed for partisan and nonpartisan participants thus add novel twists to both the hostile media phenomenon and the persuasive press inference. The patterns suggest, in short, that both projection and inference processes may be operating in a given situation, but that level of involvement influences both the direction of perceived bias in news coverage and the tendency to infer public opinion from those perceptions of bias. Level of involvement appears to be a crucial factor in predicting the effect that media coverage of social issues will have on perceptions of public opinion regarding those issues.

Notes

1. This inclination is illustrated in *The Power of News* (Schudson, 1995, p. 121), where the author chides columnist George Will for suggesting that Bob Dole's popularity in 1988 was the result of C-SPAN's live coverage of the Senate, where Dole was "in his element." Schudson suggests that while George Will may have been watching C-SPAN, most Americans probably were not.

2. A possible reason for the comparatively lower response rate among Teamster participants was the internal friction that existed between supporters of then-union president Ron Carey and those of his rival, James P. Hoffa, at the time of the strike. As Teamsters Local 344 officers (known to be Carey sympathizers) had endorsed participation in the study, members who supported Hoffa may have viewed the study with suspicion, reducing the likelihood that they would complete and return the questionnaire. The lower response rate appeared to have little or no effect on results, however. Most Teamster respondents were full-time UPS employees and had a greater financial stake in the strike than part-time workers. They nonetheless exhibited symptoms consistent with a high degree of partisanship and involvement in the strike, such as polarized personal opinions and a tendency to perceive hostile bias in news coverage of the strike. The Teamsters' response rate of 51%, while lower than that of UPS managers, was acceptable for a mail survey, which (according to Neuman, 2000) typically ranges from 10% to 50%.

3. Although incidental to theoretical questions in this study, it is interesting to note that a Gallup survey taken 1 week before the tentative settlement was announced found that 55% of Americans supported the striking Teamster workers, while 27% sided with UPS (Saad, 1997). In comparison, Teamster participants in the study perceived that the public solidly favored the strike—69% to 34%—while UPS participants believed that Americans were equally divided on the issue—51% to 51%. (Because perceptions of support for and opposition to the strike were measured separately, responses summed to greater than 100%.)

4. One recent study by Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, and Chia (2001) suggests support for this outcome. Data from partisans on both sides of the primate research controversy indicate, in addition to robust projection effects, a significant relationship between perceived news coverage and estimated public opinion.

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