

Perceptions of Media Bias: viewing the news through ideological cues

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A Senior Honor Thesis Submitted to the
Department of Political Science, University of
California, San Diego

April 1, 2013

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Acknowledgements:

This paper would not have been possible if it wasn't for several individuals who either directly or indirectly provided me with the necessary guidance, assistance and encouragement to complete this study. My utmost gratitude goes to my advisor, Professor Thad Kousser, for his unfailing support and helpful suggestions. From the very beginning, he has relieved many of my fears of the oft-intimidating thesis project. I consider it a great privilege to work with such a notable Professor. I would also like to thank Professor Glenn Smith for his kindness and allowing me to run my experiment. This thesis literally would not have been possible without the generosity of Professor Smith, as well as, Professor Kousser who both agreed to lend me time out of their class period so that I could run my experiment. I thank the ever enthusiasts Annelise Sklar who was so helpful in research assistance and always pointed me towards the right direction when I couldn't find the research I was looking for.

I am also very grateful for my amazing roommates: Amanda Beall and Taylor Munroe. First, thank you for your unconditional support during this process and being devoted assistants for my thesis experiment. More importantly, thank for your friendships. UCSD would not have been the same with you two. I wish to thank my Mother and Father, Christy and Tracey Chance. Their love and support provided me with my inspiration and was my driving force. Thank you for understanding when I hadn't called in weeks, nor visited in months, but thank you even more for understanding and continuing to check in on my progress and mental sanity. You guys have given me the greatest gift I could ever receive – my education and for that I owe you everything.

Lastly, thank you to the One above us all and Philippians 3:14 – “I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength”. His spiritual guidance provided me with the mental and physical strength to trudge on despite the overwhelming hurdles of this thesis project.

Abstract: The modern media environment is more polarized than ever before with partisan news audiences self-selecting into news channels that cater to their political preferences. Moreover, the media bias debate has heightened the overall consensus that the majority believes the media is biased, despite a lack of conformity in scholarly research and evidence that points to the underlying causes and factors. An alternative assumption is that news consumer's interpersonal factors such as ideology and perceptions of bias cause the notion that the media is biased. I set forth an experimental design to test if ideological cues, via the outlet label, caused perceptions of bias in the source's news content. My results confirm that when identical news content was attributed to either the MSNBC, FOX, or CNN outlet label perceptions of bias were found and immensely varied among each outlet variant. Indicating that individuals perceive bias in the content even when it is not there.

I. Chapter One

i. Introduction

The news media plays an important role in society. It sets the stage for political news, manages their agenda, sources, and controls the information. It functions as a window to the outside world, and possesses the ability to shape public knowledge, attitudes, and voting behavior. It is no surprise then that the media is one of the most criticized institutions in America. Yet television remains the dominant source of news with 71% of the public getting most of their national and international Television¹. This dominant and powerful role as public informants that the news media plays justifies a lot of the hype associated with the media bias debate.

“Those of us who pay close attention to the news media have known for years that the So-Called Liberal Media was a myth perpetrated by the GOP...The GOP has complained about an alleged liberal media bias for years as a tool for browbeating the media towards favorable and sheepish coverage, while wanting voters to ignore that it is conservative Corporate America that actually owns the large majority of that same media and dictates its content.” – Steve Soto, www.theleftcoaster.com².

“Just don't ask a liberal if there is a liberal bias in the national news media. In answer to that question you'll continue to hear what conservatives have been hearing for decades. No matter how many times the obvious is proven, and no matter how many ways the evidence has been documented, the response from the liberal elites is always the same. Noise.” – Brent Bozell, Media Research Center³.

“I'm convinced that if there were no Fox News, I might be two or three percentage points higher in the polls.” – President Obama, during his 2008 campaign⁴.

“Annoy the media: Reelect Bush” – Slogan in George H.W. Bush reelection campaign⁵.

Very few issues can spark more controversy than claims of media bias in political news. Arguably, claims of media bias that ignite such fumes are influenced by the very ideologies and partisanship that pundits, scholars, journalists and politicians hold. For these reasons, the discussion typically produces more confusion than clarity. The debate over whether, how, and to what extent does the media bias its news content began decades ago. All the while, the arguments have escalated and intensified over questions such as – does media bias exist, and if so, in what direction? Does media bias influence opinions and attitudes of individuals? Did individuals’ perceptions of bias bolster the public’s cynicism in the media? Whatever the question is, different explanations have been made. There are liberal critics who argue that the media favors conservatives, and feed from the hands of their corporate bosses. Then there are conservative critics who blame the media for reporting objective, liberal slanted news due to the undeniable majority of liberal journalists. Although it seems as if there was two opposing sides of bias on the political spectrum then maybe that cancels out the media bias effect?

Another study that explains a different notion as to what explain different perceptions of bias in the media was found in (Niven, 2002) which suggest that the issue of media bias is more complex and rooted in interpersonal factors and beliefs. (Niven, 2002) claims that individuals’ formulate opinions of media bias based on their own prejudices with little evidence as to why. After all, people do view things from different perspectives, and can easily be influenced by a number of factors such as their background, partisanship, religion and so on. It may seem natural for individuals to

believe something is not biased when they agree with the article, and biased when they don't agree with it.

Yet a lot of questions that pertain to the media bias debated are not answered here. When do people not agree with the article and how do they evaluate the bias in the news content? Is it the source of the news article that influences individuals to formulate perceptions of bias in the news content? Or do people observe biases when they do not agree with the information? To a certain extent, the literature review that follows provides further insight and understanding to the questions above. After discussing past academic discourse on the subject matter and other plausible answers, I focus primarily on the research questions that were left unaddressed or not completely answered.

ii. The Puzzle and Statement of Research Question

Regarding the topic of media bias, my research focuses on how individual perceptions of media bias affect their ability to properly assess bias in the news content. More specifically, is media bias a matter of perception where individuals form such perceptions based off their own prior beliefs? Or is the actual content of information presented by the media? The following literature review will illustrate the vast and distinct studies on media bias. As well as, many determinants and measures of political slant in the news have been well documented. There are many contexts in which media bias is discussed, however, this paper does not wish to prove if media bias exists in this outlet or another, nor do I wish to study whether the media as a whole is ideologically liberal or conservative. Instead I focus on the realization that, regardless of whom is to blame for media bias, there is a general consensus among the public that the media is biased. And it is my intention to study how people interact with news information if they perceive bias in the media. In other words, have individuals adjusted to the media slanting their news, or do they take media bias news into account when processing news stories.

This paper holds all the past material into perspective to understand my main research questions:

1. How do individual's perceptions of politically biased news influence their ability to process political information?
2. Is there a pattern or variation between people's perception of bias and their ability to retain information?

3. More specifically how do perceptions of ideological bias in the news media affect individuals' opinions on news stories?

In regards to the question of – how do perceptions of ideological bias cause individuals to ignore or process political information differently? One study by (Smith, 2010) might provide some insight regarding this question. In examining how elite attacks influence perception of media bias Smith (2010) stated “elite attacks work on their own – independent of any actual slant in the news – providing cues to the public from political elites” (Smith, p. 322). What Smith found was that regardless of any actual bias in the news content, when the individual read an article that a political elite previously attacked, the individual was more likely to believe the article was biased in the direction of that attack. This was especially prevalent among individuals whose partisanship aligned closely with the elite. For instance when both Republicans and Democrats read an article that Senator John McCain attacked as having a liberal bias, more Republicans deemed the article as liberally bias. Similarly, if it was Obama that attacked the article as conservatively biased, Smith (2010) found that compared to Republicans more Democrats believed the article had a conservative biased.

Another possibility that may explain my research questions is that individuals who have perceptions of media bias will take into account the source of the news when formulating opinions of any ideological slant in the news content. Earlier research (Vallone, Ross and Lepper, 1985) provide a degree of clarity to this puzzle. Vallone, et al. (1985) posited that when the issue is controversial, individuals perceive bias in the news are more likely to believe that bias is against there own ideology. Vallone, et al., 1985 coined this notion as the hostile-media phenomenon. Thus, in addition to elite

attacks, individual partisanship and ideologies are other factors impacting our perceptions of media bias.

Another level of my research applies this notion of “heuristics” which act as information short cuts or cues to the readers. Just like Smith (2010) illustrated, individuals will use cues when evaluating the news. However, in his research political elites served the function as elite cues. Whereas, as you will see in my research design I argue that perhaps the source of the news will function as an ideological cue to the reader. This information short cut impacts how individuals process and engage in the news content and increases the likelihood of perceiving bias. I believe that irrespective of any ideological slant in the news content, individuals who hold prior-beliefs that the news source is biased will be influenced under those conditions and subsequently process news content differently.

The variation of the apparent bias in the political news is different among individuals, and persistent debates of media bias appear to have some degree of influence on the public perceptions of the news (Niven, 2002). Looking at the Pew Research Center on *news consumption trends in the United States* data shows that most Americans are skeptical toward the media. According to their 2012 report on news consumption, 68 percent of the public believes the media is politically biased⁶. Moreover, the statistics for news audience is fragmented along partisan lines. 52 percent of Republicans watch Fox News, compared to 22 percent of democrats. Conversely, only 16 percent of Republicans watch MSNBC, compared to 58 percent of democrats⁷. This trend of the news audience being politically fragmented along partisan lines is bound to have some consequences. This very idea that led me to wonder, if there was a relationship between how news

content, from different sources, influence how individuals process political news? If individuals believe the media is biased are they more likely or less likely to retain information? Do individual's perception of bias cause them to take into account political information differently? And does ideological bias news create a roadblock for the media to properly inform the public? All of these questions will be explored and answered as I conduct my research design and experiment. Until then, a summary of the past literature review is necessary to answer previous questions regarding media bias and the relevant material on the subject.

iii. Literature Review

Past literature on media bias comes in many shapes and sizes, because of this I organize literature review into themes. The first category is the impact that biased media content has on the average voter, namely their attitude and voting behavior. This will become relevant to my research to show that while conservatives can watch conservative news and liberals can watch liberal news, media bias still matters. The second category of literature review is the empirical studies measuring the political slant of news content in the media. This will be useful for my own experiment, as I need to know which news networks lean to the left or right of the ideological spectrum. The third category of literature review deals with the questions pertaining to what drives media bias and perceived bias. This category will provide further a more in-depth understanding behind the political slant factors in the news and overall leads to one of my underlining questions of what op individuals do with political information when they perceive the news as ideologically bias.

News content can have a significant effect on political attitudes and voting behavior as documented by (DellaVigna and Kaplan, 2006; Gentzkow and Shapiro 2004). For instance, Rupert Murdoch established the 24-hour Fox News Channel in October of 1996 to compete with cable news networks like CNN, that Republicans and conservatives alike claimed was too liberal. “By June 2000, 17.3 percent of the US population reported watching Fox News regularly” (DellaVigna, *et al.*, 2006: 1)⁸. Due to Fox News Channel being so new to the cable industry it offered different perspectives of news information, DellaVigna and Kaplan (2006) could examine how Fox News’ entry into cable markets impacted public behavior and voting. They argue that because “Fox

News is significantly to the right of all the other mainstream television networks (ABC, CBS, CNN, and NBC)... [it] is likely to have a systematic and significant effect on the available political information in that cable market” (DellaVigna, et al., 2006: 2). Their argument suggested that if news media effects were real then people in these Fox News markets would vote more conservatively than those who were not. The evidence in DellaVigna and Kaplan (2006) suggested exactly that. In fact, in comparison of Republican vote share between 1996 and 2000 for the towns that adopted Fox News and the non-Fox News towns, indicated that the entry of Fox News increased the Republican vote share in the 2000 Presidential election. Moreover, there was no effect on the Republican vote share in the 1992 and 1996 elections when Fox News did not yet exist in the market. DellaVigna et al. (2006) evidence demonstrate that Fox News had a significant effect on the 2000 elections, revealing that 3% – 8% of Fox News’ viewers voted Republican after Fox entered into the cable markets.

Additional research illustrates that electoral consequences can be a result of news networks who seek to maximize their profits by responding to the demands of their partisan audience. For instance, when news outlets only give partial news coverage, the resulting consequences leads to an electorate that is misinformed and which in turn effects voting behavior. Bernhardt et al. (2008) study supports this claim. “If media bias occurs, listeners to the liberal or conservative news outlet are incompletely informed about facts that are unfavorable for “their” candidate... Even if citizens are completely rational and take media bias into account, they cannot recover all of the missing information, which can lead to the election of the wrong candidate” (Bernhardt et al., 2008: 19). His study demonstrates how electoral consequences arise from profit-driven

media companies portraying only one-side of the news. Specifically, when they tailor their news programs to satisfy the consumer demands of their partisan audience. In turn, this has affected the voting behavior and attitudes of individuals.

Endersby (2011) examined media bias in Great Britain and studied the relationship between *real or perceived bias* in the media by consumers' ideological preferences. He argued that media bias was evident in Great Britain due to the openness of the press in favoring one political party or another. Despite if bias in the news was real or perceived, Endersby (2011) revealed that political slant in news content still had a significant effect on voting behavior. He found that a strong relationship exists between party preference and the type of newspapers read most often. Among labor party identifiers, 56 percent read pro-Labour newspapers, and 77 percent of Tories read Conservative papers. Similarly, those in favor of Conservative newspapers casted 76.9 percent of their votes for the Tories; readers of Labour papers gave 80.4 percent of their votes for Labour (Endersby, 2011: 13).

Further research conducted by Gerber, Karlan and Bergan (2007) revealed that voter's opinions and preferences are effected by the type of news they read. In their experiment, participants received either the *Washington Times* or the *Washington Post*. The conventional wisdom of these two newspapers was that the *Washington Times* leaned to the right of the political spectrum, and the *Post* leaned to the left. Which scholarly research confirmed this wisdom, (Groseclose and Miylo, 2005). Gerber et al. (2007) argued that when a reader receives news from a newspaper with a distinct political perspective that reader is more likely to vote for the candidate endorsed by that newspaper. For instance, "among those subjects who reported voting, getting the *Post* is

estimated to increase the probability of selecting the Democrat by between 7.9 percentage points and 11.4 percentage points” (Gerber et al., 2007: 14). While this review of research illustrates the effects of media bias on voting behavior and attitudes, as well as the electoral challenges that media bias causes. There are other challenges and factors of the debate. Another important theme pertaining to the media bias discussion deals with systematic measurement for the degree of ideologically slant in the news content.

An important measurement of political slant in news outlets to determine if the news source leans “left or right” on the ideological spectrum was conducted by Groseclose and Miylo (2005). By analyzing a collection of news content, Groseclose and Miylo (2005) propose a new measure of ideological content based on the number of citations of think tanks calculated in the content. They then compared the number of citations and type citations from think tanks in news content, to the number of times members of the U.S. House of Representatives cited those same think-tanks. What is important for my research is the fact that Groseclose and Miylo (2005) measurement provides methodological evidence that MSNBC does slant their news in a liberal direction, and also that Fox News leans towards the right of the ideological spectrum, while CNN is found to be the more moderate of the two, and lies in the middle of MSNBC and FOX. These will be the three networks that I will use in my experimental design.

Additional arguments of media bias pertain to the factors that drive media. One relevant piece of literature is research conducted by Gentzkow and Shapiro (2006) who claim that media bias is driven by consumer preferences for politically slanted news. Their evidence reveals how market competition and profit-maximizing incentives are

some of the factors at play when privately owned news outlets tailor their news content to the ideological preferences of its audience. Moreover, Gentzkow and Shapiro (2006) illustrate that there is a relationship between consumer demand for slant (based on their own ideology) and the newspaper's response by supplying that slant. "We find that this "ideal slant" varies strongly with consumers' political beliefs, and that deviations from consumers' preferred slant involve a nontrivial sacrifice in circulation and, hence, profits" (Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2006: 18). For instance, if a newspaper circulated in a neighborhood that was predominately Democrat, and this area preferred the newspaper to have a certain degree of liberal slant then shifting that slant to the right of the political spectrum would result in a drop of demand from that Democrat audience. Gentzkow and Shapiro (2006) put it this way, "Shifting a paper from a zip code's ideal point to a level of slant one standard deviation away would reduce the fraction of households reading by about 3 percent" (Gentzkow and Shapiro, pg. 26). Their results conclude that this reduction in reading is equivalent to the effect of an 8 percent increase in price (Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2006: 26). Therefore, consumers are more likely to read a newspaper whose political slant is close to their own ideology, and profit-maximization is highest when the ideal demand for political slant is met by these privately owned news companies. As Gentzkow et al. (2006) explains, "this creates a strong economic incentive for newspapers to tailor their slant to suit the political leanings of their geographic market" (Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2006: 28).

One question regarding whether it is such a bad thing that news consumers have a variety of accessible news choices to select into? After all more choices means more viewpoints on issues. To answer this question, research conducted by Scott (2005) who

argues that with the proliferation of news choices didn't offer a wide variation of information and diverse views on issues as many people would suspect. What happened was this concept of "newsroom convergence" which refers to bringing television, radio and online journalists into the same production quarters. This of course cuts down production costs by eliminating overlapping news ports and instead generate one set of news converge from cross-trained media journalist that can be repackaged into multiple channels and sent out to the public (Scott 2005: p. 26). As Scott states "The logic behind this is certainly not to very expensively increase the diversity of coverage and perspective by integrating and copresenting four different takes on public affairs" (Scott: 2005, p. 26). The result of this being that newsroom convergence reduces the amount of journalists covering any particular story, the results being – a less diverse news media over more homogenous channels.

iv. My Answers

The technological advancements of the last 20th and early 21st century arguably made it easier for sophisticated news consumers to self-select into news market that met their partisan views. By 1996 most news media networks, print and broadcasted, were available online. The rise of the Internet allows for news information to become more readily available, and individuals can receive news 24-hours a day at little to no cost. In turn, individuals are flooded with information from online websites and news channels, blogs, social media, apps, podcasts, etc. As research by Scott (2005) revealed that by 2002 there were approximately 32,000 news outlets on the web. While the modern media environment has proliferated it simultaneously became more individualized. News consumers can now, more than ever before, self-select into news markets that most likely fit their political beliefs and be assured the news they receive from such outlets confirm those beliefs. So why then all this hype of media bias if consumers are not forced to watch, read or hear news that go against their political beliefs?

Individuals' own perceptions of bias can certainly be a factor when perceiving media bias. Vallone et al. (1985) describes how the hostile media effect happens when social identity and perceptions function as a filter through which people perceive the outside world. Research on this phenomenon has led to an important finding. Together with the intense debates on media bias and people's own perception of biases have led to unhealthy amounts of skepticism in the mainstream media. Yet the nature of that apparent bias in the news varies (Eveland and Shah, 2003). For instance (Eveland and Shah, 2003) find that a range of individual-level factors have led to perceptions of media bias in the absence of objective media bias, such as the strength of partisanship,

ideological similarities in political discussion, and cues within the media environment concerning press bias.

Earlier research claims that the news media does have the ability to shape public opinion despite people's own perceptions of bias. The effects of bias news on individual's attitudes are real as psychologists', Anastasio, Rose, and Chapman, (1999) argue in their study. Anastasio, et al. (1999) call them homogenous opinions, in which the media often attempts to present information that emphasizes what they believe their audiences want to hear ("in-group" – audience members, versus "out-group" – non-audience members or the general public). Homogenous opinions illustrate the consequences that fragmented media environment and partisan news can have on individual's attitudes. Anastasio et al. (1999) believe that rather than reporting how the general public feels about certain issues (i.e., the Simpson trial, Clinton's impeachment trial), "the media often considers reporting opinions along group lines... we found that such exposure can exacerbate the robust tendency to side with the in-group, perhaps by minimizing the motivation to carefully consider the information at hand" (Anastasio et al., pg. 5). Anastasio et al. also believe that there are two major routes of persuasion through which attitude can change – the central and peripheral route. Heterogeneous opinions in the news lead to the central route of persuasion, which is a motivational factor for individuals to carefully perceive opinions in the news and consider all sides. On the other hand, homogenous coverage and opinions in the news employ the "peripheral" route of persuasion. They describe this as a "mental shortcut" that individuals use when opinions are homogenized, and lack the motivation of carefully processing information

and opinions of news coverage. Anastasio, et al. (1999) argues that in-group membership is thought to function as a peripheral cue in the route of persuasion.

In the last 25 years, more Americans are now more than ever skeptical of mainstream media⁹. The modern communication realities and technologies have changed the way news media reaches its audiences and delivers its message. The effects of managed messages, targeted audiences, and proliferated news channels have left the modern media environment more polarized than ever before. No longer, like in previous decades, do majority of individuals receive the same news message from the evening news. By the same token, no longer do news media have the same reach and large audiences to get their message out. Taking into account the impacts of media bias from previous literature, the hostile-media effect phenomena, and the effects of homogenized news content I begin to study the consequences of a fragmented media environment. As well as, the real impact it could have on the role of the free press as political and public informants.

Despite all the material on media bias an important question remains left open. What is the consequence of a fragmented television news audience? As Bennet and Iyengar (2008) suggest, “relatively few efforts have been made to incorporate such perspectives into comprehensive theories or research agendas that may reconcile the paradox between the growing centrality of media in governance processes and its shrinking credibility and attention focus in the lives of citizens, particularly given the waning of mass media influence in the lives of most citizens” (Bennet and Iyengar, 2008: 7). This paper explores the relationship between perceived political bias and the political polarization of news audiences. With respect to past evidence, I acknowledge the

important role the media plays in our system of government – it fulfills the function as the median in which the public receives information about politics, government, and recent events. Political polarization of news audiences may be a consequence of the heightened media debate, proliferation of news channels, and more but the consequences of a polarized news audience is more of my concern. I set out to examine what accounts for the vast majority of the public believing that the media is biased, and more importantly what they do with the information when they hold perceptions of bias. During a time of unhealthy levels in skepticism regarding mainstream news media and a partisan media environment, it is quite possible that the likelihood of individuals retaining information from news sources, and the conditions under which they perceive ideological bias will vary depending on the ideological reputation of the news source.

In summary, the literature review provides analytical research from Groseclose and Miylo (2005) suggesting that the majority of mainstream media outlets are liberal, yet Fox News currently holds some of the highest audience ratings. Even more research has argued that the media bias is profit-driven. That is when people self-select into certain media outlets, and as a result the media responds to the demands of their partisan audience by reporting impartial information (Bernhardt, Krasa, and Polborn 2008; Bovitz, Druckman and Lupia 2002). Additional research has suggested that the media is not actually ideologically biased but that people deem the news content biased when the content is hostile towards their political beliefs (Vallone et al, 1985; Viven 2002; Zaller 1996).

These various arguments regarding the unresolved media bias debate leaves us with a puzzling phenomenon. Which is *what else* drives this notion that the media is

biased? What explains this phenomenon is the purpose of my research design. I set out to explain what accounts for the vast majority of the public believing that the media is biased, and more importantly what they do with the information if they hold biased perceptions of the media.

v. My Theory and Argument to Support my Answer

I will argue that interpersonal factors and information processing are the predominant factors that explain America's conviction that the media is biased. Information processing plays a fundamental role in this question. For instance, individuals process information through two main routes – the central and peripheral route (Petty and Cacioppo 1986; Anastasio, Rose, and Chapman 1999). The central route is when individuals process information they are considerate of multiple viewpoints, and are careful when evaluating the content. The peripheral route is known as the “mental shortcuts” that individuals take when processing information. Again Anastasio, et al. (1999) argues that the peripheral route is when individuals make judgments based on simplistic reactions to some stimuli, which is mostly, only perceptibly related to the news content (Anastasio, et al 1999). Associated with the peripheral route of information processing is the use of heuristic cues, that is, even after an individual has read or scanned information they are struck by a stimulus motivated by cognition (Chaiken 1980; Chen, Duckworth, and Chaiken 1999). An implication of this is that individuals can form judgments and opinions on the basis of a thoughtful perception. Chen et al. (1999) claims “Heuristics are knowledge structures, presumably learned and stored in memory” (Chen et al, pg. 2). The heuristic tool is efficient for individuals to utilize because it allows them to make decisions regarding the information without actually evaluating the information in-depth. Thus relying on heuristic cues saves the individual time and effort to make political decisions and judgments when processing complex issues.

The research on information processing also suggests that individuals may rely on ideological cues oriented with news outlets when they are confronted with news content

from that outlet. In turn, individuals may not utilize the central route of information processing when they are assessing news information but instead rely on heuristic cues to make judgments regarding the news information. According to Chen et al. (1999) if heuristics are based off prior knowledge that individuals have stored in their memory, then one could argue that together the proliferation of consumer choices in media outlets and decades of media bias disputes have led individuals to hold prior judgments regarding the ideological orientations of media outlets. This also provides an additional explanation for why the modern media environment is so polarized and why audiences are split along partisan lines.

Individuals use a simple heuristic: the media outlet label. The outlet label then functions as the “mental shortcut”, i.e. the information shortcut that individuals utilize when processing information. The individual’s self-assessment of the ideological position of the news outlet allows individuals to distinguish between outlets as either “hostile” or “friendly” toward their political beliefs. Moreover, the argument follows that if the individual perceives the news network as bias, via the outlet cue, then they will also believe news content will be bias in the same direction. Prior research has shown that the perception of bias in the news content deals with the individuals’ perception of the source (Gunther and Schmit 2004). The critical component of my research design is the assumption that individuals rely on heuristic cues to distinguish between the various and different media outlets out there; but, more importantly, relying on ideological cues when evaluating and forming opinions in regard to news information.

Based on the outlet label alone, perceptions of ideological bias can be detrimental to the democratic process. It not only poses the ability to shape how we perceive and

evaluate news content but also the way we perceive different ideologies and ideals from our own. My hypotheses follows.

Hypothesis 1: If Individuals believe a media outlet is ideologically slanted in a liberal or conservative direction, they will also perceive the news content from that outlet to be ideological slanted in the same direction.

Null Hypothesis 1: There is no difference in the individuals belief of outlet ideological orientation and their perceptions of bias in the subsequent news content of that outlet.

The argument in (H1) reasons that people who associate bias in news networks are just as likely to perceive bias in the subsequent information. (H1) assumes that the outlet label will function as the ideological cue to the reader. Therefore, when people hold prior beliefs regarding the ideology of the news outlet, the greater the extent to which, the label will influence the individual's perception of bias in the news content. The argument in (H1) expects that regardless of the substantive and balanced news content individuals will still process the information differently. Furthermore their attitudes and opinions regarding the news content are based off their perceptions of ideological bias. While the relationship in (H1) may seem straightforward it is critical to note that I am testing my hypothesis using identical, nonpartisan news content while manipulating the outlet label in order to study the conditions under which individuals perceive bias and do not perceive bias.

Hypothesis 2 builds upon the relationship presented in (H1). The second argument assumes that if an individual assigns an ideological orientation to the news outlet, and hence the news content then the more likely that individual will be suspicious

of the content. According to Vallone et al. (1985) when the news content is controversial or deals with opposing ideals participants were likely to perceive bias in the opposite direction¹⁰.

Hypothesis 2: If individuals perceive ideological bias in the news content, then greater the extent to which, individuals will perceive criticism in the news content.

Null Hypothesis 2: There is no difference between participants perceptions of bias and their perceptions of criticism.

(H2) adds to the idea that individuals who believe an outlet is biased (or friendly) they will also think the news content is biased (or friendly), and therefore participants are more likely to perceive criticism in the news content.

Hypothesis 1 and 2 anticipate that when respondents believe the outlet is ideologically biased, the more likely the outlet label will be use as an ideological cue when processing the information, and also when formulating judgments pertaining to the news content. A third hypothesis is derived from the relationship in (H1) and (H2) to explore the effects that perceptions of bias have on an individual's ability to engage in news information so that they can make informed decisions. (H3) suspects that the more one relies on ideological heuristics (prior information stored in the memory) to process information, the less likely he or she will retain the news content. As a consequence, the individual will receive impartial information based on their reliance on ideological heuristics. Instead of engaging in the news content individuals will rely on cues to process information, and it is through this ideological filter that ideologues understand and form opinions regarding that news story. Therefore, (H3) also holds that when

participants do not believe that an outlet label has either a liberal or conservative bias, then more greater probability that he or she will retain the news information.

Hypothesis 3: The extent to which participants believe the outlet is ideologically moderate (neutral), the less likely the individual will rely on heuristics and the greater the probability of retaining news information.

Null Hypothesis 3: There is no difference in relationship between the ideological orientation of the outlet causing participants to not retain the information.

One alternative argument that would weaken the relationship in (H3) is the following – that if an individual’s ideology is similar to the ideological orientation they’ve attached to the outlet label, then the more credible that news source and its’ content becomes. Taking this into consideration, the participant will more likely engage in the information since it came from a credible source (Lupia and McCubbins 1998). Therefore, the condition of retaining information when the individual perceives it to be ideological bias is still possible as long as the individual aligns himself or herself with that ideology. This argument is continuous with the modern media environment trend where sophisticated news consumers self-select into news outlets that cater to their political beliefs. For instance, when a self-ascribed Republican or Conservative receives the article that is attributed to Fox News Channel, the greater likelihood of that individual trusting that source, and the greater probability of that participant to engage in the news content and retain the information. Therefore, if results from my experiment indicate that a large sum of respondents retained the information, yet still perceived bias in the news content, then ideological cues may have not affect the reader’s ability to process

information as much as I anticipated. If this is the case I can look at partisanship and individuals self-described ideology to measure this alternative explanation.

All my hypotheses argue that individual's perceptions of media bias are caused by one's own preconceptions and ideologies. My arguments do compliment the notion from Niven's study (2002) that individual's may judge the media for being biased with little evidence as to why. Two causal factors for such perception of bias could be one's own ideology and the ideological orientation they have assigned to the media outlet.

Alternatively, as in Vallone et al. (1985) findings, it may be that ideologues believe something is not biased when they agree with the article and biased when they don't agree with it. This would indicate that the individual actually relied on the information to formulate opinions about the news content. Yet, in my hypotheses (namely H1 and H2) that if the outlet label functions as the stimuli or signal for bias then the individual will not rely on the content to formulate opinions of the news story. In order to investigate whether individuals, in this modern media environment, actually engage in the news content before perceiving bias or if the outlet label does in fact act as an ideological cue I design an experiment around these arguments. In the following chapter I set up my experimental design in order to test my hypotheses.

II. Chapter Two: Research Design

Regardless of the substantiated research on media bias a vast majority of the public believe the media is ideologically biased in one direction or another. One major component of this debate is *how* individuals perceive bias in the media and *what* do they do with the information. Although the majority of the public believes that the media is biased, partisans differ in the direction of that bias. Specifically, individuals perceive bias in the media when the news content goes against their political views. Indicating that individuals hold preconceived notions regarding modern media networks. In turn, individuals are less likely to trust the media outlets and the subsequent news information. It is my understanding that individuals play a huge role in this on-going, unresolved debate over the assignment of media bias.

The purpose of my research design is to examine the conditions under which individuals perceive ideological bias in the news content and how that in turn effects how they process the substantive news information. To do this I set up an experimental design to control the content of the news while manipulating the network attribution of the news source. By using an experimental setting it allows me to separate network attribution from news content in order to investigate whether individuals perceptions of bias were driven by literally identical news content or if the ideological orientation of the news outlet functioned as ideological signals to its cue to the reader.

i. Key Variables

Independent Variables

The key causal variable in this experimental design is the ideological orientation the participants assigns to the news outlet (MSNBC, CNN or FOX). Additionally the

individual's own ideology will also be one of the independent variable as I control for other key causal effects. Both of the independent variables are ordinal-level variables. I will measure the individual's self-assessed ideology and the ideological assessment they ascribe to the news outlet on the same 7-point scale. With (1) representing "extremely liberal" and (7) representing "extremely conservative". Since my experiment ultimately investigates perceptions of bias among strong ideologues, I interact the independent variables with political knowledge to examine any variations among high- and low-information individuals. I ask participants three political knowledge questions that a majority of individuals would be able to answer if they frequently watch the news or stayed updated in political events. See Appendix A.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable is perception of bias. I measure perception of bias by asking participants if the article (attributed to either CNN, MSNBC or FOX) had a liberal, or a conservative bias, or if the article was mostly neutral. I measure perception of bias on the same 7-point scale that I used to measure the independent variables. For some recoding purposes, I recode the dependent variable into are three possible values: "liberal bias", "conservative bias" and "neutral (no bias)". I will be specific in listing when I use the recoded dependent variable in the results portion and when I use the original 7-point scale measure. I also measure perceptions of criticism (coded 0-3) by asking if the article was fair in criticism (coded 0) or if it was critical towards one of the immigration policies (coded 1-3). Additionally, since I assume that the ideological orientation of the news outlet label and perceptions of bias influence how individuals process information, then retaining information will vary depending upon the IV and DV.

To measure the conditions under which individuals were likely to retain the information I ask a simple question from the news content participants just read. This is the first question in the post-experiment questionnaire that the individuals are asked so the information is still fresh on their minds. The Dependent Variable of “retain information” is a categorical variable that asked respondents to mark the answer they believed was correct. See appendix for post-questionnaire questions.

ii. Method

The first stage of the experimental design process involved finding the most balanced and objective news article for my experiment. I kept two things in mind while searching for articles. First, I wanted to find an article that reported on a substantive policy issue or event, while, making sure that the issue wasn't controversial. This was based off the findings in the Vallone et al. (1985) study that found perceptions of bias were more pronounced when using stimuli material, as well as, issues that induced strong partisanship. Controversial issues can be “stimuli” through which perceptions of bias can increase. Since, I was only curious in measuring the effects from attributing identical content to ideologically perceived outlet labels, I had to find an article that was free of tugging on reader's emotions. And at the same time make sure the article was interesting enough to keep respondents attention. I wanted to set my experimental design apart from the past researchers who studied perceptions of bias by using content that was controversial or campaign related material when studying perceptions of bias.

The article I used for my experiment reported on recent immigration reform policy. Although immigration issues can spike some stimulus for people, being that it is a pressing issue for our generation, the article was merely informative and nowhere in the

article did it speak of controversial immigration reform. See appendix for actual article and the manipulated article used in experiment. The second aspect was to find an article from a mainstream television news source. This was based off the Pew Research study that for most Americans the dominant source for political news remains mainstream Television. As I mentioned earlier 71% of the public get most of their national and international news from the television.

The article that was used came from CNN.com on January 29, 2013. It was originally three pages in length. For purposes of keeping my experiment at a reasonable length and time, I narrowed it to one page that consisted of three paragraphs. The length and amount of time respondents took to read the article was important for a measure of control because I did not want respondents to lose interest; and also to avoid the risk of participants' using other cues to process lengthy information. Prior research shows that effectiveness of media information relies on the relationship between ideology and the length of the news coverage (Joslyn and Ceccoli 1996). Making sure the news story was an easy read based on the length, yet at the same time relative and politically informative was the main goal. To do this I used only the beginning three paragraphs of the article, which worked out nice since they happened to be the three most informative pieces of the text.

According to (Joslyn and Ceccoli 1996) it was important for me to use a news story that would be of importance to individuals in both partisan groups. The CNN article, both the shortened version and full version, provided that assurance. The shortened article used for my experiment mentioned immigration policy facts from each member in Congress and the President. It discussed the Bipartisan cadre of Senators

immigration plans, the House Republican's plan, and President Obama's immigration policy. This made sure each participant who was Democrat, Independent, or Republican would likely be able to identify with the news content. The article also discussed the similarities and differences among the three immigration proposals. Again, no commentary or opinions were used in the experiment article nor were they found in the original article. Since nothing in the content of the news article I selected was inherently biased any other factors of perceptions of bias was due to other factors. Moreover using an article from CNN.com seemed like the best choice since CNN is the more moderate news source of MSNBC and FOX. Moreover, neutral or moderate news content was critical to the intent and design of this experiment, as I wanted to measure the effects of the network attribution on perceptions of bias while holding constant news content.

Leaving out a large portion of the news content from the experiment article may seem like a weakness in my experiment. The reason being is that scholars argue that media bias takes on many forms and shapes. Three significant forms are called agenda-setting, priming and framing – defined as the extent to which journalists portray certain news stories that either they believe the public wants to hear, or to serve the interests of their partisan audiences (Entman 2006). However, those studies examine how media bias effect changes in individual's attitudes and beliefs. The essence of my research is to investigate what explains the assignment of media bias, not the different forms and effects of it. Therefore, manipulating the article so that the news content of my experiment was appropriate in length, yet a substantive issue for partisans appears reasonable. And for the purposes of my study this manipulation of the article would not impact my results.

The second stage of my experiment was the manipulation checks and control. I created duplicates of the story, wherein I kept the news content constant but manipulating the network attribution to FOX, CNN and MSNBC by using their respective logos. The only addition to the experimental CNN article was the label attached to the content. Additionally I changed the reference of CNN throughout the experimental articles to either MSNBC or FOX.

iii. Experiment

The last step in this experiment consisted of actually conducting the experiment and collecting the data. A sample of 118 undergraduates students enrolled in political science courses at University of California, San Diego participated in this experiment. This experiment took place in two political sciences courses during the 2013 winter quarter. In order for me to obtain a large enough sample to make significant inferences I had to run the experiment twice. Before I handed out the experiment I spoke briefly about the intent and purpose of my experiment. I informed participants that I am a student at UCSD, and for my senior thesis I will be conducting an experiment on news media to study how individuals interact with certain news content. Of course I could not tell them that I was studying perceptions of media bias because that would contaminate my results. I emphasized that this experiment was completely anonymous and voluntary. If any person did not feel comfortable taking this experiment they did not have to participate. Prior to passing out the experiment, I had arranged the articles in a FOX, MSNBC, CNN, FOX, MSNBC, CNN, pattern. In this sense, randomization was successful, as experimental conditions were roughly equal among respondents. The experiment was comprised of three pages. The first page was a pre-experiment

questionnaire, which consisted of questions regarding age, gender, party identification, ideology, and political knowledge (refer to appendix). Prior to reading the news article, participants completed a short survey concerning their attention to politics, ideology, and party identification. In addition, I asked a three factual questions measuring general political knowledge. After completing the pre-experiment survey, all participants read the identical news article reporting on immigration policy reform that varied only in the outlet label.

After reading the news article, participants completed a questionnaire designed to evaluate their perceptions of bias and criticism in the article. The post-experiment questionnaire was designed to measure respondent's ability to retain information, their perceptions of bias and the ideological bias they assigned to the network label. To understand how perceptions of bias affect what individuals do with the information, I measured individual's evaluations of the news content as well. Throughout each question I reiterated the name of the article to make sure respondents noted and remembered the source of the article when answering the questions.

[[Insert Appendix A.2]]

Notice that respondents were asked the ideology position of the news network after they were asked their perceptions of the news content to ensure that did not influence their opinions regarding the news information.

III. Chapter Three: Statistical Results and Analysis

Table 1. Characteristics of the Experimental Groups

	MSNBC	CNN	FOX
Liberal (%)	56.7%	69.2%	58.5%
Moderate (%)	10.8%	18.0%	14.6
Conservative (%)	32.4%	12.8%	24.4
Male (%)	38%	51.3%	56.0%
Female (%)	62%	48.7%	44%
Mean partisanship	3.341	2.692	3.171
Mean attention to news	1.622	1.513	1.550
Mean political knowledge	2.405	2.538	2.292
N	37	39	41

Note: Ideology was measured on a 7-point scale from *extremely liberal* to *extremely conservative* but for the purpose of this Table Ideology was recoded (1 = liberal, 2 = moderate, 3 = conservative). Partisanship was measured on 7-point scale from *strong democrat* to *strong republican*. Attention represents the participant's self-rating of the amount of time he (she) follows the news (1 = only when something important happens, 2 = most of the time). Political knowledge represents the number of questions the participants answered correctly (out of three) in the pre-experiment survey.

Table shows a summary of the characteristics of participants in the experiment.

Figure 1 presents a summary of ideological orientations that participants in this study assigned to the given news outlets. In comparison of each three news outlets, 85.7 percent (N=41) of respondents rated FOX as ideologically conservative, whereas 59.2 percent (N=37) of respondents in the MSNBC group rated it as ideologically liberal.

While no participant rated MSNBC as extremely conservative, only one participant rated FOX as extremely liberal. A the majority of participants that had the CNN variant rated it as ideologically moderate, 70.8 percent (N=39), compared to FOX and MSNBC.

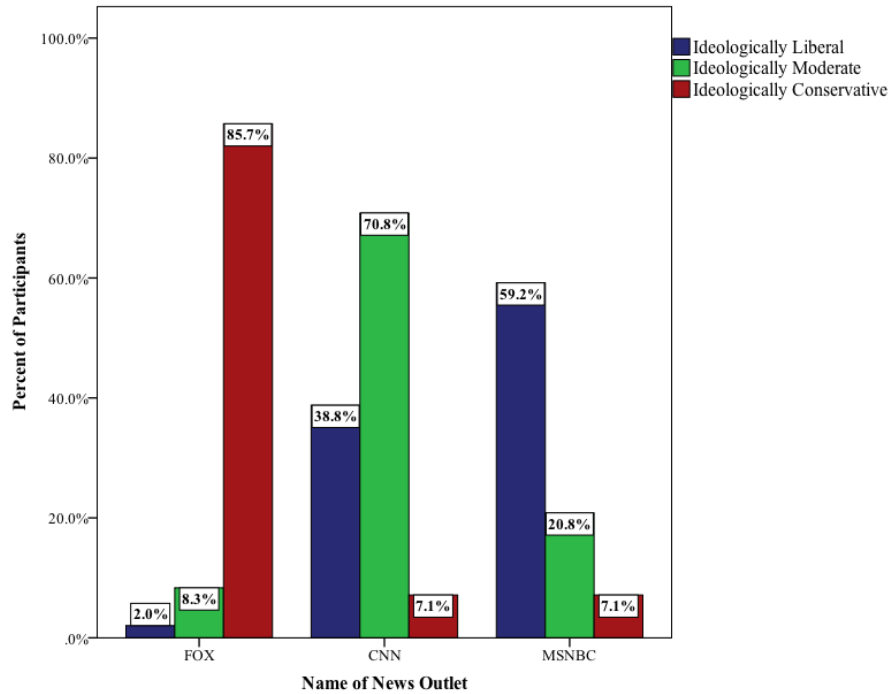


Figure 1. Ideological Orientations of news outlets

A more comprehensive model of these results can be found in Figure 2 where I categorized the news outlets by three ideological groups: liberals, moderates, and conservatives to compare the differences in ideological orientations by ideologues¹¹. In comparison of participants who received the article attributed to MSNBC, conservatives were more likely than liberals to rank MSNBC as ideologically liberal (Figure 2). Whereas, respondents that were ideologically moderate rated MSNBC as moderate. Among the participants in the CNN group, most liberals and moderates ranked CNN as ideologically moderate compared to conservatives who mostly ranked CNN as liberal (Figure 2). Lastly, in comparison of respondents who received the article attribute to FOX, a majority of participants rated FOX as extremely conservative or conservative (Figure 2). Overall, the findings presented in Figure 1 and Figure 2 are straightforward

and reaffirm previous research of ideological slant associated with news networks¹². That is, MSNBC leans ideologically to the left, while FOX lies on the far right of the ideological spectrum, and the more moderate of the two being CNN which lies in the middle. For the purpose of this study, participant's ideological ratings of the news outlets will be will be interacted with the independent variable (outlet label) and dependent variable (perceptions of bias) to examine the variation, strength and significance of their relationship.

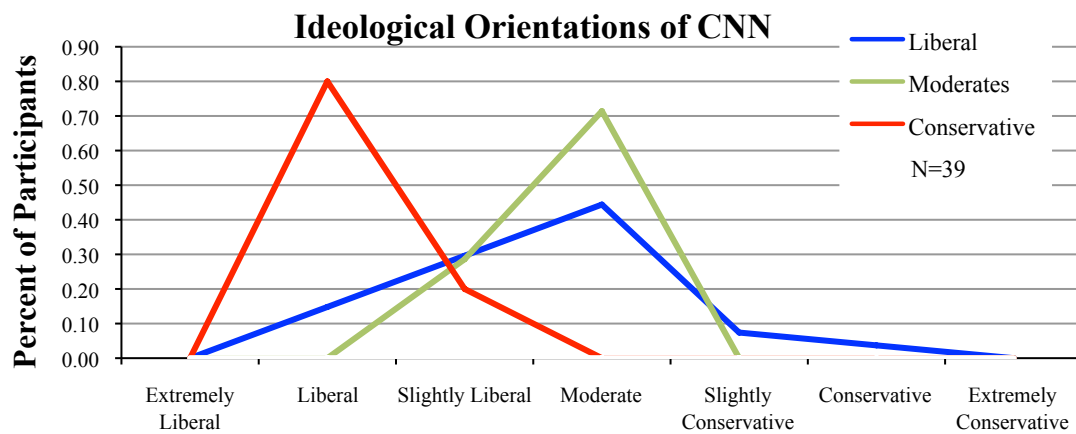
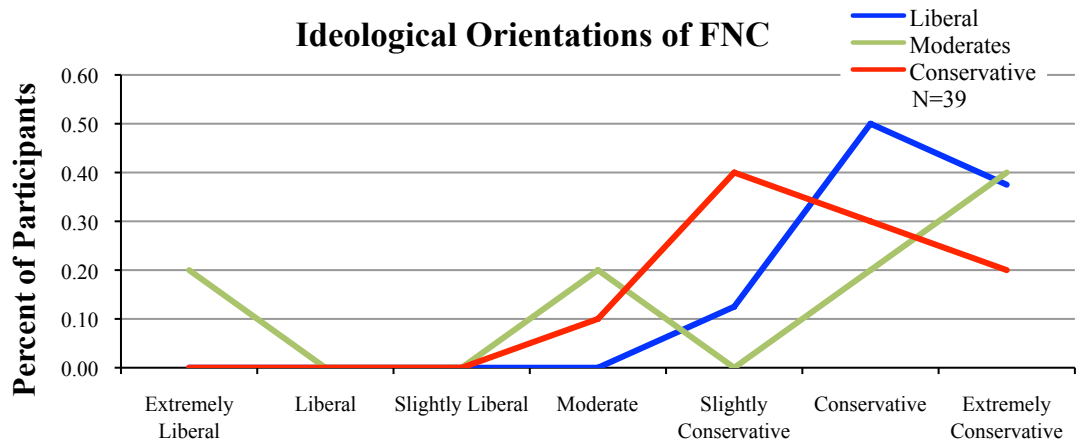
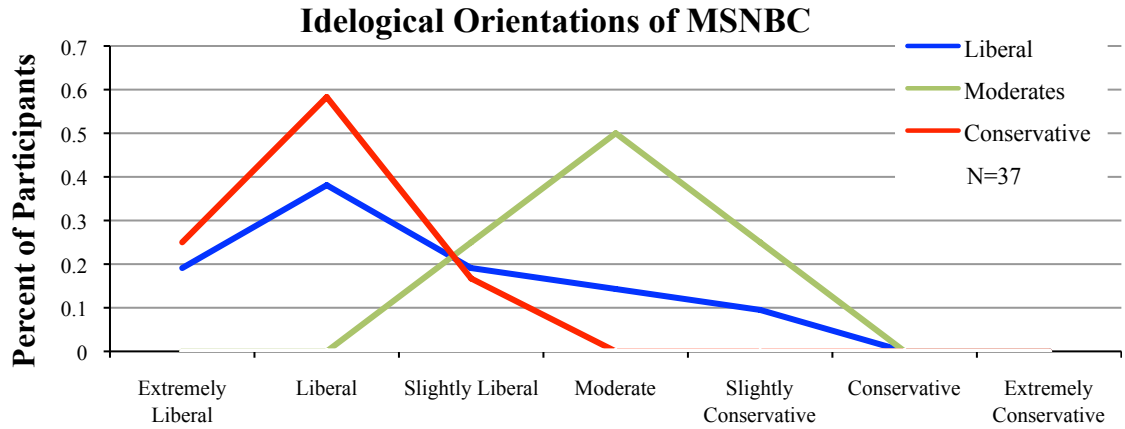


Figure 2. The ideological orientations of news outlets rated by participants ($n = 115$).

I begin my analysis by examining the relationship presented in hypothesis 1 – to what extent did the network attribution of MSNBC, CNN and FOX influence the individual’s perceptions of bias in literally identical news content. (H1) predicts that independent of the substantive news content, perceptions of bias will be evident based on the ideological cue from the outlet label. Because these news outlets differ quite vastly on the ideological scale, from “1” – extremely liberal to “7” – extremely conservative, I expect that news content attributed to MSNBC will have the lowest mean for ideological bias, whereas content attributed to FOX will have the highest mean, and that the content attributed to CNN will lie in the middle of the two. Additionally, there will be a significant difference between the means for FOX and MSNBC. To examine the main treatment affects, i.e. the first hypothesis, I start with using a chi-square analysis and then run a difference of means test. After that, I look at how the participant processed the news content. This will depend on results from (H1) – whether or not the outlet label functioned as a ideological signal to its reader. This part of my analysis investigates the conditional hypotheses: (H2) and (H3). My second hypothesis claims that if the participant believes the news content to be ideologically biased, via the outlet label, he or she will more likely the individual will perceive criticism in that content. My third hypothesis proposes that individuals are more likely to retain news information when the outlet is ideologically moderate (neutral). However, (H3) this depends on whether or not CNN was perceived as the ideological moderate news outlet compared to FOX and MSNBC. As we say in Figure 1 and Figure 2, CNN was split between being perceived as ideologically liberal and ideologically moderate.

Statistical Analysis

How do individuals perceive bias in the news? As noted earlier, that while individuals vary in their assessment of ideological slant in the news outlets, every group of participants rated MSNBC as more liberal than FOX and CNN. Likewise, all participants rated FOX as more conservative than MSNBC and CNN. Hence, I anticipate that the direction of ideological bias perceived in the news content will be determined by the direction of ideological slant that respondents’ assign to the outlet label. Because the independent and dependent variables are nominal and ordinal, I begin by using Chi-Square descriptive statistics to compare the perceptions of ideology in the news content by the news outlet variant. Results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Variances in Perceptions of Bias in News Content

<i>Perceptions of Bias</i>	FOX	CNN	MSNBC	Total
Liberal Bias	7.3% (3)	43.6% (17)	70.3% (36)	39.3% (46)
Conservative Bias	63.4.3% (12)	10.3% (4)	8.1% (8)	32.5% (38)
Neutral	29.3% (26)	46.2% (18)	21.6% (3)	28.2% (33)
Total	(N=41)	(N=39)	(N=37)	(N=117)

$X^2 = 51.38$

Somers’ d (-.549)

Note: The dependent variable in the first column is the participants perceived bias in the news content (1 = liberal, 2 = neutral, and 3 = conservative). The outlet label, IV, is a nominal variable (coded 1: FOX, 2: CNN, 3: MSNBC). In parenthesis is the number of respondents. Frequencies are statistically significant: $X^2(4, N=117) = 51.38, ***p<0.0001$.

Results in Table 2 demonstrate that biased perceptions changed when the outlet label changed. The difference in perceptions of bias among individuals indicates that

outlet label act as ideological cues to the reader. Meaning the exposure to different outlet labels caused respondents to perceive bias in different directions. For instance, perceptions of conservative bias in the news content changes from 63.4 percent with the FOX outlet label, to 10.3 percent with the CNN label, and 8.1 percent for the MSNBC outlet label; a noticeable difference of 53.1 and 55.3 percentage points. The exact opposite was found when looking at perceptions of liberal bias. As results in Table 2 reveals, when participants were exposure to the MSNBC article, 70.3 percent of respondents believed that MSNBC displayed a liberal bias, compared to 43.6 percent of CNN who believed the article was liberal. In addition, perceptions of liberal bias were the lowest among respondents who were exposed to the FOX outlet label. Among the participants in the MSNBC group, only 21.6 percent believed the article to be ideologically neutral, and only 8.1 percent said that the article displayed a conservative bias. When comparing FOX and MSNBC to CNN, there is also a difference in the degree of ideological moderate perceptions. For those individuals who read the article attributed to CNN, 46.2 percent perceived the news content to be neutral, compared to 29.3 percent of participants with the FOX variant. 43.6 percent of participants with the CNN outlet label perceived a liberal bias in the news story, only a 2.6 percentage point difference. While I initially anticipated that perceptions of ideological bias in news content for the CNN variant to be moderate, this 2.6 percent difference doesn't say that. Although I was relying on CNN to be perceived as the most neutral of the three outlets, overall, the findings are significant. The contrasting differences in the direction of perceived bias shown in Table 2 indicate that viewers only perceive bias in the news content when it is attributed to an outlet brand.

Therefore, when the outlet label changes so to does the degree of participant's perceptions of ideological bias. The Chi-Square test also indicates that the relationship between the outlet label and perceptions of bias are negative. The somers'd value (-.546) indicates that increasing values of the independent variable are associated with the decreasing values of the perceptions of ideological bias in the news content. Note the numeric values of the independent variable (outlet label) was coded as (1 for FOX), (2 for CNN), and (3 for MSNBC). Thus, exposing participants to increasing outlet values is associated to the decreasing values in perceptions of ideological bias (1 = extremely liberal, to 7 = extremely conservative). These results are summarized in a simple bar chart in Figure 3.

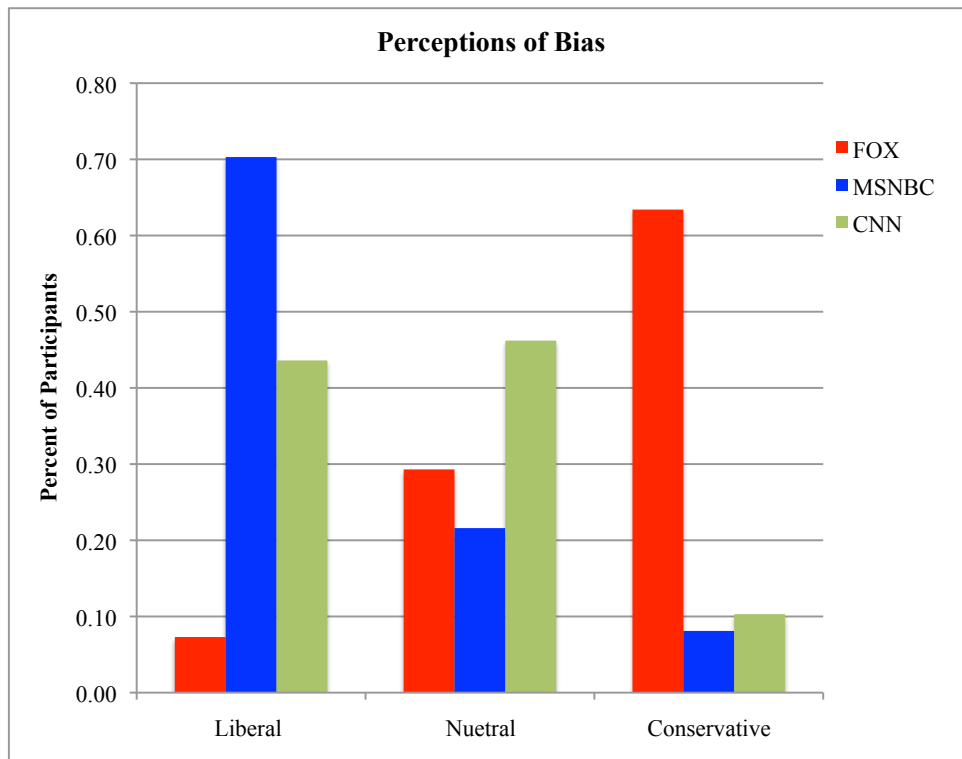


Figure 3. Perceptions of bias in news content compared to each outlet variant

To determine the strength of (H1), that the ideological outlet label is a predictor for perceptions of bias, I ran a difference of means tests between participant’s ideological ratings of the news outlet and their perception’s of bias in the news content. The results are presented in Table 3, which provides support for my first hypothesis. The difference of means demonstrate that perceptions of bias were significantly different between each outlet variant. Moreover, when comparing each outlet to one another, the difference in the direction of ideological bias was significant between FOX and MSNBC ($M = 1.734^{**}$, $p < 0.001$). And the difference of means between the FOX and CNN variant ($M = 1.333^{**}$, $p < 0.001$) was statistically significant. However, the mean difference between CNN and MSNBC was not statistically significant, but that is not surprising considering 43.6 percent of CNN participants rated it as ideologically liberal, while 46.2 percent rated CNN as ideologically moderate.

Table 3. Mean of Participants perceptions of bias, by Outlet Label

<i>Difference in Means for Perceptions of Bias</i>					
Outlet Name	Mean	N	SD	Std. Error of Mean	Sq SE
FOX	4.9487**	39	1.099	.176	.4295
MSNBC	3.2162**	37	.85424	.140	.375
CNN	3.61514**	39	.84652	.136	.368
Mean Difference (FOX-MSNBC)	1.734**				
Mean Difference (FOX-CNN)	1.333**				
Mean Difference (MSNBC – CNN)	.3992				

Note: Perceptions of bias and ideological orientations of news outlet were measured on identical 7-point scales from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Refer to Appendix C.1 for full list of means and descriptive statistics. Subscripts indicate the means are statistically significant ** $P < 0.001$.

Overall, my results prove that when individuals believe the media outlet is slanted in an ideological direction, they will also perceive the news content to be ideological slanted in the same direction. The fact that the means for FOX, CNN, and MSNBC attribution variables are statistically significant confirms that the outlet label influences participant's assessments of bias in the news content presented. Therefore, regardless of the news article, respondents were only referring to the network attribution when formulating perceptions of bias in the news content. To find out if these cues influence the way individuals process news information I set forth to test my conditional hypothesis (H2 & H3).

For another measure of perceptions of bias I asked participants if they found any criticism according to the news story. I gave four options for respondents to choose from depending on what they believed they read in the article. The level of criticism was in regards to immigrations plans ranging from four possibilities: President Obama's immigration policy, House Republicans' plan, the Bipartisan cadre of Senators plan, or if they found that the article was fair in criticism. (H2) holds that if individuals perceive ideological bias in the news content, the greater the extent to which individuals will perceive criticism in the news content. Results shown in Table 4 reveal that a majority of participants in all groups believed the news content was critical to some degree.

Table 4. Participants overall perceptions of criticism by each news outlet

<i>Perceptions of Criticism</i>				
	MSNBC	CNN	FOX	Overall
Criticism %	78.4% (29)	70.3% (26)	55.5% (22)	67.5% (77)
No Criticism %	21.6% (8)	29.7% (11)	45% (18)	32.5% (37)
Total	100% (37)	100% (37)	100% (40)	100% (114)

Note: The dependent variable is in column one – *criticism* and *no criticism* – which refer to participant’s belief that there was criticism or that there was not criticism in the news content. Perceptions of criticism was a nominal variable and had a total of four values (3 = Bipartisan cadre of Senators, 2 = President Obama, 1 = House Republican, 0 = Fair in criticism). For the purpose of this Table, I recoded the perceptions of criticism to (1 = criticism and 2 = no criticism). Number of participants is in parenthesis; overall participants in this measurement: $N = 114$.

An interesting trend in perceptions of criticism, which I did not anticipate in (H2), was that the degree of criticism that participants rated varied depending on the network attribution. Keep in mind the article used in this experiment was substantive and informative, absent of any opinions and commentary from the reporter. Because the article gave descriptions of each immigration proposal and mentioned the Senate's of success, or lack of, in regards to previous Bipartisan groups trying to work together to formulate a policy consensus. If respondents had read the article without the use ideological cues they should've perceived that it was friar in criticism at best, but results displayed in Figure 4 reveal that was not the case. Figure 4 illustrates the changes in criticism compared to each news outlet.

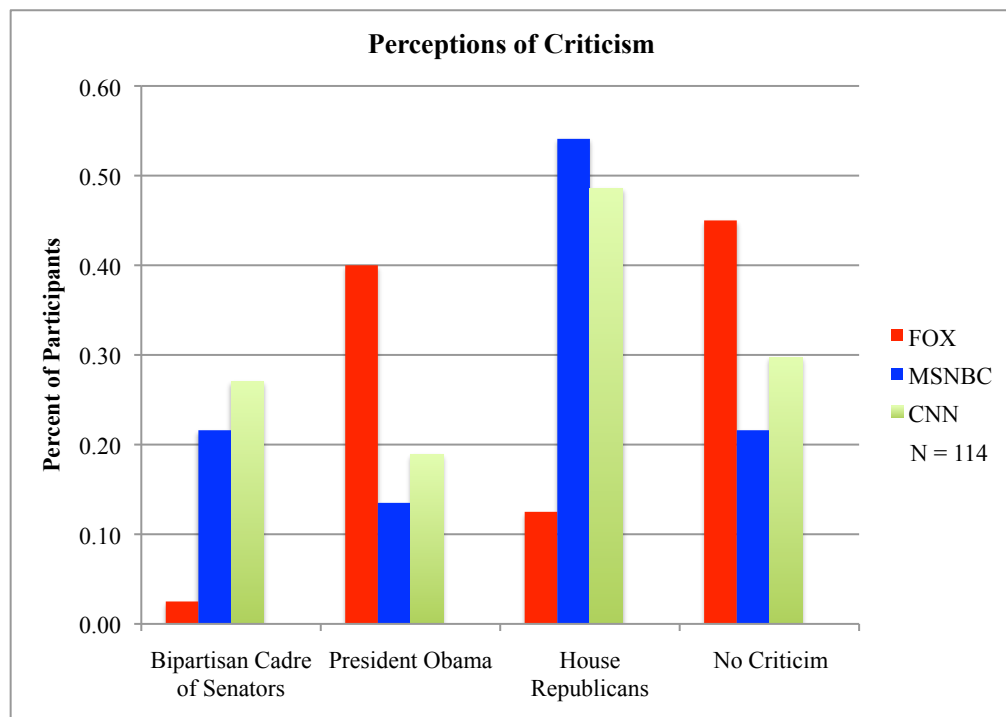


Figure 4. Variations in perceptions of criticism among news outlet

As you can see in criticism of President Obama was highest when the article was attributed to FOX. While the MSNBC and CNN variants showed the highest amount of perceptions of criticism towards House Republicans. In comparison of individuals in the FOX and MSNBC group, 54.1 percent of respondents that had the MSNBC variant, said it was critical of the House Republicans plan, compared to 12.5 percent of respondents that had the FOX variant, a 41.6 percentage point difference. Looking at the results in the MSNBC groups, only 21.6 percent of participants said the article was fair in criticism, and an even lesser percentage of them said that the article was critical of President Obama 13.5 percent. The highest amount of criticism perceived towards President Obama was came when participants were exposed to the article attributed to FOX, 40 percent of respondents said it was critical of the President's plan, a 26.5 percentage point difference compared to MSNC. Another surprising result seen in Figure 4 is the fact that the FOX variant held the highest rating for fair in criticism 45 percent with CNN coming in second at 29.7 percent. To test the statistical significance between the outlet variant and different values of criticism I used the Chi-Square Test Statistic. While controlling for the outlet label, I analyzed the relationship between perceptions of bias and perceptions of criticism. Table 5 documents the results.

According to the Chi-Square statistic you can clearly see that the findings of perceptions of criticism among each news outlet is statistically significant. For example, the variation in criticism among respondents in MSNBC, $\chi^2(6, N=37) = 13.490, p < 0.05$, were statistically different.

Table 5 Chi-Square Tests of significance for perceptions of criticism

	Chi-Square Test Statistic	<i>df</i>	P-value	(λ)
FOX	18.607*	6	.005	.273
CNN	27.750***	6	.000	.368
MSNBC	13.490**	6	.036	.176

Note: Refer to list of frequencies in this Table in Appendix C. (λ) = lambda. Subscripts indicate that the test statistics is significant: * p =.01, ** p =0.05, *** p =.001.

In (H2) both the independent variable and dependent variables: perceptions of bias and the outlet label are nominal variables. Therefore to find the strength of their relationship I refer to lambda (λ) for measure of association. Lambda, as a proportional reduction in error (PRE), measures the degree of strength in the relationship. A positive or negative value can tell you whether the relationship is weak or strong. Hence, as a PRE measure, the lambda value (from -1 to +1) can tell you the extent to which the values of the independent variable predict the values of the dependent variable. If you refer to the fifth column in Table 5 you find the lambda (λ) measurements for each outlet, and the positive values demonstrate that the relationship between perceptions of criticism and the outlet attribution is strong. Meaning that if participants did not perceive bias in the ideological outlet, and the subsequent news content perceptions of criticism would less likely appear. The significant of these results suggest that when participants found perceptions of bias in the news content, they also found the article to be critical to some degree. Moreover, the extent of that criticism varied depending on the outlet variant. These findings complement my first hypothesis and demonstrate even further that the outlet label influences the way in which individuals perceive the news story.

To understand how the ideological cue from the outlet label effects the individual's ability to process news information I begin to analyze results suited for hypothesis three. In my third hypothesis I argue that if the outlet label is perceived as ideologically moderate then individuals will not be affected by the ideological labels and therefore the greater the likelihood of processing information. Since the CNN outlet was ranked more moderate than the other two labels I will use the results in the CNN group and compare them with MSNBC and FOX⁴. Note, because a good proportion of individuals ranked CNN outlet ideologically liberal I do not expect the relationship in (H3) to be statistically significant due to fact I didn't have an outlet label where the majorities perceived the news network as moderate.

I measured the likelihood of retaining information by asking participants in the experiment's post-questionnaire a question that pertained to the news article's main storyline, and the question had been discussed for almost an entire paragraph. Respondents had four possible choices to select from, including "I don't know" (see Appendix B for post-experiment questionnaire, number 1). Figure 5 illustrates the difference in retaining the information (the dependent variable) by exposure to the three outlet variants.

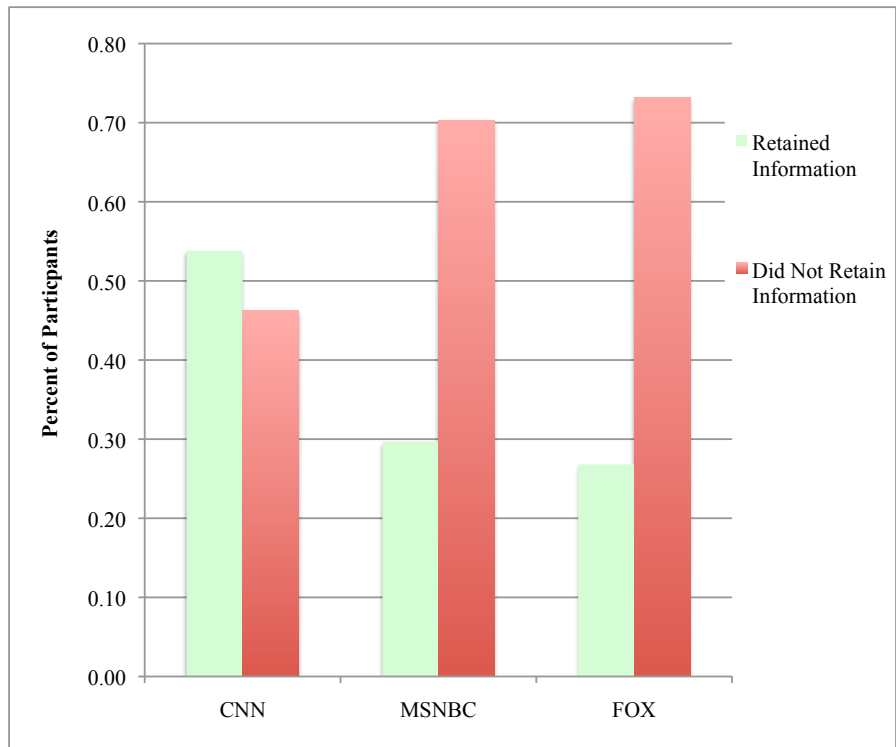


Figure 5: The likelihood of participant’s retaining the news information based on exposure to the three outlet labels.

As illustrated in Figure 5, individuals were most more likely to retain information when exposed to the moderate CNN variant compared to the other ideological labels, FOX and MSNBC. To see the differences between the two I used a chi-square analysis presented in Table 6.

Table 6 Cross Tabulation results of retaining information by the outlet variant

	FOX	CNN	MSNBC	Total
Didn't Retain Information %	73.2 (30)	24.2 (18)	70.3 (26)	63.2 (74)
Retained Information %	26.8 (11)	53.8 (21)	29.7 (11)	36.8 (43)
	100%	100%	100%	100%
Total, N	(N=41)	(N=39)	(N=37)	(N=117)

Note: Figures are displayed in percentages. Number of participants are in parenthesis. The dependent variable *retained information* was initially coded with four values representing the number of answer options for the question being asked. Only one answer was correct. For the purposes of this comparison I recoded the values into two possible values: 1 which was recoded for the correct answer, and the other incorrect answers was recoded to 0.

As suspected when the article was attributed to FOX and MSNBC participants were least likely to retain news information. For those with the FOX variant 73.2 percent of participants did not retain the information, and 70.3 percent of participants with the MSNBC variant failed to retain the information. Only 26.8 percent of FOX participants, and 29.7 percent of MSNBC actually knew the correct answer, a 46.4 percent difference in FOX, and a 40.6 percent difference in MSNBC. Comparing these results to CNN, 53.8 percent of respondent retained information, a 27-percentage point gap between FOX, and a 24.1 percent gap between MSNBC. While the probability that respondents retained the information is quite stronger when exposed to the CNN variant, a large proportion of respondents in CNN (46.2 percent) did not retain the information, a weak 7.6 percent difference. Thus, the likelihood that newsreaders processed the information seems likely but without further evidence, I cannot prove significance for my third hypothesis.

IV. Chapter Four: Conclusion

This study provides meaningful information relating to perceptions of bias in the media and its consequential effects on perceiving ideological bias in news content. It illustrates that perceptions of bias exist irrespective of whether the actual news was biased or not, and more significantly when the content was not inherently biased. My research demonstrated that by exposing individuals to the MSNBC outlet label it cued the reader to perceive a liberal bias in the news story. Conversely, when introducing the individual to the FOX outlet label, respondents perceived a conservative bias in the news story. Hence, the outlet label acts as an ideological heuristic, which sends ideological signals to the reader who thereby formulates their opinions regarding ideological bias in the news content.

While my research presents evidence that perceptions of media bias are real, it certainly does not solve the media bias debate. The uncertainty of whether the news media is actually ideologically biased still remains open. Past research has suggested that individuals hold similar beliefs regarding news network's ideological slant the reason being is that news outlets and the majority of their audience are split among partisan lines. For instance, majorities for the MSNBC's Rachel Maddow show consist primarily of liberals, 57 percent, and Democrats, 74 percent, respectively. Whereas Fox News programs, such as Hannity, are majority conservatives, 78 percent, and Republicans, 65 percent, respectively. While some scholars are stuck on forming a consensus on whether the media is ideologically biased or not polarized news audiences certainly impels the general public to view the media as ideologically biased.

Some of the major findings in my experimental analysis provide an alternative explanation for the question pertaining to the uncertainty of whether the media is biased. Individual's predispositions about the media being ideologically biased cause them to perceive news content as ideologically biased despite the content being impartial and substantive. However, I certainly do not posit that ideologues and news consumers take full ownership of why the public believes the media as biased. I do however, believe that my research suggests there are important elements regarding the media bias debate that are often neglected by the popular discussion of media bias effects on voting behavior, electoral consequences, etc. For the most part, the fact my research showed alternative cause and effect relationships, point to the fact that perhaps the changes in the realities of the modern media environment have other implications for the media bias debate. Because regardless if the media tries to "unbias" their news reporting, and report objective news content, my experiment results indicated that individuals still perceived bias in the news content, even though it was absent of political slant. The problem here is that individuals find bias when they look for it, and if they find the media as a whole to be biased, they are likely to find certain outlets to be biased.

If the primary purpose of the media is to inform the public then how can the news media be effective when individual's perceptions of bias influence their way of thinking regarding news content? Again my results pointed out that depending on which news outlet variant was attributed to the news content, respondent's differed in the information they believed to be talked about in the article.

To summarize, I add to past research and understandings on the relationship of media bias and perceptions of bias in the following ways. First, independent of the actual

news content, news outlets and the ideological reputations they carry influence perceptions of bias. Specifically, different directions of ideological bias were found depending on which news network participants received. Thus, irrespective if the media is actually biased, perceptions of ideological bias will still be found when individuals look for it. Secondly, my research shows that perceptions of bias are being caused by the news outlet's ideological reputation. And where it comes into conflict with the media bias debate is the fact that perceptions of ideological bias in the news outlet are transferred to individuals perceptions of ideological bias in the news content. With respect to one of the major arguments of the debate is that media bias causes the media to tell its audience what to think about and thus, what to think. My research questions that possibility. If it is the intent of the news outlet to persuade a reader's attitude with information then it faces a serious obstacle if that reader believes the outlet is ideologically biased. Because when individuals hold perceptions of bias in the news media, and self-select into news outlets based on their partisanship, the relationship then almost becomes reversed, and I have to ask – Are partisan news audiences now the ones telling journalists what to think and what to think about it?

i. Implications

“What Difference Does it Make!” – Hilary Clinton¹³.

Although my results and research provided insight into some of the conditions under which individuals perceive biased news, independent of any ideological bias in the news, the question of whether this makes a difference is questionable given the current conditions of our modern media environment. The development of cable news, and the internet has led to a proliferation of news choices and a 24-hour news supply for

consumers. Technological advances has provided a new information where consumers can access news from newspapers, radio, Television, websites from all over the world. With respect to this notion of self-selection, where partisans can select into their preferred news choices, seems like a positive development. After all, individuals, unlike before, have the ability to consume news products suited to their political preferences and tastes. So if conservatives can consume conservative news while liberals can consumer liberal news – What difference does it make?

To understand the implications of perceptions of biased news in the era of selective exposure, I first looked at the very notion of self-selection. The likelihood that partisan news audiences and the current fragmented media environment started was due to the technological advancements of the late 20th and early 21st century which led to the influx of news information (Bennett and Iyengar, 2008; Scott, 2005). Bennet and Iyengar (2008) points out that fifty years ago Americans depended primarily on evening network broadcasts by SNB, CBS, and NBC, for information regarding public affairs. “The norms of journalism meant that no matter which network voters tuned in to, they encountered the same set of news reports, according balanced attention to parties, candidates, or points of view...In the era of “old media,” accordingly, it made little difference where voters got their news” (Bennett and Iyengar: 2008, p. 11). Today however, the modern media environment has changed tremendously, with instantaneous, unlimited supply of available information on every topic under the sun, it is small wonder why news consumers demand for selective exposure to political information (Ibid.).

From a democratic this trend of selective exposure can have unfortunate implications. First political accountability is definitely in question. If the news media

can not effectively give out its message to the consumer without the news consumer assuming it is bias then the likelihood of that individual receiving the full message is undermined. If citizens are increasingly polarized with respect to the news information they receive, as well as seeing public affairs through an ideological filter then the democratic process is hindered. Such intolerance for other sources of news can be damaging to the very function of comprise and seeking coalitions in the name of majority will.

THE END

Appendix A

Appendix A: CNN Experiment Sample

[Page 1]

Pre-Experiment Survey Questions

Gender

_____ Male

_____ Female

Age

In the space below please write the year you were born.

Party Identification

Generally speaking, do you consider yourself a:

_____ Strong Democrat

_____ Democrat

_____ Independent Lean Democrat

_____ Independent

_____ Independent Lean Republican

_____ Republican

_____ Strong Republican

Ideology

Some people think about politics and political beliefs in terms of liberal and conservative ideologies. If you had to choose where would you say you fall on the scale below?

_____ Extremely Liberal

_____ Liberal

_____ Slightly Liberal

_____ Moderate

_____ Slightly Conservative

_____ Conservative

_____ Extremely Conservative

Political Knowledge

1. Which person – Barack Obama or Mitt Romney – is more supportive of increasing taxes on higher income people?

_____ Mitt Romney

_____ Barack Obama

_____ Don't Know

2. What political office does John Boehner currently hold?

_____ Governor of Ohio

- Speaker of the House
- Senate Minority Leader
- Don't Know

3. Which political party has the most seats in the United States House of Representatives?
- Republicans
 - Democrats
 - Don't Know

[PAGE 2]



Immigration plan: A new era of bipartisanship or a political necessity?

updated 11:28 AM EST, Tue January 29, 2013

CNN.com

Washington (CNN) -- An immigration proposal crafted for months in secret by a high-profile, bipartisan cadre of senators is both a rare moment of simpatico in politics and a matter of political practicality. President Barack Obama, who won re-election with strong support from Latinos, the fastest-growing demographic, has called an overhaul of immigration a second-term priority. Meanwhile, Republicans who lost the Latino vote by large numbers, have signaled that mainstream members might be willing to compromise on thorny immigration issues.

But the deal is far from done. The plan could face stiff opposition in the House of Representatives, where conservatives and tea party leaders have resisted any compromise that even hints at relief or amnesty for those already in the country illegally. House Republicans are also working on a plan of their own, seeking bipartisan support. And Obama is said to have drafted his own detailed plan, which could differ from the Senate proposal in key areas, including border security and a path to legality.

The senators announced their plan a day before Obama speaks in Las Vegas on immigration, signaling a major push by both sides to focus on the contentious issue in the new Congress. Aides said the president's remarks on Tuesday will touch on the blueprint he's detailed in the past: improving border security, cracking down on employers who hire undocumented workers and creating a pathway to "earned" citizenship for

undocumented immigrants. Those provisions align closely with what the eight senators laid out in a framework of their legislation, which CNN obtained Sunday.

[PAGE 2]

Post-Experiment Questionnaire

The final part of this experiment deals with a few simple questions regarding the CNN article that you just read. You do not and should not refer back to the article for answers. Please answer as best as you can.

1. What feature of the Senate's bipartisan immigration policy was different from Obama's plan?

- Border Security and path to citizenship
- Amnesty
- Cracking down on employers who hire undocumented workers
- Don't Know

2. With respect to the information you just read in the CNN article, which immigration policy were they more critical of:

- The Bipartisan cadre of Senators
- President Obama's
- House Republicans plan
- Fair in criticism

3. Do you think the CNN article displayed a liberal bias, conservative bias, or was the article ideologically moderate?

- Extremely Liberal
- Liberal
- Slightly Liberal
- Moderate
- Slightly Conservative
- Conservative
- Extremely Conservative

4. Aside from the content you just read. In general, do you believe CNN is ideologically biased? If so please choose where you believe CNN falls on the ideological scale.

- Extremely Liberal
- Liberal
- Slightly Liberal

- _____ Moderate
- _____ Slightly Conservative
- _____ Conservative
- _____ Extremely Conservative

5. Which of the following two statements best describes you: “I follow National news closely only when something important or interesting is happening” OR “I follow National news closely most of the time, whether or not something important or interesting is happening”?

- _____ Only when something important or interesting is happening
- _____ Most of the time, whether or not something important or interesting is happening

Page 3

Appendix B

Appendix B. Outlet Labels



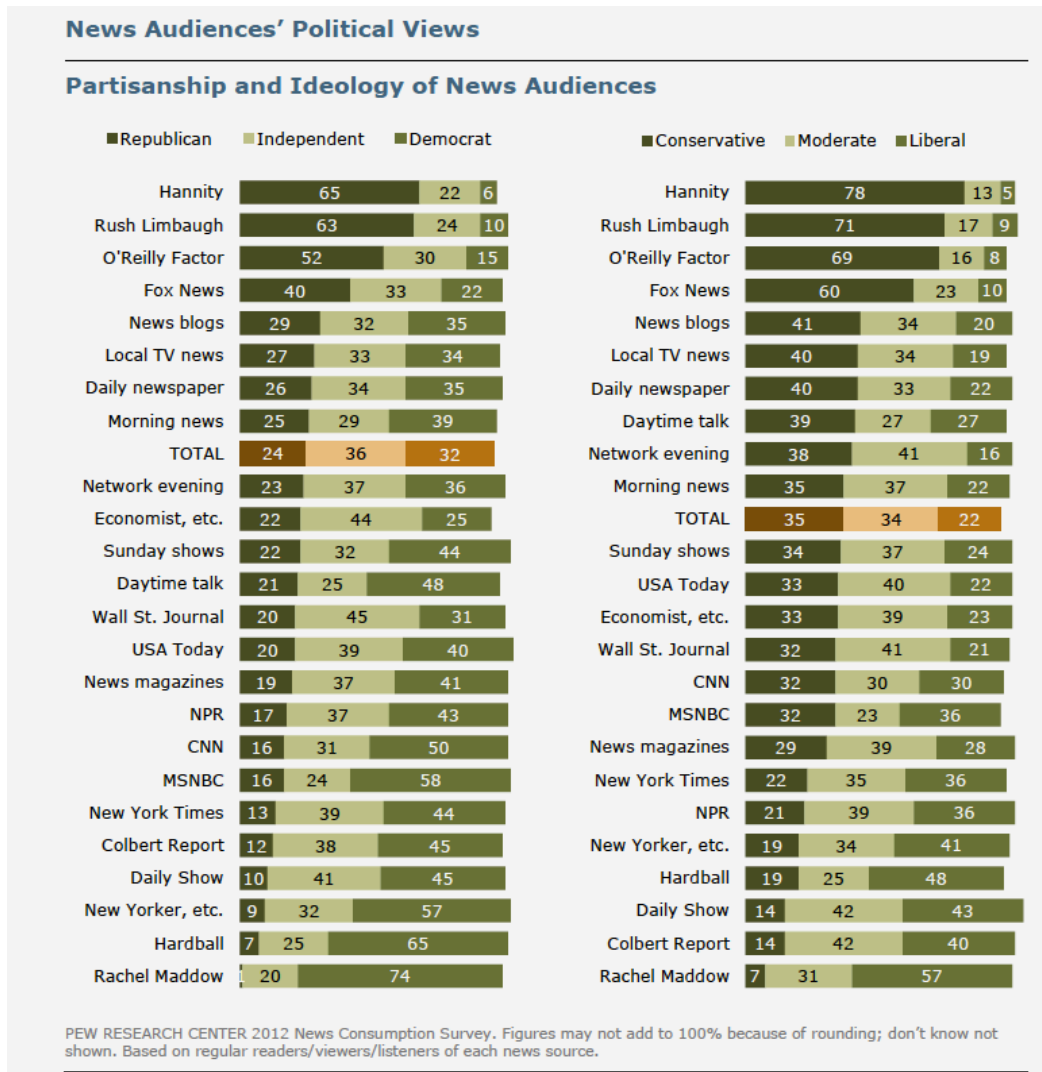
Appendix C

Appendix C. Summary of means for perceptions for criticism

Name of News Outlet	Perceived Ideology of News Outlet	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error of Mean	% of Total Sum	% of Total N
FOX	Extremely Liberal	1.0000	1	.	.00	0.2%	0.9%
	Moderate	4.5000	2	.70711	.50000	2.0%	1.7%
	Slightly Conservative	4.8571	7	.69007	.26082	7.5%	6.1%
	Conservative	4.8750	16	.80623	.20156	17.2%	13.9%
	Extremely Conservative	5.4615	13	1.05003	.29123	15.7%	11.3%
	Total	4.9487	39	1.09901	.17598	42.6%	33.9%
CNN	Liberal	3.6250	8	.74402	.26305	6.4%	7.0%
	Slightly Liberal	3.0000	11	.63246	.19069	7.3%	9.6%
	Moderate	3.8235	17	.63593	.15424	14.3%	14.8%
	Slightly Conservative	4.0000	2	1.41421	1.00000	1.8%	1.7%
	Conservative	6.0000	1	.	.00	1.3%	0.9%
		Total	3.6154	39	.84652	.13555	31.1%
MSNBC	Extremely Liberal	2.7143	7	.95119	.35952	4.2%	6.1%
	Liberal	2.8667	15	.51640	.13333	9.5%	13.0%
	Slightly Liberal	3.2857	7	.48795	.18443	5.1%	6.1%
	Moderate	4.0000	5	.70711	.31623	4.4%	4.3%
	Slightly Conservative	4.6667	3	.57735	.33333	3.1%	2.6%
		Total	3.2162	37	.85424	.14044	26.3%
Total	Extremely Liberal	2.5000	8	1.06904	.37796	4.4%	7.0%
	Liberal	3.1304	23	.69442	.14480	15.9%	20.0%
	Slightly Liberal	3.1111	18	.58298	.13741	12.4%	15.7%
	Moderate	3.9167	24	.65386	.13347	20.8%	20.9%
	Slightly Conservative	4.6667	12	.77850	.22473	12.4%	10.4%
	Conservative	4.9412	17	.82694	.20056	18.5%	14.8%
	Extremely Conservative	5.4615	13	1.05003	.29123	15.7%	11.3%
	Total	3.9391	115	1.19419	.11136	100.0%	100.0%

Appendix D

Appendix D.1: Pew Research Statistics



Appendix D. 2: Partisan Views Towards News Outlets

Partisan Views of Leading News Outlets					
	<u>Total</u>	<u>Rep</u>	<u>Dem</u>	<u>Ind</u>	<i>R-D</i> <u>gap</u>
	%	%	%	%	
CNN					
Favorable	60	44	75	55	-31
Unfavorable	19	34	7	22	+27
DK/Can't rate	21	22	18	23	
Fox News					
Favorable	55	72	43	55	+29
Unfavorable	25	13	36	24	-23
DK/Can't rate	20	15	21	21	
MSNBC					
Favorable	48	34	60	47	-26
Unfavorable	19	35	7	20	+28
DK/Can't rate	33	31	32	33	
Network TV					
Favorable	64	55	81	54	-26
Unfavorable	24	35	9	33	+26
DK/Can't rate	12	10	10	12	
New York Times					
Favorable	29	16	39	29	-23
Unfavorable	17	31	8	18	+23
DK/Can't rate	54	53	53	54	
NPR					
Favorable	44	39	50	43	-11
Unfavorable	12	13	7	16	+6
DK/Can't rate	44	48	43	40	
Wall St. Journal					
Favorable	32	39	29	32	+10
Unfavorable	13	12	16	12	-4
DK/Can't rate	55	49	56	56	

Figures read down.

Footnotes

1. Pew Research Center. 2012. *In Changing News Landscape, Even Television Is Vulnerable*. Survey Report. Available at {www.people-press.org}.
2. Steve Soto, "Democrats Show Signs of Realizing Conservative Bias in Media," <http://www.leftcoaster.com/archives/000993/php>.
3. Are the Media Liberal?" Yes – Brent Bozell," National Review Online, <http://www.nationalreview.com/debates/debates020503.asp>
4. Matt Bai, "Working for the Working-Class Vote," New York Times Magazine, October 19, 2008
5. Eveland, William P., and Dhavan V. Shah. "The Impact of Individual and Interpersonal Factors on Perceived News Media Bias." *Political Psychology* 24.1 (2003): 101-17. Print.
6. Pew Research Center. 2012. *In Changing News Landscape, Even Television Is Vulnerable*. Survey Report. Available at {www.people-press.org}.
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8. DellaVigna, Stefano, and Ethan Kaplan. "The Fox News Effect: Media Bias and Voting." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 122.3 (2007): 1187-234.
9. Pew Research Center. 2012. *In Changing News Landscape, Even Television Is Vulnerable*. Survey Report. Available at {www.people-press.org}.
10. Vallone et al. (1985) used news content that covered the Beirut massacre and had two opposing groups of participants in the study. Pro-arab and Pro-Isreal. The news controversy news content was the stimuli. In regards to my experiment, the stimuli is the ideological orientation associated with the news outlet label. So while, participants in the Vallone et al. study processed the information, the stimuli (controversy news content) effected the way the two groups of individuals perceived the news content. Each groups both said that the news content was biased in the opposite direction of their political beliefs.
11. Again, ideological orientations were measured on a 7-point scale. .
12. In Figure 2. Ideology of participants self-ascribed ideology which was initially measured on the 7-point scale was recoded into three groups 1 = liberal, 2 = moderates, 3 = conservative for the practical purpose of comparison.
13. At the Benghazi Senate Hearing (January 23rd 2013). Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, shouted "What difference at this point does it make" after being pressed and questioned about the initial, incorrect government report that the Benghazi terrorist attacks was a spontaneous protest gone bad.
<http://www.cnn.com/2013/01/23/politics/clinton-benghazi>

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