

Politicians and the News Media

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The International Journal of Press/Politics 2010 Sage Publications

Perhaps no other political institution in American politics gets as much criticism as the news media. When politicians get negative coverage, a common strategy is to attack the messenger. In some cases, attacking the messenger can be a politician's only chance to avoid the consequences of negative news coverage. For example, during the 1992 presidential election, incumbent George H. W. Bush was running for reelection during poor economic times. One of Bush's strategies in the election was to attack the news media for focusing on the economy and, in general, giving his campaign poor coverage. Although attacking the news media did not pay off for Bush, it was used again by Republican candidate Bob Dole in the 1996 presidential election. More recently, Hillary Clinton attacked the media during the 2008 Democratic primary for what she perceived to be overtly positive coverage of her primary opponent Barack Obama. Although Democrats occasionally go on the attack, media bashing is much more common among conservatives. Indeed, the notion of a liberal bias in the mainstream media has become a prominent part of conservative rhetoric since Richard Nixon was president.

These persistent attacks on the news media appear to have had some influence on public perceptions of the mainstream news media. For example, people were more likely to perceive media bias in 1992 after media bashing was a theme of Bush's reelection campaign. In addition, after repeated accusations – from Hillary Clinton and Republicans – that the media favored Barack Obama, polls showed that an overwhelming majority of Americans thought journalists wanted Obama to win the 2008 election. The problem with these two examples is that in both instances the attackers were correct: Bill Clinton received more favorable media coverage than George H. W. Bush and Obama received more favorable coverage than McCain. It is unclear whether the attacks worked on their own or merely pointed out the disparity in coverage of the candidates. If elite attacks increase perceptions of media bias, they have the potential to weaken political accountability, which is the foundation of representative democracy. The news media play important roles in representative democracies as public informants and government watchdogs. The mainstream media's ability to fulfill those roles depends on their credibility. A great deal of research shows that people are more likely to reject messages from low credibility sources. If people think a source is biased, they are more likely to ignore that source's messages. Research also shows that perceptions of media bias correspond to lower levels of trust in the news media as an institution. Studies have found numerous instances where the credibility of the news media affected their influence on public opinion. The tendency for people to base their evaluations of politicians on the issues receiving the most media attention is dependent on people's trust in the news media. In addition, beliefs about the biases in CNN and FOX News influenced the persuasiveness of those sources. If elected officials can increase perceptions of bias by attacking the media, they might be able to soften the impact of unfavorable news coverage. Although attacking the media might protect representatives from unfavorable news, it is likely to weaken political accountability in the process.

Elite attacks and perceptions of bias

Why do people perceive bias in the news media? Most research concerning perceptions of media bias has focused on how individuals evaluate bias in the content of the news. The most common finding – termed the hostile media perception – is that partisans tend to perceive bias against their side (Vallone et al. 1985). In

addition, the more interested and involved the observers, the more likely they are to perceive bias in media coverage. For example, Christen and colleagues (2002) found that union members and management during the 1995 UPS strike perceived bias against their respective sides, while uninvolved individuals thought the coverage was neutral or balanced. Perhaps the most interesting implication of the hostile media phenomenon is that truly balanced news sources are likely to upset partisans on both sides (Schmitt et al. 2004). The hostile media phenomenon is not the only factor influencing perceptions of media bias. Past research has found that elite attacks on the news media – and the corresponding media coverage of those attacks – increase perceptions of bias in the mainstream news media. Watts and colleagues (1999) compared public opinion data to a content analysis measuring the news media's tone toward the two main presidential candidates during the 1988, 1992, and 1996 presidential elections. In 1988, there was no evidence of bias toward either candidate and few attacks on the news media from political elites. As a result, a low percentage of Americans thought the mainstream media were biased in their coverage of the 1988 presidential election. People were much more likely to think the media were biased in 1992, but a content analysis found that the news media actually *were* more favorable toward Bill Clinton. Although there were also frequent attacks in the news media, it is unclear whether people perceived bias because of the attacks or because they noticed the actual bias in news coverage. Some clarification was provided in 1996, when there were more elite attacks than in 1992, but the news coverage was not favorable toward either candidate. Despite the absence of any actual bias in coverage, public perceptions of bias were at the same levels as they were in 1992. This provides evidence that perceptions of bias are influenced more by elite attacks on the news media than any actual bias in news coverage.

Watts and colleagues (1999) performed a more in-depth analysis of the 1992 presidential election to examine this relationship more closely. Specifically, they examined whether changes in perceptions of bias – measured by public opinion polls – over the course of the election were better explained by changes in media tone (toward both candidates) or the amount of media coverage of elite attacks. The results indicated that increases in perceptions of bias during the 1992 election were best explained by increases in media coverage of elite attacks.

Theory and Research Questions

Although Watts and colleagues (1999) presented compelling evidence that elite attacks increased perceptions of bias during the 1992 election, it remains unclear how this occurred. The main question for the present research is, *how do elite attacks influence perceptions of media bias?* One possibility is that elite attacks work on their own – independent of any actual slant in the news – by providing cues to the public from political elites. Watts and colleagues argued that elite attacks provided cues to the public, which were used instead of an evaluation of the actual bias in the news media. There is an abundance of research showing that people rely on cues from political elites when processing political information. Elite cues simplify political information and allow people to make political decisions without expending a great deal of time or mental energy. Although the use of political cues provides an efficient shortcut in decision making, they can be problematic when people rely on political elites to do their thinking for them.

People rely on source cues about bias in the media because they are either unwilling or unable to evaluate media bias on their own. Evaluating bias in the content of the news would require more mental effort than most people are willing to expend. Media bias is a systematic distortion of the real world. That is, bias suggests a difference between media accounts of the outside world and the way the world actually is. For people to evaluate media bias, they must have knowledge of the world independent of news media accounts.

Do the following activities (in Spanish)

I. Answer these questions about the text:

1. What is the relationship between politicians and the news media in America, according to the author? (12 pts)

2. What may the risks of public perceptions of bias be for democratic practices? (12 pts)

3. Identify a sentence that indicates a limitation of previous studies (gap in knowledge). COPY the sentence below. (10pts)

4. What issue does the present report attempt to answer? (20pts)

II. Paraphrase the following (in Spanish): (16 pts)

The most common finding – termed the hostile media perception – is that partisans tend to perceive bias against their side (Vallone et al. 1985). In addition, the more interested and involved the observers, the more likely they are to perceive bias in media coverage. Perhaps the most interesting implication of the hostile media phenomenon is that truly balanced news sources are likely to upset partisans on both sides.

III. Summarize the main idea of the text in no more than TWO sentences (30 pts)

CLAVE DE CORRECCIÓN

I.

1. La relación entre los políticos y los medios es conflictiva. Los medios son la institución que más críticas recibe desde la política en los EEUU. Eso se ha percibido en las últimas elecciones presidenciales, por ej.: en 1992 Bush criticó a los medios por concentrarse en la economía, en un momento en que la situación económica no era buena. También recibió ataques de Bob Dole en 1996 y de Hillary Clinton, en las últimas elecciones primarias Demócratas en 2008, por su percepción de que los medios favorecían a Barack Obama. El ataque a los medios es más común entre los Conservadores que entre los Demócratas.
2. La percepción pública de opiniones sesgadas en los medios puede debilitar su rol de contralor, como informantes públicos y observadores del accionar de los gobiernos, ya que disminuiría la credibilidad en las fuentes. La gente tiende a basar sus evaluaciones de los políticos en la información provista por los medios. Si un político acusa a algún medio de emitir información sesgada, podría reducir el impacto de una cobertura que le fuera desfavorable.
3. Although Watts and colleagues (1999) presented compelling evidence that elite attacks increased perceptions of bias during the 1992 election, it remains unclear how this occurred.
4. A partir de la falta de datos en investigaciones previas acerca de qué contribuye a la percepción pública de tratamiento sesgado de las noticias en los medios, el presente informe analizará cómo los ataques de las elites políticas influyen en la percepción de sesgo en los medios. Una posibilidad es que estos ataques funcionen independientemente de una tendencia real en los medios, al aportar señales en esa dirección, en lugar de una evaluación propia por parte del público de que realmente hay una tendencia en los medios.

II.

Existe un fenómeno por el cual los partidarios de un partido político tienden a percibir que los medios son hostiles en su cobertura al partido que apoyan, y esta percepción de una actitud tendenciosa se intensifica cuanto más involucrados estén. Esto lleva a concluir que una cobertura apropiada de las noticias tenderá a disgustar a seguidores de ambos lados.

III.

Según los resultados de una investigación sobre las elecciones presidenciales en EEUU en 1992, los políticos atacan a los medios como estrategia para que el público perciba que los medios tratan las noticias de modo tendencioso y de este modo reducir el impacto de una cobertura negativa; sin embargo, esto puede deteriorar el rol de los medios como contralor de la democracia. El autor se propone investigar de qué modo estos ataques logran influenciar la percepción del público.