The Politics of Deciding What’s News:

Party Reputations, Costly Talk, and how Journalists Experience the Hostile Media Effect

Abstract: Despite renewed attention examining what sets the agenda of the news media, we know relatively little about the individual-level factors that drive journalists’ attention to particular issues. A web-based survey experiment of television and print journalists in the top 150 media markets in the United States (N=631) varied whether a news story was about an issue owned by the Republicans (tax relief) or the Democrats (health care) and whether the partisan senator of the party that owned the issue engaged in “cheap talk” or “costly talk.” Journalists believed that the costly talk stories were more newsworthy than those containing cheap talk only. However, journalists were more likely to perceive a hostile media when a member of their preferred political party was reported to have engaged in costly talk—especially when costly talk came from a partisan source whose party owned the issue.

Keywords: journalism, hostile media effect, issue ownership, media bias, newsworthiness, political parties
How Journalists Experience the Hostile Media Effect

On the evening of July 17, 2009, Walter Cronkite’s death was announced on an episode of CNN’s “Larry King Live,” guest hosted that evening by John King. One of King’s guests was then-CBS anchor Katie Couric, who recalled Cronkite telling her that because he heard complaints about his work from liberals and conservatives alike, “I must be doing something right.” Cronkite was reported to have made a similar claim in Woodhull and Snyder’s (1998) *Defining Moments in Journalism*. Scholars of political communication are likely to quickly recognize Cronkite’s experiences hearing complaints from the left and the right as being rooted in their understanding of the hostile media effect – the idea that partisans on both sides of an issue will judge neutral media coverage of that issue as biased against their own preferences. The hostile media effect is a robust phenomenon replicated on the same issue (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985; Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken 1994; Perloff, 1989), across different issues (Gunther, Christen, Liebhart & Chia, 2001; Gunther & Christen, 2002), and outside the lab in electoral contests (Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998).

The enormous success of hostile media effect research is rooted in a wide range of robust findings that “dramatically illustrates the critical role of audience variables in the mass communication process” (Gunther & Schmitt, 2002, p. 56). While this line of research has shed considerable light on how citizens process media messages, scholars have not yet turned their attention to whether judgments of bias are present in those who produce the news articles in the first place – journalists. While journalists might argue that they are assiduously moderate, and as such, conclude that they are not partisan enough to be good candidates for hostile media effects to reveal themselves, the most recent published national sample of journalists – in 2006 – revealed that 68% of American reporters identify as a liberal or conservative, the exact same
percentage as their counterparts in the citizenry at large during the same year (Weaver, Beam, Brownlee, Voakes, & Wilhoit, 2006; Jones, 2014). Whether journalists should be likely to experience the hostile media effect and to what end are open questions. On the one hand, journalists are trained professionals who work to fulfill norms that the stories they produce will be novel, balanced, and wrought with dramatic conflict (Schudson, 2001; Graber, 2004; Cook, 1996). On the other hand, professionals in other arenas have been shown to engage in motivated reasoning to pursue their ideological goals under circumstances when the decision at hand exists in a professional gray area (Braman, 2009).

It is important to examine whether reporters themselves are likely to see bias when balanced stories are presented in different partisan contexts. Moreover, it is important to determine whether judgments of bias affect whether journalists find some stories newsworthy than others. After all, the information journalists choose to include and/or discard when constructing stories creates the real-world coverage that news consumers see everyday when judging the quality of the reporting they encounter—for the way reporters construct the news is directly affected when journalists systematically determine that some items more newsworthy than others and that using some quotes rather than others would make their stories biased.

In this paper, a sample of 631 American journalists working in the top 150 media markets in the United States completed an online survey experiment in which they viewed one of six stories about health care reform in the United States. The stories were varied in two ways. First, the story either focused on an element of health care reform favored by Republicans (malpractice reform) or Democrats (mandated purchase of health care). Second, the story either contained quotes from elites from each party that varied whether the partisan elites were engaged in cheap talk – expressing viewpoints one would expect given the elites’ party identification or costly talk.
– when partisan elites attack their own party’s position in favor of another (Groeling 2010; Groeling and Baum 2009). This design allows for the first ever test of whether journalists experience the hostile media effect and a follow-up test of whether reporters make different judgments about the newsworthiness of stories based on their perceptions of a hostile media.

**Journalists’ Approaches to Covering the News**

Whether their goals are to sound public alarms, hold government officials to account, speak truth to power, or create a more informed citizenry, journalists often end up reporting what is said by official sources in power with far greater frequency than almost anything else (Bennett, 1990; Cook, 1996; Hayes & Guardino, 2013; 2010). This behavior is rooted in the professional norms and daily routines journalists follow in their pursuit of writing balanced, “objective” stories containing conflict between authoritative sources about novel topics (Groeling & Baum, 2009; Schudson, 2001; Shoemaker & Reese, 1995; Sigal, 1973). To be sure, the desire to produce neutral coverage of elite conflict fits well in a two-party system (Wagner, 2007; Hershey, 1999).

The most prominent explanation of press-state relations in the United States is W. Lance Bennett’s indexing hypothesis, which maintains that news coverage of political issues tends to be dominated by official sources and the views expressed in mainstream government debate. (Bennett 1990; 1996; 2012). Though there is considerable evidence supporting the indexing hypothesis, scholars have also demonstrated that reporters regularly act as more than indexing stenographers, more closely fulfilling the democratic requirement that a free press provides a variety of critical perspectives on issues (Althaus, 2003; Hayes & Guardino, 2013; Sartori, 1987).
Indeed, one way that journalists push beyond reporting the official party line on issues is by giving prominent attention to lawmakers who engage in “costly talk”—statements that oppose the position that the speaker’s party has staked out on the issue (Groeling, 2010; Groeling and Baum, 2009). The decision for any lawmaker to promote the party message, promote a competing message, or to stay silent is a strategic one (Sellers 2010), making costly talk all the more novel, and thus, more newsworthy.

**Why Journalists Might Be Biased Processors of the News**

The professional work American journalists do—that is, the gathering news and writing stories—is broadly designed to result in balanced, indexed stories that provide information about what the two major political parties believe about an issue (Hershey, 1999; Wagner, 2007). This article considers whether journalists who read news stories that others have produced perceive a hostile media in the same way that non-journalists do in balanced news coverage.

One kind of story, even if it is balanced, that might be likely to cause journalists to perceive bias, is one in which broad narratives that reporters believe are true are violated. For example, Jamieson and Waldman (2004) revealed that during the 2000 presidential election, reporters came to believe that George W. Bush was not very bright and that Al Gore had trouble telling the truth. They showed that the media gave regular coverage to times when Bush fumbled the English language and when Gore stretched the truth.

Reid (2012) speculated that a social identity source cue, like one from a political party, overrides the influence of actual media content on information processing. This means that even if media content is in some way genuinely biased against an individual’s perspective, he or she will not perceive it as biased if an in-group member is the messenger. In terms of attitude change, there is some evidence that costly talk is more trustworthy when the source is a member
of the in-group. But our concern is not attitude change, but perceptions of bias. Indeed, it is theoretically plausible to expect a social identity source cue to influence how media content is processed but how the processing changes as the content of the media shifts in one direction or another is more complicated. This may be especially true for Reid’s study that employed an undergraduate population, which may not reflect journalists would process the same identity cues.

Braman (2009) showed that motivated reasoning can infiltrate the decision-making from highly trained professionals. Her examination of when law students would rely on case law to make a decision or when they would rely on their ideological predispositions to make a legal judgment suggest that when a professional norm, in this case stare decisis, is clear, trained professionals follow the norms. However, if the norm is ambiguous, motivated reasoning is more likely to carry the day. Applying this theoretical and empirical insight to journalists, we might expect instances of costly talk from partisan lawmakers to feed the professional norms of creating novel drama in news stories. As such, stories containing costly talk should be viewed by professional journalists as being more newsworthy than stories containing typical conflict between partisan elites.

However, the newsworthiness of a story is independent of whether the story is balanced. As such, journalists might be likely to perceive a hostile media when costly talk occurs, even if the story is genuinely balanced. Here, other professional expectations about political coverage may affect how journalists interpret the work of their colleagues. One relevant theory to this discussion is that of issue ownership (Petrocik 1996), which posits that Americans view a particular party as being better able to handle a specific issue as compared to the other party.
Indeed, when parties can focus public attention on issues they “own,” there is some evidence that they are more likely to perform better at the ballot box.

Journalists are keen followers of conventional political wisdom. As such, they are likely to have detailed expectations about which party the public thinks owns a variety of issues. Indeed, Hayes (2010) showed that reporters actually give more favorable coverage to parties on the issues that the parties own. When a partisan engages in costly talk then, the costly talk is a threat to the party’s general position—and advantage—on the issue. Journalists who share an ideological view with the party that is receiving the costly talk might perceive the costly talk as a threat to the party’s (and the journalist’s) point of view and prospects for electoral success and consider the story containing costly talk to be biased. Moreover, this effect should be especially pronounced for owned issues, since public attention on those issues are more likely to have electoral consequences. That is, when a partisan elite is reported to present costly talk on an owned issue, that costly talk threatens the party’s ownership of the issue and any benefits the party might receive as a result of owning the issue. As such, I expect ideological journalists (journalists willing to say they are liberal or conservative) to consider stories reporting costly talk coming from ideologically similar lawmakers to be biased. This theoretical perspective yields the following hypotheses that are tested in this paper.

H1: Journalists will find stories containing a partisan lawmaker engaging in costly talk to be more newsworthy than stories in which all partisans engage in cheap talk.

H2: Neither liberal nor conservative journalists will perceive stories in which partisan lawmakers engage in competitive cheap talk to be biased.
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H3: Liberal journalists will find stories balanced containing a Democratic lawmaker engaging in costly talk to be more conservatively biased than stories in which all partisans engage in cheap talk.

H3a: The size of the effect described in H3 will be larger for issues “owned” by Democrats.

H4: Conservative journalists will find balanced stories containing a Republican lawmaker engaging in costly talk to be more liberally biased than stories in which all partisans engage in cheap talk.

H4a: The size of the effect described in H4 will be larger for issues “owned” by Republicans.

H5: Moderate journalists will not find balanced stories in which a partisan lawmaker engages in cheap talk to be any more liberally or conservatively biased than stories in which all partisans engage in cheap talk.

Experimental Design and Measures

In order to test these hypotheses, I conducted a 2x3 experiment that manipulated whether the issue covered in a news story was broadly “owned” by Republicans or Democrats (mandated purchase of health insurance v. medical device taxes) and whether the partisan elites quoted in the story were engaged in cheap talk or costly talk (both cheap talk, Republican Cheap Talk/Democrat Costly Talk, Republican Costly Talk/Democrat Cheap Talk). Research examining party reputations on issues has shown that Democrats traditionally fare better in the mind’s eye of the public on health care while Republicans hold an advantage on taxes (Petrocik, 1996; Petrocik, Benoit, & Hansen, 2003-04).

The participants in the experiment were working journalists in the top 150 media markets in the United States. The sample was created by creating a database of every reporter who covered any kind of political news for a major newspaper or the local NBC, CBS, ABC, and
FOX television affiliates in each market. Decisions about which employees of a newspaper or television station might cover politics were made by visiting the website for each news outlet. For those outlets that had staff biographies, a team of research assistants read them and created a list of reporters who covered politics. These were mostly local television stations. For newspapers and other outlets that did not include staff biographies, research assistants combed the website for any information that revealed where the employees worked. Most newspaper websites had information about the “desks” to which reporters were assigned. For outlets that provided no help with respect to the work done by their reporters, research assistants clicked on the tabs related to political news and acquired the email addresses of the bylines of reporters who had produced a story within the previous seven days.

Each reporter was emailed in the summer of 2014 at her or his station/newspaper email address and invited to participate in a study of how news reporters approach their jobs. The full database consisted of 6,733 reporters. I emailed a random sample of 2,000, introducing them to the project by explaining that the survey was seeking to understand how reporters approach their jobs and by inviting them to participate. 94 emails were bounced back to me immediately because the reporter had left the station or newspaper. Over the course of four weeks, links to the study were sent to the journalists who had agreed to participate. In addition, three follow-up emails were sent to those who did not respond to the first invitation email. In total, 631 completed the study. Each participant who completed the survey (including the experimental portion thereof) received a $5 gift card to Starbucks as a small token of appreciation.

Before the experiment began, the participants answered a battery of questions relating to demographics, political attitudes, and their judgments of the American political system. Males made up 59% of the sample while females comprised 41%. 90% of the sample was white, 35%
were Democrats while 22% were Republicans. In terms of ideology, 40% of journalists identified as liberal (including those who “leaned to the left”) while 27% identified as conservative (or leaning to the right). These numbers are highly comparable to the last two major national surveys (Weaver, Beam, Brownlee, Voakes, & Wilhout 2006; Weaver and Wilnat 2014) of journalists in the past decade. The median market size of a respondent was 71.

Participants were asked several questions asking them about their attitudes regarding which party was best able to handle a variety of issues (including medical device taxes and health insurance coverage) and which party the participants felt “conventional wisdom in America” believed which party was best at handling the same issues. 61% of the sample believed that Democrats were best able to handle health insurance coverage while 69% of the sample believed that conventional wisdom put the Democrats on top. 68% of the sample believed that Republicans were best able to handle medical device taxes while 70% of the sample believed that conventional wisdom gave the advantage on that issue to the GOP. There were no meaningful statistical differences between liberal, moderate, and conservative journalists’ individual judgments of which party owned an issue nor which party had the advantage in the mind’s eye of the American people.

The first condition in both the mandated health insurance story and the medical device tax story contained balanced stories in which Democratic and Republican lawmakers engaged in “cheap talk” on the issues. That is, in the health insurance story, the Democrat senator said “the Affordable Care Act will cover millions of Americans who have been without health insurance and makes sure that no one can be kicked off of their insurance plan because of a pre-existing condition” The Republican senator said, “Obamacare is an unconstitutional intrusion into the private lives of Americans that is going to raise taxes and hurt small businesses, which is why we
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will continue to fight to repeal it.” Additionally, the story contained a quote from the American Medical Association supporting the Affordable Care Act and a quote from Americans for Prosperity opposing it.

In the medical device tax story, the cheap talk condition Democratic senator said, “Device repeal could cause a domino effect with the insurance industry and big pharmaceutical companies wanting special carve outs too” while the Republican said, “we need to cut this onerous tax this year, which has already resulted in lost jobs and cuts in R&D because it threatens our global leadership in the development of new medical technologies.” For each quote on each issue, the quotations were direct quotes from actual lawmakers, though the rest of the stories were carefully written to achieve overall balance in the stories.

In the Democrat Cheap Talk/Republican Costly talk (Republican Cheap Talk/Democratic Costly talk) condition, the Democratic (Republican) lawmaker says the same quote while the Republican (Democratic) lawmaker is quoted with the words the American Medical Association (Americans for Prosperity) spokesperson said in the first condition. To balance the story, the story included the Americans for Prosperity (American Medical Association) quote and added a second quote from another Republican (Democratic) lawmaker who provided the same quote the Republican (Democratic) lawmaker gave in the first condition. Thus, the stories contain an equal number of arguments on each side of the issue, even though one partisan lawmaker engages in costly talk in each treatment condition.

To measure newsworthiness, the journalists were asked, “on a scale from 1 to 7, where 7 is the most newsworthy and 1 is the least newsworthy, how newsworthy was the story you just read?” In order to measure perceptions of bias, the journalists were asked, “on a scale of 1 to 7,
where 1 is very conservatively biased, 4 is balanced, and 7 is very liberally biased, how would you categorize the story you just read?”

**Results**

Following correlational evidence from Groeling and Baum (2009) and Groeling (2010) hypothesis 1 posits that journalists will find stories containing costly talk to be more newsworthy than stories containing cheap talk among partisan lawmakers. Importantly, journalists were not more likely to think one of the cheap talk stories was more newsworthy than the other cheap talk story. Collapsing the two cheap talk conditions, an ANOVA comparing the mean newsworthiness values for the cheap talk and costly talk conditions revealed that journalists were far more likely to rate costly talk stories as more newsworthy than cheap talk stories for both the medical device tax issue and the mandated health insurance coverage issue (p<.001).

For the mandate, the story containing cheap talk between partisan elites and interest groups barely surpassed the midpoint of the newsworthiness measure. This is not surprising as the Affordable Care Act’s requirement for Americans to purchase health insurance or face a penalty has been a part of public conversation for at least five years. However, when an elected official in either political party engages in costly talk about the issue, Figure 1 shows that the mean newsworthiness of the story jumped from 4.43 to 6.4.

[Figure 1 about here]

As was the case for the mandated insurance coverage issue, a story containing cheap talk about a medical device tax repeal was not seen as particularly newsworthy by journalists. Figure 1 shows that the average newsworthiness of the story was 4.9 while the same issue covered with one partisan lawmaker engaging in costly talk resulted in a newsworthiness average of 6.7.

[Figure 2 about here]
Figure 2 breaks down the results by issue and by the ideological orientation of the journalists in the sample. Indeed, there is no statistically discernible difference between how liberal, moderate, and conservative journalists rate the newsworthiness of each story. Across ideological orientations, reporters found the stories containing costly talk to be more newsworthy than the stories containing cheap talk. The lack of difference held regardless of which party the journalists perceived to “own” the issue.

Just as Groeling and Baum (2009) found with respect to lawmakers on Sunday morning talk shows seeing their sound bites make the evening news, journalists across the United States are systematically more likely to find a story to be newsworthy if a lawmaker engages in costly talk. But, do they find those same stories to be biased? What is more, does the direction of the bias depend upon which party is engaging in the costly talk and whether the party in question “owns” the issue?

Hypothesis 2 suggests that balanced stories containing cheap talk will not be perceived as biased. This expectation departs from traditional expectations in hostile media effect research that shows that partisans interpret balanced stories as hostile to the partisans’ point of view. Here the expectation is that professional norms and routines of coverage that preference indexed conflict should result in reporters judging the stories to be balanced because the partisan lawmakers are conforming to the expectations of conventional wisdom. Indeed, perceptions of a hostile media were absent on these stories. Figure 3 shows that journalists viewed the two cheap talk stories as balanced. Indeed, conservative and liberal journalists were not more likely to judge these stories as being biased against their point of view.

[Figure 3 about here]
However, for the mandate story – the Democratic Party’s owned issue in the experiment – when Democrats engaged in costly talk in the story, liberal journalists were far more likely to perceive the story as being conservatively biased. The perceived bias score for liberal journalists fell from 3.8 (a balanced story) to 2.2 (a conservatively biased story), confirming H3. Conservative journalists ratings of the Democrat costly talk mandate story barely moved (4.2 in the cheap talk condition, 4.1 in the costly talk condition). On the other hand, Figure 3 shows that when Republicans engaged in costly talk on the mandate story, conservative journalists were the ones perceiving a bias – but in a liberal direction, confirming H4. Liberal journalists’ opinions about the bias in the cheap talk mandate story and the Republican costly talk story were not statistically different from each other. Moderate journalists perceptions of bias did not change across the three conditions in the mandate story.

Turning to the Republican-owned issue in the study, the medical device tax, conservative journalists perceived the Republican costly talk condition to be liberally biased, moving from a bias rating of 3.7 in the cheap talk condition all the way to 6.2 in the costly talk condition, consistent with H4. Moreover, comparing the shift in conservative journalists’ attitudes in the Republican costly talk condition in the mandate story to the medical device story revealed that the effect was significantly larger (p<.05) in the device story, confirming H4a. Liberal journalists were not more likely to find the Republican costly talk story to be biased. Rejecting H3, but confirming H3a, liberal journalists were not more likely to find the Democratic costly talk condition to be conservatively biased for the medical device tax story. To wit, liberal journalists only perceived a balanced story to be conservatively biased when Democrats engaged in costly talk on an owned issue. When Democrats engaged in costly talk in a balanced story for an issue owned by Republicans, liberal journalists perceived the story to be balanced.
Conservative journalists, on the other hand, always found Republicans engaging in costly talk in a balanced story to be evidence of liberal bias, though the magnitude of the effect was larger for the issue the Republican Party was perceived to own.

**Discussion**

One alternative explanation for the findings highlighting the differences in how liberal and conservative journalists perceive the hostile media effect comes from social identity theory. Hoffner and Rehkoff (2011) analyzed hostile media perceptions and perceived media influence among Republicans and Democrats before and after the 2004 U.S. presidential election. They found important differences in perceptions of bias based on each party’s standing at various points during the election season. Republicans began with higher perceptions of media bias but these perceptions largely melted away after George W. Bush was re-elected, suggesting that group status is a key element in explaining the dynamics of the hostile media effect. Hartman and Tanis (2012) also found that ingroup identification and group status alter perceptions of media bias because news coverage of a debate between groups should raise the salience of social identity for members of each group.

To account for this possibility, I tried to assess whether conservative and liberal journalists saw their group political status differently, at least with respect health care reform. We asked our participants whether they thought that, when considering the implementation of health care reform, it was more important that President Obama, a Democrat, occupied the White House or that the Republican Party held the majority in the U.S. House of Representatives. Across liberals, conservatives and moderates, about 2/3 of participants believed that the occupant of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue held the catbird’s seat. However, there were no differences between those who thought it was more important that the GOP controlled the House of
Representatives and those who thought having a Democrat in the White House was more crucial to health care reform with respect to comparing perceptions of newsworthiness or bias across the experimental conditions. Thus, the perceived status of liberals and conservatives in Washington, D.C.—at least in terms of having the political capital to push or block health care reforms—did not meaningfully contribute to individual reporters’ perceptions of newsworthiness and bias in the stories.

Another question that can be asked about these results is whether they are moderated by how personally important the issue is to the individual judging whether a story is biased or balanced. To attempt to account for this possibility, I also asked the participants to rank the issues they were about in the survey (15 issue) by selecting the five issues that were most important to them and the five issues that were the least important to them. If issue importance is affecting the lack of a finding with respect to liberal journalists believing Democratic costly talk was not evidence of conservative bias in the medical device tax story, we might expect that most liberal journalists did not find the issue to be important enough to look for bias. Previous research suggests that perceptions of the reach of a story influences whether partisans think a balanced story is biased (Gunther & Liebhart, 2006).

Liberal journalists who placed the medical device tax issue in their “top five” were not more likely than those who placed it in their “bottom five” to perceive conservative bias in the Democratic costly talk condition. Thus, the evidence suggests that, at least with these stories, liberal journalists are only more likely to perceive a hostile media when a Democrat engages in costly talk on a Democratically-owned issue. Does this mean that conservative journalists are more likely to perceive a hostile media than liberal journalists? Perhaps. But since health care is an issue that is generally owned by the Democrats, it could be that conservative journalists were
interpreting the various conditions of coverage of each story through the lens of health care more generally and thus perceiving liberal bias in Republican costly talk conditions because the general topic area favored Democrats in the first place. Recall that participants were asked which party was better able to handle the medical device tax issue – and that journalists of all ideological stripes were more likely to say that Republicans had the advantage – but future research should expand the issue areas studied to provide a robustness check to the generalizability of the findings presented here.

On the one hand, it is comforting to demonstrate that when partisan politicians are engaging in what we might think of as typical debate, journalists steeped in professional norms of objectivity and balance perceive the work of their peers who chronicle such debate to be balanced and fair. Just as law students put their personal political opinions aside and follow the law when being asked to decide a case where the case law is clear (Braman 2009), journalists put aside their own ideological predispositions when judging reporting that reflects conventional political wisdom. On the other hand – and even though they systematically believe that the stories are more newsworthy – journalists see bias in balanced stories that quote a partisan politician engaging in costly talk. This seems to be especially true for conservative journalists, though the evidence reported here shows that liberal reporters are not immune from the hostile media effect either. Whether journalists are systematically more likely to choose to use in their own stories a “costly talk” quote from a lawmaker from their preferred party remains an important, open question.

Conclusion

The hostile media effect is a durable, robust finding in political communication and political psychology scholarship. This paper presents the first evidence that journalists
themselves are susceptible to this effect, but only under conditions when politicians sharing their
general ideology engage in costly talk on issues. Thus, even when journalists themselves read
balanced stories in the news, there is pervasive evidence of motivated reasoning in the ranks of
the fourth estate.
References


Figure 1: Newsworthiness as a Function of Costly Talk
Figure 2: Comparing the Ideological Orientations of Journalists with Perceptions of the Newsworthiness of Cheap Talk and Costly Talk
Figure 3: Perceptions of Bias as a Function of Journalists’ Ideology, Issue Ownership, and Costly Talk