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According to the Pew Research Center, 65% of the American public perceives that the news media are biased (2004). This paper looks at the hostile media effect—the theory that individuals assume media bias against them (Vallone, Ross and Leper 1985). The results from an experiment with 325 undergraduates have several implications regarding the role of political information. First, the hostile media effect is not consistently supported— that is, perceptions of bias result from actual content, with individuals responding to media messages with the assumption of bias, but not of bias linked to partisanship. When the expectations of the hostile media effect are supported, the results show a larger effect for Republicans, not Democrats (Beck et al. 2002; Mutz and Martin 2001). Second, respondents tend to rate the reporter as fair when content is balanced and unfair when content is disparate or one-sided; when they do perceive a bias, partisan Democrats tend to kill the messenger and describe the reporter as unfair while partisan Republicans tend to describe the reporter as fair. The present data indicate influences beyond partisanship and offer alternative explanations for perceptions of bias.

In an age of growing cynicism about government and politics, it is not surprising that roughly 65% of all respondents to a PEW Research Center (2004) survey perceive a political bias in news coverage. Researchers are currently studying the processes by which individuals interpret media content and bias (e.g., Eveland and Shah 2003; Lee 2005). Findings suggest that inter-

personal factors, such as a person's discussion network, ideology, and partisanship, affect perceptions of bias. Given the strength of association between partisanship and its effect on individual decision-making, partisanship might best explain the discrepancy between perceived bias and actual bias.

The hostile media effect explains the gap between actual media content and perceptions of bias in content. Its basic premise is that partisans interpret media content as opposed to their views when in fact it is balanced among viewpoints (Vallone, Ross and Lepper 1985). However, the theory (and recent research) fails to consider bias perceptions when media content is not balanced. For example, Dalton, Beck and Huckfeldt (1998) found that the news media present multiple, conflicting, and disparate messages regardless of whether or not content is biased. Dalton et al. (1998) refer to bias as that which is imposed intentionally by the journalist, which is different than others who define bias in terms of shear positive and negative tone of the article (e.g. Stempel and Windhauser 1991). The multiple definitions of bias available have led to conflicting measures and results.

Given the current climate concerning media bias, both in terms of the public perceiving bias, and journalists arguing its very existence, an examination of the effects of content on evaluations of bias is extremely timely. Further, since partisanship is a widely used heuristic in decision making, what happens when one relies on partisanship as a heuristic to evaluate media content? Is it true, as the hostile media effect suggests that partisanship will cloud one's judgment? Using the hostile media effect as a framework, one might predict that disparate, or one-sided, messages would be easiest to project a bias onto because the content itself presents opposing viewpoints. If so, the potential for perceived media bias may be greater than previously thought. Therefore, an examination of both balanced and dispa-

rate messages is important to fully understand the extent to which perceptions of bias are actual or projected.

INFORMATION PROCESSING BIAS:
THE HOSTILE MEDIA EFFECT

Vallone et al. (1985) confirmed the existence of the hostile media effect in the form of *attitude influenced processing* and *different standards*. According to attitude-influenced processing, partisans make evaluative judgments about media content based on their predisposed beliefs rather than actual content (Chaiken, Liberman and Eagly 1989; Tversky and Kahneman 1982). A perceptual bias can occur when partisans who are predisposed to skepticism and searching for disagreeable content report unequal amounts of negative content toward their preferred positions (Gunther, Christen, Liebhart and Chia 2001). According to the different standards approach, partisans view balanced coverage as being biased based on their belief that their superior viewpoint should receive more favorable coverage than other viewpoints (Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken 1993). Depending on the situational context, either process can be used to explain why an objectively balanced newscast can be interpreted as biased by partisans.

There is also support for the hostile media effect in terms of political party affiliation. Dalton et al. (1998) examined perceptions of newspaper content during the 1992 presidential election and found that strong Republican supporters tended to describe newspapers as biased in favor of Bill Clinton and strong Democratic supporters described the same newspapers as favoring George H. W. Bush. However, the conclusions of Dalton et al. (1998) were based on a single variable for party identification and the results were interpreted as an effect of both ends (Democrats and Republicans) of the variable. According to Beck, Dalton, Greene and Huckfeldt (2002) and Mutz and Martin (2001), the results instead might support the basic premise that

Democrats generally hold favorable opinions of the press (accounting for the lower percentage of respondents who stated that the press favored Bush) and Republicans are generally critical of the media (explaining the larger percentage of respondents reporting a pro-Clinton bias). Therefore it is Republicans, and not Democrats, who are more susceptible to the hostile media effect.

The previous research has provided mixed support for the hostile media effect in terms of partisanship. Further, the majority of the experimental evidence has been based on *balanced* content, meaning partisans are exposed to content where neither group is given more positive or negative coverage than the other group. For example, if two candidates are running for office and both support campaign finance reform, the balanced article describes these similar viewpoints while giving equal coverage to each candidate in terms of tone and content (both candidates are presented as moral). However, balanced content is not the only type of content that can exist. Therefore, this study examines the hostile media effect under a different situation- that of *disparate* media content, which actually is more likely to occur in a real world situation.

Disparate content refers to coverage that is one-sided- more or less positive for one group compared to coverage for the other group. Again, while some scholars have defined this as biased, this study avoids that evaluation and simply refers to this content as disparate. For example, if two candidates are running for office and each has a different viewpoint in terms of campaign finance reform, an article with disparate coverage would use the differing opinions to give more favorable coverage to one candidate (the candidate is described moral) over the other candidate (the candidate is described as corrupt). Such an article could give positive coverage to the candidate who supports campaign finance reform, while giving more negative treatment to the candidate who opposes reform.

EXPECTATIONS OF THE HOSTILE MEDIA EFFECT

To test the effects of partisanship on perceptions of bias under balanced and disparate media content, this study uses the theory of the hostile media effect to generate hypotheses for both situations. First, in terms of balanced coverage, previous evidence shows that respondents report balanced coverage as biased. In particular, when groups were given the same balanced content to watch, partisans evaluated the balanced content as biased. Therefore, I hypothesize that:

> **H1:** Partisans will evaluate all balanced content as biased against their preferred side.

Balanced coverage is not the only type of content that can appear in the media; however, within the examination of the hostile media effect, the presence of disparate coverage has not been examined. Although previously unexamined, the theory of the hostile media effect can be used to generate expectations for situations of disparate messages. The hostile media effect states that partisans will always assume a bias for the other side, unless the partisan's preferred side receives more positive coverage, which actually can happen in disparate coverage. In disparate coverage, the partisan will report no bias exists because his or her side is favored and this is the only acceptable condition for a partisan. Remember, the only acceptable (and thus considered unbiased) situation is when the partisan group receives more favorable coverage, anything else is considered by the partisan as biased. Therefore, I hypothesize that:

> **H2:** Partisans will evaluate disparate coverage favoring their side as unbiased because they find the imbalance in favor of their side as the only acceptable situation; and

> **H3:** Partisans will evaluate disparate coverage favoring the opposition as biased because the content is seen as unacceptable.

In addition to these expectations based on balanced and disparate content, I expect the hostile media effect to be more likely when content is disparate compared to when content is balanced. Disparate content presents two conflicting points of view, which makes it easier for respondents to recognize an imbalance and perceive a bias. Given that people are limited information processors, situations that make the end result (perception of bias) easier to achieve are desirable. Balanced content will still result in perception of bias, but to arrive at this, partisans will have to make more of an effort to justify the perception. Therefore I hypothesize that:

H4: The hostile media effect to be more likely under situations of disparate content compared to situations of balanced content.

The above expectations center around perceptions of media content, where the hostile media effect can be tested in terms of the extent to which respondents perceived media content as biased. The hostile media effect can also be assessed by how a partisan evaluates journalistic balance and fairness. For example, Arad and Carnevale (1994) reported that partisans gave higher ratings to mediators who ruled in favor of their argument than to neutral mediators or mediators who ruled in favor of the opposing side. Similarly, the evaluation of the journalist will be based on the respondent's perception of the article content, as well as partisanship. Democrats and Republicans will assume journalists do not favor their preferred side. The hostile media effect assumes partisans will not recognize bias for their preferred side because they would find any favorable imbalance and acceptable and report this as unbiased; however, partisans should report bias for the opposition in all other situations and, since this is considered unacceptable, I hypothesize that partisans will penalize the journalist in these situations. Accordingly, applying the hostile media effect to journalistic evaluations raises the following hypotheses:

H5: Partisans will describe all journalists that do not treat their side most favorably as unfair

H6: Partisans who perceive a bias for the opposition will evaluate the journalist as unfair

H7: Partisans who perceive a bias in favor of the opposition will evaluate the journalist as unfair.

BEYOND INFORMATION PROCESSING BIASES:
ACTUAL MEDIA BIASES

Having used the hostile media effect to generate expectations, it is important to note that other explanations might prevail. Namely, the current political and media climate in society could influence evaluations. While there is ample discussion in the mainstream as to if bias exists, there is a debate among political scientists regarding this. Though not an exhaustive list, researchers who have documented a liberal media bias include Efron (1971), Keely (1971), and Bozell and Baker (1990). Researchers who have documented a conservative media bias include Liebling (1964), Cooper and Soley (1990), and Lee and Solomon (1991). The list of researchers who claim that media content is, on average, devoid of bias includes Hostetter (1976), D'Alessio and Allen (2000), and Niven (2003). Finally, it must be noted that the definition of "bias" remains contentious in current research and, therefore, disparities in the definition and measurement of bias are likely leading to conflicting results.

The focus of mainstream debate on this issue concerns the "existence" of a liberal bias, with a growing number of conservative commentators lamenting a bias that few liberals vehemently refute. The current literature contains little information on the extent to which this one-sided discourse preconditions individuals to assuming the existence of a liberal bias in the media re-

gardless of actual content. Given conflicting evidence on the existence of bias, it is reasonable to speculate that perceptions of bias are linked to the current discourse on the topic. Thus, the hostile media effect might not best explain current partisan perceptions.

EXAMINING THE HOSTILE MEDIA EFFECT

This analysis looks at the effects of bias perceptions in media coverage by using newspaper content of two candidates who show positive support for the same issue or different viewpoints that result in disparate coverage. For each scenario content for both sides is included, in order to evaluate perceptions of bias of one side compared to another side. This comparison could not be made if content focused only on one side. The four coverage options are:

(1) the Democrat supports side A and the Republican supports side B,

(2) the Democrat supports side B and the Republican supports side A,

(3) both candidates support side A, or

(4) both candidates support side B.

The articles are objective in nature because both the balanced content and disparate content is presented as factual and devoid of any intent to prefer one side over the other (e.g. Dalton et al. 1998). Unbiased content was purposefully used in all four scenarios, yet the research assumption dictated that readers would project a bias onto the story source depending on the issue and how each side was presented. For instance, if side A was presented as moral and correct and side B as corrupt and unjust, the hostile media effect states that supporters of both candidates would report biases for all content scenarios except when their favored candidate supported side A and the other supported side B. In those situations, it was assumed that the partisan would

describe the positive coverage of their candidate (moral versus corrupt) as fair and balanced.

A controlled survey experiment was designed to examine information processing and the hostile media effect given certain expectations and content scenarios. The Fall 2001 experiment was conducted with 325 undergraduate students who voluntarily participated for extra credit for two introductory political science courses at a large Midwestern university. The use of students is sometimes challenged in experimental research. However, given the reported lack of partisan attachment in younger individuals, the results obtained from this analysis might be weaker than the results that would be drawn from a sample consisting of older non-students.

Data were collected via a computerized survey containing 6 knowledge questions, 2 party identification questions, a fabricated newspaper article, 5 questions designed to measure the extent to which accurate or biased information processing occurred, 14 candidate trait evaluation questions, and 10 questions designed to assess the favorability of the candidates. Follow-up questions were included to measure evaluation intensity.

The survey software randomly assigned newspaper articles to each participant.[*] Students were told that each article was taken from a newspaper covering two congressional candidates, one Democrat and one Republican. They were also told that each candidate had a particular stance (side A or side B) on campaign finance reform as it concerns political action committees. Article content varied according to the four scenarios described above. The disparate articles presented one candidate supporting side A and the other side B; the neutral articles presented both candidates as supporting side A or B.

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[*] Appendix A presents each of the four newspaper articles.

Side A and B content were identical for all articles. The tone of information for Side A was positive, with the candidate described as a moral citizen who supported campaign finance reform, who rejected donations from political action committees, and who refused to be "bought" by corporate interests. The tone of information for side B was negative, with the candidate described as someone who was beholden to corporate interests, who had amassed a large war chest, and who opposed campaign finance reform.

The scenarios can be justified for three reasons. First, the experiment occurred in fall 2001, following the terrorist attacks, when many believed bipartisanship characterized the political mood. Also, at this time, the McCain-Feingold Act, a bipartisan campaign reform act, was rapidly gaining in popularity. Second, the articles were clearly written in language intended to convey positive and negative cues. For example, the phrase, "taking back power from special interests" would have a negative connotation for those opposed to reform. Lastly, and most importantly, a separate sample of 119 undergraduate students received sections of the articles to read, with the candidate names and party identifications omitted. For each, they identified the content as positive or negative. The results show that 87% of the respondents identified content where the candidate supports campaign finance reform as positive and 97% reported content where the candidate opposes campaign finance reform as negative. Therefore, while some might argue classifying all pro-reform content as positive conflates the positive/negative information with issue positions for campaign finance reform, these results show students do identify pro-reform content as positive content and anti-reform content as negative, irrespective of issue positions.

For these three reasons, information is considered positive when the candidate supports reform and negative when the candidate opposes it. This creates two neutral content situations, in

which each candidate has the same viewpoint, and two disparate content situations, with one favoring the Democratic candidate (the Democratic candidate receives positive coverage and the Republican candidate receives negative coverage), and one favoring the Republican candidate (the Republican candidate receives positive coverage and the Democratic candidate receives negative coverage).

Two dependent variables were used to measure perceptions of bias and the hostile media effect. Similar to Vallone et al. (1985), bias was assessed by asking respondents, "Which candidate do you think the newspaper favored in the article you read, or did it not favor either candidate?" Responses were coded as 0 for a perceived Democratic bias, 1 for no perceived bias, and 2 for a perceived Republican bias. This question serves as an assessment of bias because previous research has defined bias as a situation in which a candidate is favored in terms of content (e.g. Stempel and Windhauser 1991). The hostile media effect was also evaluated in terms of the perceived fairness of the reporter, using the question "How fair-minded would you rate the journalist who wrote this article?" Responses were given along a Likert-type scale in which 1 was coded as "very unfair" and 7 "very fair."

The primary independent variables in this analysis were the message content of the newspaper article and partisanship. Message content was measured using dummy variables if the respondent read one of the four articles—1 if an article was read, 0 if not. Three dummy variables were used with the four articles, with the balanced and negative content category excluded.

Partisanship was measured via answers to the National Election Studies questions that were included in the survey. Responses were given along a seven point Likert-type scale, with 1 being "strong Democrat" and 7 "strong Republican." Party identification was considered important to testing the hostile media

effect, since it was assumed that partisans would perceive biases in media content based on their political preferences. Further, a method was needed to confirm a minimum degree of equal distribution of the four articles in terms of party identification in order to control analytical bias. The party identification distribution data indicate that partisanship was even across the sample and across treatment groups. Additionally, interactive effects of message content and partisanship were used as independent variables to analyze the extent to which the participants responded to a particular stimulus (type and tone of content). It is reasonable to expect partisans to respond differently to different stimuli and this can not be understood without an interactive effect.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first set of hypotheses address how message content affects the way that partisans perceive media content. Using the hostile media effect, hypotheses were generated for perceptions of bias when content is balanced and when it is disparate. Partisans will perceive a bias against their preferred position unless the article content was clearly more favorable toward their side, in which case they would report zero bias. Therefore, balanced content should result in perceptions of bias, while disparate content will result in perceptions of bias when content is negative for the preferred candidate and perceptions of no bias when content is positive for the preferred candidate. Also, while perceptions of bias should occur in both situations, balanced and disparate content, I posit perceptions of bias will be more likely when content is disparate rather than when content is balanced, because the disparity will be easy to recognize and project a bias onto. To test for this, an ordered logit analysis was conducted with perception of bias as the dependent variable. Perception of bias is coded as 0 for a perceived Democratic bias, 1 for no perceived bias, and 2 for a perceived Republican bias. The inde-

pendent variables included in the analysis are partisanship and dummy variables for which article the respondent read. Results from this analysis are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Logit Regression Results: Effects of Partisanship and Media Content on Perceptions of Media Bias

Variables	Coefficient	(SE)
Party identification	-0.03	(0.09)
Positive content for Democrat	-2.02‡	(0.62)
Positive content for Republican	0.94↑	(0.57)
Positive content for both candidates	-1.04↑	(0.56)
Positive content for Democrat*party identification	0.17	(0.14)
Positive content for Republican*party identification	0.01	(0.13)
Threshold 1	-0.99	(0.38)
Threshold 2	0.94	(0.38)
LR Chi2	66.55‡	
N	323	

Significance ↑ p<0.10, ‡ p<0.001

Results indicate that content and party identification affect perceptions of bias. The magnitude of this relationship is best explained through predicted probabilities of perceptions of bias for strong partisans, since the hostile media effect should be greatest for them (Table 1a).[*] The study will first examine the effects when content is balanced, then when content is disparate and lastly the study will draw comparisons between these scenarios.

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[*] Probabilities were also generated for weak partisans and the results show consistency across the partisanship scale as expected by the hostile media effect. Strong partisans show larger probabilities, on average 0.05 compared to weak partisans. Therefore, given that the hostile media effect aims to explain the behavior of strong partisans, I report those in the text. When weak and strong partisans are collapsed into one group, the probabilities are on average 0.025 lower than found for strong partisans. Additional probabilities can be provided by the author upon request.

TABLE 1a
Predicted Probabilities of Assessment of Bias for
Strong Partisans Based on Newspaper Article Content

	Newspaper Article Content			
	Disparate Content		Balanced Content	
Assessment of bias	+ Democrat - Republican	- Democrat + Republican	+ Democrat + Republican	- Democrat - Republican
	Strong Democrats			
Democratic bias	0.71 (0.54, 0.87)	0.12 (0.05, 0.21)	0.51 (0.35, 0.68)	0.28 (0.16, 0.40)
No bias	**0.23** **(0.11, 0.36)**	0.38 (0.27, 0.48)	0.37 (0.26, 0.47)	0.45 (0.39, 0.51)
Republican bias	0.06 (0.01, 0.10)	**0.50** **(0.32, 0.67)**	**0.12** **(0.04, 0.20)**	**0.27** **(0.15, 0.39)**
N	16	10	13	16
	Strong Republicans			
Democratic bias	**0.51** **(0.31, 0.71)**	0.14 (0.05, 0.23)	**0.51** **(0.35, 0.68)**	**0.32** **(0.16, 0.48)**
No bias	0.37 (0.31, 0.71)	**0.39** **(0.29, 0.49)**	0.37 (0.26, 0.47)	0.44 (0.16, 0.48)
Republican bias	0.12 (0.03, 0.21)	0.47 (0.29, 0.65)	0.12 (0.04, 0.20)	0.24 (0.10, 0.37)
N	11	17	17	11

Note: Figures represent predicted probabilities obtained from Table 1 estimates. Confidence intervals are in parentheses. Newspaper article content: + = positive coverage, - = negative coverage. Assessment of bias refers to which candidate, if any, was perceived as favored. Figures in bold font are expectations based on the hostile media effect.

Balanced Content

In terms of balanced content, remember that partisans are expected to report bias in favor of the opposition, both when the balance is positive for both candidates and when the content is negative toward both candidates. This is because partisans are to

assume all content is biased unless the content is more favorable for their preferred side. As the probabilities show, this is not necessarily true. Strong Democrats have a 0.12 probability of reporting a Republican bias when content is balanced and positive, and a 0.27 probability of reporting a Republican bias when content is balanced and negative. Clearly this does not support the hostile media effect. On the other hand, strong Republicans are more likely to conform to the hostile media effect, though the results are not overwhelming. Strong Republicans have a 0.51 probability of reporting a Democratic bias when content is balanced and positive, and a 0.32 probability of reporting a Democratic bias when content is balanced and negative. These probabilities do not indicate widespread support of the hostile media effect, but they do show strong Republicans are more likely to conform to the hostile media effect compared to strong Democrats. This result is in line with recent evidence of the hostile media effect in a real world setting where party identification is examined (Mutz and Martin 2001; Beck et al. 2002).

Overall, in terms of balanced content, only moderate support is found for the hostile media effect, and this applies to strong Republicans, but not strong Democrats. Instead, the results suggest partisans assess positive and negative information differently, rather than assessing all balanced content, regardless of tone, as biased. When article content is balanced and positive, both strong Democrats and strong Republicans have a 0.51 probability of reporting a Democratic bias. This shows a hostile media effect for strong Republicans, but not for strong Democrats.

When content is balanced and negative, both strong Democrats and strong Republicans are more likely to report no bias (0.44 and 0.45, respectively). A possible explanation for this finding is the presence of a projection effect according to current discourse in which partisans assume a liberal media bias when content is favorable to both candidates. Thus, when a message is

ferred candidate. It is hard to argue that the negative Republican content stood out in contrast to the positive Democratic content, and led to a perception of a Democratic bias by strong Democrats. Rather, strong Democrats respond to the positive information about the Democratic candidate and report a Democratic bias. The same is true for strong Republicans- positive Republican content leads to a perception of a Republican bias.

Overall, the evidence in terms of disparate content is mixed. When the disparity favors the preferred candidate, partisans recognize the actual content and report a bias for the preferred candidate. When the disparity favors the opposition, the hostile media effect is more likely. Interestingly, partisans equate disparity with bias, though this study refrains from calling these articles biased because there are objective reasons why disparity can exist.

Comparisons between Neutral and Disparate Content

The hostile media effect will be more likely when content is disparate as opposed to balanced because the disparity allows respondents to easily notice that one side is favored over the other. Therefore, rather than projecting a bias that does not exist, partisans assume disparity is bias. Remember, this study does not evaluate disparity as bias because there could be objective reasons for the disparity, such as how the campaigns are run (e.g. Dalton et al. 1998). Comparing the probabilities between balanced and disparate situations does show that partisans conform to the expectations of the hostile media effect more so when content is disparate, as predicted; however, support for the expectations is quite modest. When content is disparate and negative for the preferred candidate, the hostile media effect prevailed for both strong Democrats and strong Republicans (0.50 and 0.51), but not in the other disparate condition (0.23 and 0.39). However, when the articles were balanced, the only evidence of a

balanced but negative, partisans recognize the negative tone and fail to report either candidate as favored, regardless of their general perception of a mainstream media bias. This study cannot offer a conclusion on this point because the respondents were not asked to express their opinions regarding bias in the mainstream media. Further research is required to test whether a factor other than information processing biases (e.g., a hostile media effect or motivated reasoning) can be used to explain perceptions of bias. Overall, when content is balanced, Republicans are more likely than Democrats to perceive a bias and conform to the hostile media effect, though the probabilities are not overwhelmingly large in support of this. Further, partisans assess information differently, depending on tone.

Disparate Content

In situations of disparate coverage, partisans are expected to report no bias if their side is favored (since they consider this the only acceptable situation) and biased if their side receives anything less than this. First, in terms of disparate coverage that is negative for the preferred candidate, both strong Democrats and strong Republicans report this as biased for the opposition (0.50 and 0.51, respectively). This does show there is a hostile media effect for partisans in this condition. On the other hand, when content is disparate and negative for the opposition, neither strong Democrats nor strong Republicans have large probabilities of conforming to the hostile media effect and reporting no bias (0.23 and 0.39, respectively). Interestingly, in both of these situations, strong Democrats and strong Republicans evaluate the negative opposition content, and positive preferred candidate content, as just that. Thus, Democrats report the content as biased for Democrats (0.71) and Republicans report the content biased for Republicans (0.47). Most likely one type of message is resonating with respondents- the positive content for the pre-

hostile media effect is for strong Republicans, when the article is balanced and positive. Rather, both sets of partisans are at times able to equally recognize actual content, yet in some situations a Democratic bias is assumed for both sets of partisans even when not true. This finding suggests that current discourse concerning a "liberal media" might actually have an effect on perceptions of media bias. Both Democrats and Republicans report the Democrat as favored when content is favorable for the Democrat, even in the balanced situation.

Overall, the expectation that the hostile media effect is more likely when content is disparate is supported, though not in both cases of disparity. Instead, the tone of the content and the recipient of the content seem to influence the results more so than the hostile media effect.

Reporter Evaluation

As a further test of bias perception, respondents evaluated the fairness of the reporter. The hostile media effect suggests that: (a) unless their side is given most favorable coverage, partisans will perceive all coverage as unfair; and (b) when partisans of one party or the other perceive a bias, they will describe the reporter as unfair if the bias supports the other candidate. Given the results of the previous section, there is evidence that partisans do report bias for their preferred side, which the hostile media effect does not predict. In these situations, one would expect perception of bias for the preferred side to be acceptable for partisans, since they prefer positive content for their candidate, and one would expect partisans in this situation to report the journalist as fair.

To assess these expectations, this study used an ordered logit regression with reporter evaluation as the dependent variable. Responses were given along a Likert-type scale in which 1 was coded as "very unfair" and 7 "very fair." The independent variables included those listed in Table 1. Two dummy variables were added—one each for perception of a Democratic or Republican bias. In each case, responses stating a perceived bias were coded as 1 and responses indicating no perceived bias were coded as 0. These variables address the effects of perception of bias, which was found in the previous section, and hypothesized to effect evaluations of the reporter. Further, this study employs interaction terms from the multiplicative product of party identification and each dummy variable for perception of bias. The interaction terms were included because perception of bias is contingent on partisanship. Democrats who perceive a Democratic bias should evaluate reporters differently than Republicans who perceive a Democratic bias. The results of the ordered logit analysis are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Logit Regression Results: Evaluations of Reporter Fairness based on Partisanship and Media Content

Variables	Coefficient	(SE)
Party Identification	-0.06	(0.67)
Positive content for Democrat	-0.80†	(2.24)
Positive content for Republican	-0.16	(0.47)
Positive content for both candidates	0.19	(0.56)
Perceived bias for Democrat	-1.92‡	(3.44)
Perceived bias for Republican	-2.30‡	(3.74)
Perceived Democratic bias*party identification	0.18	(1.47)
Perceived Republican bias*party identification	0.22↑	(1.67)
Threshold 1	-2.02	(0.44)
Threshold 2	-1.31	(0.43)
LR Chi2	52.47‡	
N	323	

Note: Z-scores for coefficients and standard errors for cut-points in parentheses.,† $p<0.05$, ↑ $p<0.10$, ‡ $p<0.001$ Reporter fairness: -1 = somewhat unfair, unfair, very unfair; 0 = neither fair nor unfair; + 1 = somewhat fair, fair, very fair.

The results indicate that reporter evaluations are affected by content, perceptions of bias and party identification and the interaction of party identification and perception of bias; however, mixed support for the hostile media effect is found. Overall, partisans do have some tendency to kill the messenger.

Table 2a presents probabilities of journalist ratings based on partisanship and newspaper article content.

TABLE 2a

Predicted Probabilities of Rating the Journalist asUnfair and Fair for StrongPartisans Based on Newspaper Article Content

| | Newspaper Article Content | | | |
| | Disparate Content | | Balanced Content | |
Journalist Rating	+ Democrat - Republican	- Democrat + Republican	+ Democrat + Republican	- Democrat - Republican
	Strong Democrats			
Fair	**0.42**	0.57	0.65	0.61
	(0.23, 0.59)	(0.40, 0.73)	(0.50, 0.80)	(0.44, 0.77)
Unfair	0.42	**0.27**	**0.21**	**0.24**
	(0.23, 0.60)	(0.14, 0.41)	(0.10, 0.32)	(0.11, 0.37)
N	16	10	13	16
	Strong Republicans			
Fair	0.33	**0.48**	0.57	0.52
	(0.17, 0.48)	(0.30, 0.66)	(0.40, 0.73)	(0.33, 0.71)
Unfair	**0.50**	0.35	**0.27**	**0.31**
	(0.33, 0.68)	(0.19, 0.51)	(0.14, 0.41)	(0.15, 0.47)
N	11	17	17	11

Note: Figures represent predicted probabilities obtained from Table 2 estimates. Confidence intervals in parentheses. Newspaper article content: + = positive coverage, - = negative coverage. Unfair reporter rating: respondent described reporter as very unfair, unfair or somewhat unfair. Fair rating: respondent described reporter as very fair, fair, or somewhat fair. Entries in bold font based on expectations of the hostile media effect.

Table 2b presents probabilities of journalist ratings based on partisanship and perceptions of bias.

Table 2b
Predicted Probabilities of Partisans Rating Reporter as
Unfair or Fair Based on Perception of Newspaper Bias

		Perceived Article Bias	
		Democrat	Republican
Strong Democrat			
	Fair	0.34	0.27
		(0.20, 0.48)	(0.12, 0.42)
	Unfair	0.49	**0.57**
		(0.34, 0.64)	**(0.39, 0.76)**
	N	24	8
Strong Republican			
	Fair	0.51	**0.49**
		(0.36, 0.66)	**(0.31, 0.67)**
	Unfair	**0.32**	0.34
		(0.19, 0.45)	(0.17, 0.50)
	N	24	15

Note: Figures represent predicted probabilities obtained from Table 2 estimates. Confidence intervals are in parentheses. "Unfair" rating means respondent described reporter as very unfair, unfair, or somewhat unfair. "Fair" rating means respondent described reporter as very fair, fair, or somewhat fair. Entries in bold type were based on expectations of the hostile media effect.

Balanced Content

In terms of balanced coverage, where partisans should report the journalist as unfair, because the situation is not acceptable, both Democrats and Republicans report the journalist as fair, both when content is balanced and positive (0.65 and 0.57 respectively) and balanced and negative (0.61 and 0.52 respectively). Partisans are more likely to evaluate balanced content as

fair, not unfair, contrary to the hostile media effect. This result could be anticipated for non-partisans, because balance should imply neutrality and given journalistic standards, this should be perceived as fair. Surprisingly, however, partisans also respond to the overall balanced message and accept the balance and evaluate journalists as fair.

Disparate Content

As anticipated, when content is disparate, there is more support for the hostile media effect. The expectation is that partisans will evaluate the journalist as fair when the disparity favors the preferred side and unfair when the disparity favors the opposition. First, when content is disparate and negative for the preferred candidate, Republicans do report the journalist as unfair (0.50), while Democrats do so, but with a much lower probability (0.27). For Democrats, the current discourse could affect their evaluations. In the mainstream debate about a "liberal" media, people are told this is unfair and Democrats should not receive favorable coverage. Perhaps in response to this, when Democrats do receive negative coverage, Democrats find this acceptable. This runs counter to the hostile media effect, and even to intuition, but it is one possibility that could later be explored.

When content is disparate and negative for the opposition candidate, both Democrats and Republicans report this as fair, as expected, though the probabilities do not exceed 0.50 (0.42 and 0.48 respectively). This suggests modest support for the hostile media effect. However, even with these modest results, the hostile media effect receives more support when content is disparate than when content is balanced. Further, strong Republicans are more likely than strong Democrats to conform to the hostile media effect.

Perceptions of Bias

This study initially anticipated that perceptions of bias would affect reporter evaluations because partisans should evaluate a reporter as fair if they perceive a bias in their preferred direction. Otherwise, partisans will evaluate the journalist as unfair. When perception of bias is taken into account, however, there is mixed support for the hostile media effect (Table 2b). The results show that Democrats who perceive a Republican bias do report the journalist as unfair (0.57 probability) and Republicans who perceive a Republican bias report the journalist as fair (0.49). However, when a Democratic bias is perceived, Democrats do not in large part report the journalist as fair (0.34 probability) and Republicans do not in large part report the journalist as unfair (0.32 probability). Interestingly, Democrats are more likely to give an unfavorable reporter evaluation regardless of the direction of perceived bias, and partisan Republicans are more likely to give a favorable evaluation regardless of the direction of perceived bias. Could public discourse explain this? Perhaps. Democrats might respond to outcries of media bias by evaluating any bias as unfair, while Republicans might be resigned to accept what they feel is a "liberal" media. This is an interesting finding overall, even if it does not conform to expectations. Partisans are processing information differently and this is evident in terms of the effects of perceptions of bias.

CONCLUSION

The results have several implications regarding the role of political information. First, in many instances they do not support the hostile media effect—that is, perceptions of bias result from actual content, with respondents reacting to the presence of disparate content regardless of the lack of measurable bias. When the expectations of the hostile media effect are supported,

the results show a larger effect for Republicans, not Democrats, which recent evidence also supports (Beck et al. 2002; Mutz and Martin 2001). Second, respondents tend to rate the reporter as fair when content is balanced and unfair when content is disparate; when they do perceive a bias, partisan Democrats tend to kill the messenger and describe the reporter as unfair while partisan Republicans tend to describe the reporter as fair.

The results provide important information as to the ways that individuals respond to media content and project biases, especially in the context of disparate versus balanced information. Whereas previous studies have suggested that partisanship affects perceptions of bias, the present data indicate influences beyond partisanship. One possible reason is the current national discourse on liberal bias in the media. Eveland and Shah (2003) found perceptions of bias to be linked not only to partisanship, but to conversations with like-minded people. The influence of communication networks is unexamined here, but could support the idea that a larger discourse, either in one's network, or in the mainstream, could be shaping perceptions of bias.

Furthermore, discrepancies in the literature regarding the extent to which bias exists may be definitional, a context that apparently affects the general public as well. For example, Dalton et al. (1998) and Kahn and Kenney (2002) argue that in campaigns, it is common for one side to receive more favorable coverage due to how the campaign is being run. They suggest this is not bias per se, but objective reporting. These results show that definitional problems not only affect researchers, but the public as well.

The finding of a perception of bias when content is disparate regardless of the objectivity of the actual message is particularly important in light of the "horserace" type of coverage given to most electoral campaigns and the ongoing national concern with objective political reporting. Determining the implications of this

finding when coverage is perceived to be biased requires further examination of the affects of bias perceptions on outcomes (e.g., candidate support and voting decisions). In the present study, the results reveal a perception of bias in disparate messages that also affect perceptions of journalistic fairness. The question remains as to whether media consumers are less likely to use such information in forming their candidate evaluations.

The results also suggest that respondents are able to decipher actual media messages, even if the messages favor one side, and are able to evaluate them accordingly. If this is true, media bias might not have any effect on evaluations by the public. Accurate recognition shows that people can assess the leanings of the press, and if so, media bias might not be capable of shaping opinions. Voters might actually be shrewd consumers of the news and ignore what they might feel is biased, according to selective perception and exposure, which is beyond the scope of this project. Respondents were randomly assigned via computer one article to read and were not able to choose among different articles and sources, as we would find in the real world. Given the abundance of media outlets to choose from, the public can be selective in tuning in to certain sources that fit their predispositions.

Overall, the results provide evidence that individuals perceive media bias, including when political coverage is disparate. However, the hostile media effect cannot be used to fully explain these results. The results suggest that individuals respond to media messages with the assumption of bias, but not of bias linked to partisanship. Instead, the data seem to indicate a tendency for media consumers to project bias onto a source when the message is disparate. I refrained from calling these articles biased because there are objective reasons why a disparity can exist. However, partisans did assume disparity equated to bias. The public and the media may have different definitions of what constitutes media bias in a discourse that predisposes individuals to assume

bias. Accordingly, researchers need to consider the effects of public discourse on information processing and try to understand the extent to which partisanship affects the calculations. Researchers also need to consider definitions of media bias, examine if the public uses different definitions, and determine what affect the differences may have on political decision-making. The present results suggest factors other than partisanship explain how 65 percent of the American public report perceptions of a media bias, even when actual content is neutral.

APPENDIX A
NEWSPAPER ARTICLES AND TONE

1. Disparate Content: Positive Content for the Democratic candidate, negative content for the Republican candidate.

Denver, CO. May, 15, 2001. In his bid for the U.S. Senate, Democratic Candidate Andrew Pierce refuses political action committee money to promote an image of independence from special interests. "I'm not bankrolled by the special interests," Pierce told a crowd in kicking off his fall campaign against Republican William Jackson. "I haven't accepted a dime of PAC money in this race. And I'd like to rally you to join me in taking power back from the special interests who call the shots."

Pierce used to take money from PACs—more than $ 2.5 million from 1987 to 1995, according to FEC records. But several years ago he decided to stop taking PAC money, and he has made bashing special-interest dollars a central theme of his current campaign. Pierce was one of about a dozen House Democrats to buck their leadership to force a vote on a campaign finance reform bill in 1998. "He has been the real deal in fighting for reform," said Donald J. Simon, general counsel of Common Cause, a liberal watchdog group headquartered in Washington, D.C. "H's as genuine as they come on Capitol Hill."

Republican Candidate William Jackson also claims to not having ties to special interests. However, an examination of Jackson's campaign donations over the years shows how difficult it can be to completely disengage from what he calls "the potentially corrupting system." Jackson has raised more than $13 million during his political career, mostly the traditional way: by dialing for dollars, mixing with well-heeled donors, and accepting contributions from members of special-interest groups. His largest sources of political donations

are banks and financial services firms, which have had a keen interest in him as a member of the House Banking and Finance Committee. According to a Times analysis of Federal Election Commission records, lawyers and lobbyists are also among his most frequent contributors, as are doctors and computer-industry executives.

Jackson's donor list is not surprising, given that he represents a large swath of Silicon Valley. A lawyer for investment bankers helped him draft legislation that would benefit large financial concerns in the valley, and two physicians who donated to his previous campaigns convinced him to introduce a bill giving doctors more power in negotiations with HMOs.

2. Disparate Content: Positive Content for the Republican candidate, negative content for the Democratic candidate.

See above story and substitute the Republican candidate for all of the previously positive statements for the Democratic candidate, and substitute the Democratic candidate for all of the previously negative comments toward the Republican candidate.

3. Balanced Content: Positive Content for both the Democratic and Republican candidates.

Denver, CO. May, 15, 2001. In his bid for the U.S. Senate, Democratic candidate Andrew Pierce refuses political action committee money in order to promote an image of independence. "I'm not bankrolled by special interests," he told a crowd when kicking off his fall campaign against William Jackson. "I haven't accepted a dime of PAC money in this race. And I'd like to rally you to join me in taking power back from the special interests who call the shots."

Republican candidate Jackson also claims to not being tied to special interests. An examination of Jackson's campaign donations over the years shows that it has not been difficult for him to disengage from what he calls "the potentially corrupting system." He has raised more than $13 million during his political career, mostly in the traditional ways of dialing for dollars and mixing with well-heeled donors, without accepting contributions from members of special interest groups.

Both candidates have previously accepted PAC money, but in recent years they have made clean breaks from the influence of special interests. According to FEC records, Pierce accepted more than $ 2.5 million from PACs between 1987 and 1995. However, he decided to stop taking PAC money several years ago, and has made special-interest dollar bashing a central theme in his campaign. Pierce was one of about a dozen House Democrats to buck their own

leadership to force a vote on a campaign finance reform bill in 1998. "He has been the real deal in fighting for reform," said Donald J. Simon, general counsel of Common Cause, a liberal watchdog group headquartered in Washington, D.C. "He's as genuine as they come on Capitol Hill."

Republican Jackson has also sponsored legislation to reform campaign finance rules and to maintain distance between Congress and special interests. His stated goal is to eliminate the amount of PAC money contributed and accepted at election time and to make it easier for candidates to raise money without being influenced by special interests.

4. Balanced Content: Negative Content for both Democratic and Republican candidates.

Denver, CO. May, 15, 2001. In his bid for the U.S. Senate, Republican candidate William Jackson refuses political action committee money in order to promote an image of independence. "I'm not bankrolled by special interests," he told a crowd when kicking off his fall campaign against Democratic candidate Andrew Pierce.

Pierce also claims to not being tied to special interests. "I haven't accepted a dime of PAC money in this race. And I'd like to rally you to join me in taking power back from the special interests who call the shots."

However, an examination of both candidates' campaign donations over the years shows how difficult it can be to completely disengage from what Pierce calls "the potentially corrupting system." Pierce has raised more than $13 million during his political career, mostly the traditional way: by dialing for dollars, mixing with well-heeled donors, and accepting contributions from members of special interest groups. His largest sources of political donations are banks and financial firms that have a keen interest in him as a member of the House Banking and Finance Committee. According to a Times analysis of Federal Election Commission records, lawyers and lobbyists are among his most frequent contributors, as are doctors and computer-industry executives.

Similarly, FEC records show that Jackson has previously accepted large amounts of money from PACs—more than $ 2.5 million between 1987 and 1995. The individuals on Jackson's donor list should not be surprising, given that his district covers a large swath of Silicon Valley. For example, a lawyer for investment bankers helped him draft legislation that would benefit Silicon Valley financial titans, and two physicians who had donated to his campaign convinced him to introduce a bill giving doctors more power in negotiations with HMOs.

According to their individual records, both candidates are quick to deny being bought by special interests, but in the past they have been quick to accept money from PACs when offered.

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