

Blurred Lines: How Online Electoral Campaign Exposure Affects Perceptions of Media Bias

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Abstract

Internet strategic communications about elections are commonplace in the 21st Century, but some effects of online campaign exposure are still unknown. Internet usage is a hybrid of informative, strategic, and personal communications, which blurs audience expectations while consuming information. This study examines the effects of online political information sources on perceptions of media bias due to these blurred lines. Hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to examine the effects of receiving candidate and campaign information from online media, interpersonal discussion, and strategic communication on perceptions of media bias. Findings revealed that Internet campaign exposure predicts a higher perception of Internet media bias and news organization bias. Increased online news media exposure also predicts a higher perception of media bias in all professional media.

Keywords: journalism, media bias, political communication, election, quantitative

Introduction

In the electoral process, the potential for powerful media effects draws specific interest to the possibility of political bias in the media, which can affect voting results. But the question of bias in the media is not a new one with about 50% of Americans consistently stating they still perceive political bias in reporting in the 21st Century (Pew Research Center, 2002). Yet while many Americans may perceive a news media bias in terms of partisanship, studies have shown very little evidence of it in mainstream news print, radio, or television (D'Alessio, 2000).

Antecedents of perceptions of media bias include individual-level influences such as partisanship and ideology, which have both been found to significantly affect how audiences view the media (Lee, 2005). Strong conservatives and Republicans are most likely to distrust the media (especially those who listen to political talk radio), with

political cynicism as the best predictor of media bias perception. Similarly, low trust in the government and the media, which are associated with political cynicism, have also been found to be strongly related to attitude toward media (Bennett, 1999).

The source used for seeking political information is also an important determinant in how information is processed by an audience and perceived as biased or unbiased. Information obtained directly from a hard news source can be perceived as having gatekeeping, coverage bias or statement bias. Because of the news format, the information can also be perceived as viewed by a large audience, which can alter effects (potential for third person effects).

This study examines the effect of hard news media use, interpersonal discussion and Internet campaign exposure on the perception of media bias among Internet users. It assesses the type of perceived bias as a general media bias, news organization bias, or Internet media bias. This study discerns the possible effects of political information seeking in the unique medium of the Internet and the importance of the source of political information (news exposure, interpersonal communication, campaign exposure), which can affect voter reasoning and ultimately the final voting decision.

Media Bias

Politicians made many accusations of media bias in the 2008 Presidential Election. The Democratic Clinton campaign said media were harder on her than they were on Obama. The Republican McCain campaign also said media favored Obama when their campaign seemed to be losing momentum in the media. And the Republicans again called fault when PBS Washington Week news anchor Gwen Ifill moderated the Vice Presidential debate while she was in the midst of writing a book called “Breakthrough: Politics and Race in the Age of Obama.”

Citizens often perceive media bias as well, and have likely taken their cue in suspicions from politicians of the past. The 1952 Eisenhower vs. Stevenson Presidential Election is regarded as one of the first elections that spurred study of potentially biased media coverage when Stevenson claimed there was a “one party press (D’Alessio, 2000).” Accusations of bias were made various times in the years that followed, such as by the campaign manager of President Clinton.

But for media to be biased it must meet certain qualifications. It must be unfair and imbalanced. It is defined by the American Heritage Dictionary as “a preference or an inclination that inhibits impartial judgment,” or as “an act or policy stemming from prejudice (D’Alessio, 2000).” Additionally, the bias must be intentional. “It must be volitional, or willful; it must be influential, or else it is irrelevant; it must be threatening to widely held conventions . . . ; and it must be sustained rather than an isolated incident (D’Alessio, 2000).” This means that to remain unbiased, media must provide only evidenced facts of a political account, prohibit special treatment for any side of the issue, and maintain the same amount of coverage for each viewpoint.

But while a media bias can be created in the production of news, it is how information is interpreted by the public, which determines if the media is perceived as biased. A 2002 survey by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press showed

that 47% of those polled believed news organizations in general are politically biased in their reporting. A study of two large national surveys in 2005 also showed that strong conservatives and Republicans are more likely to distrust the news media, and that the best prediction of media bias perception is political cynicism (Lee, 2005).

Work on the hostile media effect also sheds light on bias perception in news organizations. Studies about the hostile media effect have shown that individuals more involved in political groups or issues perceive the media as hostile toward their ideology or cause. They believe that a specific news organization favors their opponents instead of themselves. The amount of involvement in the group also determines whether or not they perceive media coverage as biased (Gunther, 1992). This hostile media effect was shown in a national survey performed by Gunther in 1992, which surveyed partisan and issue groups, and found that individuals consistently thought media coverage was more negative toward their cause.

This perception of media bias is potentially where voter reasoning matters most in deciding how to interpret political information. Whether received through the news, strategic, or interpersonal communication, the perception of a bias can produce great effects on decisions made in the voting booth. And because the Internet has become such a common medium for learning about political news, the perceptions of media bias on the Internet must be discerned to identify these potentially powerful media effects.

Online Media Bias

Today the Internet provides an easier and faster means of communicating about political issues through news websites, strategic communication (emails, advertisements, videos, etc.), and interpersonal communication such as emailing and social networking. It is described by some as a new democratic sphere of information seeking and opinion expression without the rules and regulations of past mediums (Benkler, 2006).

The great appeal of the Internet is its speed and ability for content to be both temporary and permanent; content can also be stored in infinite amounts, a phenomenon of time compression and space expansion (Carey, 1997, p. 427). The resulting wide adoption of this low-cost medium has now created a new public sphere of communication among the public, government, and other institutions such as media conglomerations.

And while traditional media outlets only provided one-way communication, the Internet allows citizens to easily respond directly or indirectly to information. Mainstream media have long acted as gatekeepers of information, which was filtered before being allowed into the public sphere. But online, these conglomerations have less power in such a large net of resources, turning gatekeepers into merely gate watchers (Bruns, 2005). Online there are an infinite number of ways to direct communication, for example, through blogs, chat, instant messaging, texting (SMS), and email. Because of these various forms of online communication, the Internet has potential to be an even truer democratic sphere because of its many opportunities for having a conversation. These different types of conversations have potential for different effects on information seekers.

A bowtie structured Internet model expresses the phenomenon of freer

directionality in information flow unlike traditional mainstream media structures (Benkler, 2006, p. 250). While according to the model, nodes of main media and other powerful institutions like the government do retain more power than the average individual in the center circle of the bowtie, these nodes compete aggressively for readership, and are connected through the Web to smaller media in the larger, outer ribbons of the tie. Because of this need for readership, these institutions are committed to a free public sphere (unless the Internet becomes a tiered media structure like cable and satellite television).

Additionally, smaller nodes can easily communicate and transfer information directly, without the involvement of other media or government nodes. By spreading information and opinion to other nodes, they are more likely to be picked up by other media and institutions, making their way up the Long Tail and into the mainstream media focus.

And the Internet shows even more promise in other political arenas. The Electronic Dialogue Project, conducted during the 2000 presidential campaign, showed that online communication “fostered increased political engagement and general community participation,” suggesting that online communication has potential to create a healthier public sphere (Price & Capella, 2002). Later, a Pew Research Center survey conducted as recently as January 2008 found that 24 percent of Americans said they learned something about the campaign regularly from the Internet (Kohut, 2008).

While the Internet allows many-to-many and few-to-few communications, which provides audiences the opportunity to become producers of news, these producers have varying journalism ethics. The Internet has led to the rise of citizen journalists, bloggers, and online opinion leaders, many of whom have not experienced formal training for news production. This opens the possibility for more skepticism and bias perceptions in online information because of the higher potential for unprofessional practices.

The Internet seems to have also changed many of the rules for how political information is disseminated and shared among the public. Recent studies suggest that it is the motivational factors of the Web user that leads them to seek out different types of information, which then in turn can have effects on media perceptions (Kim, 2007).

There are three distinct camps in the theory of Internet effects. One side includes “mobilization theorists,” which contend that the Internet can lead to more campaign participation, expand deliberation, and reach minority voters. “Cyber skeptics” find that empirically, the Internet only has limited effects on Web users, and “reinforcement theorists” believe the Internet can only reinforce the ideologies of the Web user because they seek information, which support their positions (Scheufele, 2004).

Whichever side is correct, this more active role of the Internet user in information seeking is crucial in understanding online media effects. Following Zaller’s Receive-Accept-Sample (RAS) model, Internet users are already actively seeking out information, which moves them ahead of the receive component (contingent on political awareness). So to form an opinion or perception of online media, Web users then need only complete the later accept (contingent on consistency with prior beliefs) and sample steps (contingent on issues held with priority at that moment in time) (Zaller, 1992). Thus, the

Internet may be much more influential on political information seekers than any other medium.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

The theory outlined thus far leads to expected effects on perception of media bias from hard news media use, interpersonal discussion and Internet campaign exposure. This study is interested in assessing the potential relationships of these independent variables with three types of media bias: general media bias, news organization media bias, and Internet media bias. Past studies have shown that there are not sufficient findings to prove a general media bias (D'Alessio, 2000), but because of the highly influential roles that hard news, interpersonal and strategic communication play in political reasoning, these types of communication are expected to affect audience perceptions.

Because interpersonal communication has been found in other mediums to be more influential than mainstream media, interpersonal communication should have a large impact on perceptions of media bias. Those who perceived the media as biased are more likely to share their opinion with peers easily through the sending and discussing political information. This study hypothesizes that Internet users will perceive a higher level of media bias, dependent on their level of exposure to different types of political communication. Previous findings in these areas lead to the following hypotheses:

H1A: With all other variables kept constant, the level of interpersonal discussion will be positively related to perception of news organization media bias.

H1B: With all other variables kept constant, the level of interpersonal discussion will be positively related to perception of Internet media bias.

H1C: With all other variables kept constant, the level of interpersonal discussion will be positively related to perception of general media bias.

Since strategic communication is easily identified in an online setting, Internet users should not draw connections between this type of communication with purely informative news. But because online strategic communication shows potential to reach larger populations and may have a larger online presence than in other mediums, Internet campaign exposure is expected to have a significant positive effect on perceptions of media bias.

H2A: With all other variables kept constant, the level of Internet campaign exposure will be positively related to perception of news organization media bias.

H2B: With all other variables kept constant, the level of Internet campaign exposure will be positively related to perception of Internet media bias.

H2C: With all other variables kept constant, the level of Internet campaign exposure will be positively related to perception of general media bias.

The Internet offers many different views and versions of news for today's citizens. Thus, one might believe that online hard news is not biased. However, Internet users can also consistently visit Web sites that reflect the type of news that they prefer to receive and if this source is partisan media, significant effects could result in an increased perception of media bias. Thus, the following research question is formulated: Is exposure to hard news media use related to higher perceptions of media bias?

RQA: With all other variables kept constant, the level of hard news media use will be positively related to perception of news organization media bias.

RQB: With all other variables kept constant, the level of hard news media use will be positively related to perception of Internet media bias.

RQC: With all other variables kept constant, the level of hard news media use will be positively related to perception of general media bias.

Methods

Hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to examine the effects of receiving candidate and campaign information from online media, interpersonal discussion, and strategic communication on perceptions of media bias. Three regressions were performed on the dependent variables for perception of media bias, perception of news organization bias, and perception of Internet media bias. Predictor variables were entered in blocks, starting with gender, age, party affiliation, education, and income followed by the independent variables.

Data to test this theoretical model was taken from a national telephone survey by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press conducted through random digit dialing (RDD) to landlines and cellular phones in late December 2007 and early January 2008 (N = 1,430). Respondents were residents of the continental United States ages 18 and older, of which 48.2 percent were male. Response rate for the survey was 18 percent landline and 22 percent cellular phone. A sample taken from this survey was based on respondents having used the Internet (N = 312). *Internet use* is defined as “going online, sending or receiving email, using social networking sites, and getting news from the Internet.” Respondents had to have answered “Yes” to this question to be included in this study (21.8%).

Control Variables

Controlled variables include gender, age, education, party affiliation, and income. *Gender* was coded with female to equal 0 and male to equal 1 (48.2%). *Age* was assessed by an open-ended continuous item (M = 50.19, SD = 17.865). Similarly, *education* was an open-ended continuous measure that asked respondents to report their total years of schooling (M = 4.82, SD = 1.649). *Party affiliation* asked respondents if they considered themselves as Republican, Democrat, or Independent (M = 1.54, SD = 0.499). *Income* measured total household income for the previous year (2007).

Independent Variables

In the survey, respondents were asked their level of *hard news media use*, *interpersonal discussion*, and *Internet campaign exposure*, which created the independent variables for this study. The items came from a battery of questions about online exposure to candidate and campaign news.

Hard news media use is an open-ended single item variable, which asked respondents “Thinking about news websites and other sources of campaign information online. . . Please name some of the websites where you get information about the

presidential campaigns and candidates?” The most popular, first mentioned response was MSNBC/MSN/NBC News, which was used to create the *Hard news media use* variable (21.2%).

The variable *interpersonal discussion* is another single item variable that asked respondents “Have you sent or received e-mails about the candidates or campaigns with friends, family or other personal acquaintances, or not (24.3% yes)?”

The last independent variable *Internet campaign exposure* was created from two items. The first item asked, “Have you received e-mails about the candidates or campaigns from any groups or political organizations, or not (16.8% yes)?” The second item asked, “Have you watched any a) Video of the candidate debates (15.9% yes) b) video of interviews with candidates (17.7% yes) c) campaign commercials (15.6% yes) d) video of candidate speeches or announcements on the internet (18.9% yes), or not?” Participants’ scores on these two items were averaged to create an index for likelihood of Internet campaign exposure (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .746$).

Dependent Variables

The dependent variables in this study were derived from single items, which include *perception of media bias*, *perception of news organization bias*, and *perception of Internet media bias*.

Perception of media bias asked respondents on a five-point scale, “To what extent do you see political bias in news coverage? A great deal, a fair amount, not too much, or not at all (M = 2.98, SD = .940)?”

Perception of news organization bias asked respondents, “In the way they have been covering the presidential race so far, do you think news organizations are biased in favor of the Democrats, biased in favor of the Republicans, or don’t you think news organizations have shown any bias one way or the other?” Responses were measured on a four-point scale, which included “Biased in favor of Democrats,” Biased in favor of Republicans,” “No bias,” and “Don’t know/Refused,” which were combined into possible responses of “Yes, biased in favor of Democrats or Republicans” and “No, no bias/Don’t know/Refused (50.9% yes).”

Lastly, *perception of Internet media bias* asked respondents “Thinking about all the news, blogs, and political websites on the INTERNET, on balance, do more websites favor Democrats, do more favor Republicans, or are there about equal numbers on both sides?” Responses were measured on a four-point scale, including “More websites favor Democrats,” “More websites favor Republicans,” “About equal numbers on both sides,” and “Don’t know/Refused.” These responses were combined to create “Yes, more websites favor Democrats or Republicans” or “No, about equal numbers on both sides/Don’t know/Refused (28.8% yes).”

Results

Concerning perceptions of news organization bias, regression analysis partially supported Hypothesis 1A that interpersonal discussion would be positively related to perception of news organization bias, until Internet campaign exposure was added to the

regression ($\beta = .136$, $p < .05$). Hypothesis 2A confirmed that Internet campaign exposure is positively related to perception of news organization bias ($\beta = .155$, $p < .01$). Research Question A was not supported, showing no significant relationship between hard news media use and perception of news organization bias. Of the control variables, only party affiliation significantly predicted media bias ($\beta = -.290$, $p < .001$), showing that more conservative people are more likely to perceive a bias in news organizations. Gender, age, education, and income were not significant contributors. Overall, the regression accounted for 11.1 percent of the variance of the dependent variable.

Table 1. Hierarchical Multiple Regression Predicting Perception of News Organization Bias (unstandardized regression coefficients)

	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>	<i>Model 4</i>
Block 1: Control Variables				
Gender (male=1)	.001 (.056)	.005 (.056)	.006 (.055)	.028 (.056)
Age	.002 (.002)	.003 (.002)	.002 (.002)	.002 (.002)
Party Affiliation	-.284 (.054)*	-.283 (.054)***	-.269 (.054)***	-.288 (.054)***
Education	.046 (.028)	.044 (.029)	.035 (.029)	.029 (.028)
Income	-.007 (- .015)	-.008 (.015)	-.011 (.015)	-.010 (.015)
R^2	.095***			
Block 2: Independent Variable				
Hard News Media Use		.067 (.071)	.059 (.070)	.031 (.071)
R^2		.097***		
Block 3: Independent Variable				
Interpersonal Discussion			.147 (.060)*	.088 (.064)
R^2			.115***	
Block 4: Independent Variable				
Internet Campaign Exposure				.268 (.103)**
Total R^2				.134***

Note: $N = 312$. Cell entries for all models are final unstandardized regression coefficients for Blocks 1, 2, 3, 4 * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Concerning perception of Internet media bias, Hypothesis 2 predicted that Internet campaign exposure would have a significant positive effect on perceptions of Internet media bias. And not only was Internet campaign exposure found to be a significant predictor for perception of news organization bias, but it was indeed found to also be a significant predictor for perception of Internet bias. This means that more exposure to emails from political organizations and more exposure to videos of debates, interviews,

commercials, and speeches increases the perception of bias in Internet media, confirming Hypothesis 2B ($\beta = .135$, $p < .05$).

Perception of Internet media bias, however, was not found to have significant relationship with interpersonal discussion and did not support Hypothesis 1B. Again, hard news media use was also not found to have a significant relationship with perception of Internet media bias, so Research Question B was not supported. And lastly, only party affiliation was a significant predictor of the control variables with more conservative people being more likely to perceive a bias in Internet media ($\beta = -.151$, $p < .05$). The overall regression accounted for just 1.6 percent of the variance of the dependent variable.

Table 2. Hierarchical Multiple Regression Predicting Perception of Internet Media Bias (unstandardized regression coefficients)

	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>	<i>Model 4</i>
Block 1: Control Variables				
Gender (male=1)	-.029 (.058)	-.030 (.059)	-.027 (.059)	.001 (.060)
Age	-.001 (.002)	-.001 (.002)	-.002 (.002)	-.001 (.002)
Party Affiliation	-.131 (.057)*	-.132 (.057)*	-.127 (.057)*	-.142 (.057)*
Education	.007 (.030)	.010 (.030)	.003 (.031)	.004 (.031)
Income	-.003 (- .016)	-.002 (.016)	-.004 (.016)	-.001 (.016)
R^2	.022***			
Block 2: Independent Variable				
Hard News Media Use		-.075 (.080)	-.073 (.080)	-.101 (.081)
R^2		.025***		
Block 3: Independent Variable				
Interpersonal Discussion			.079 (.065)	.032 (.069)
R^2			.030***	
Block 4: Independent Variable				
Internet Campaign Exposure				.209 (.104)*
Total R^2				.044***

Note: $N = 276$. Cell entries for all models are final unstandardized regression coefficients for Blocks 1, 2, 3, 4 * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Concerning general media bias, Research Question 1 asked if increased exposure to hard news media online would be positively related to perceptions of media bias. This meant that more exposure to a news website such as MSNBC would lead to higher perceptions of bias, which confirmed Research Question C for perceptions of media bias in general (not specifically media bias on the Internet, but all media) ($\beta = .198$, $p < .01$).

Interestingly, here neither interpersonal discussion nor Internet campaign exposure had significant relationships with perception of general media bias, which did not support Hypothesis 1C or Hypothesis 2C. Party affiliation ($\beta = -.196$, $p < .01$) and education ($\beta = .194$, $p < .05$) were significant predictors of media bias, meaning that more conservative, and more educated people are more likely to perceive a general media bias. Here, the overall regression analysis accounted for 12.8 percent of the variance of the dependent variable.

Table 3. Hierarchical Multiple Regression Predicting Perception of General Media Bias (unstandardized regression coefficients)

	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>	<i>Model 4</i>
Block 1: Control Variables				
Gender (male=1)	-.130 (.116)	-.127 (.114)	-.119 (.114)	-.113 (.119)
Age	.003 (.004)	.006 (.004)	.006 (.004)	.006 (.004)
Party Affiliation	-.380 (.113)	-.337 (.112)**	-.326 (.113)**	-.325 (.113)**
Education	.196 (.062)	.164 (.061)	.157 (.062)	.156 (.063)*
Income	-.003 (-.032)	-.004 (.031)	-.007 (.031)	-.007 (.032)
R^2	.122***			
Block 2: Independent Variable				
Hard News Media Use		.410 (.139)	.396 (.141)	.393 (.142)**
R^2		.160***		
Block 3: Independent Variable				
Interpersonal Discussion			.105 (.131)*	.094 (.143)
R^2			.162***	
Block 4: Independent Variable				
Internet Campaign Exposure				.043 (.235)
Total R^2				.163***

Note: $N = 201$. Cell entries for all models are final unstandardized regression coefficients for Blocks 1, 2, 3, 4 * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Discussion

The connections made in this study show how those who use certain information sources online, have a higher tendency toward perception for media bias. Strategic communications in the form of Internet electoral campaign exposure were found to increase perceptions of bias in news organizations and in the Internet overall as a medium.

This means that deliberate exposure to emails from political organizations, videos of debates, interviews, commercials and speeches increase the perception of bias in news organizations and the Internet overall. This is an important finding for strategic communicators and scholars as the use of online campaigning continually grows with each passing election.

The second major finding revealed that exposure to hard news content online increased the perception of media bias in general. Those who consumed more hard news from mainstream news organizations online felt that “the media” as a profession was biased compared to other forms of information. This finding highlights what might be an interesting glimpse into this moment in contemporary history as audiences are becoming more aware of alternative versions of news. The influx of news and information producers online has sharpened the image of the media establishment as it exists compared to all other forms.

This study asserts the current state of media bias theory in that there is a standoff between researchers and the public. A majority of studies have found no significant bias in mainstream media, but nearly half of Americans believe news organizations are indeed biased (Pew Research Center, 2002). Additionally, as recent as 2011, Hansen and Kim performed a meta-analysis of the hostile media effect, but found no evidence that media format moderates these perceptions (Hansen & Kim, 2011).

So why is there such a profound disconnect? Some suggest that malcontent with the state of politics has produced a skeptical and cynical public, which has little trust in the government and the media that reports its political information. Perceptions of bias in Internet users may also be attributed to the many independent media sources, citizen journalists, and bloggers, which potentially hold larger sway over the state of online news content. This new medium allows more information to come from infinite sources.

This study confirms the state of media bias theory with the results of a public that not only believes there is general media bias, but that Internet media and news organizations are biased as well. But this is only the case under specific circumstances and influences related to the sources where people are receiving political information. This means that the reach of strategic communication campaigns online likely creates more significant effects when strengthening partisanship. Additionally, news websites are key factors in shaping public perceptions of a biased media establishment. In short, the conditions and sources of political information online have significant effects on whether or not a bias is perceived.

The future of research in media bias needs to build on these findings and discern what online conditions and qualities of sources lead to both greater and lesser perceptions of different types of bias. Because information sources can be chosen by the user, it is surprising that U.S. citizens still believe that much of the political information is biased. Even with much of the news online being shared through personal relationships, the public seems just as cynical about the balance of political coverage online as offline.

As the pervasiveness of online news consumption increases, it is important for media organizations to establish trust with audiences so that the Internet is not perceived as a more of the same information structures flowing over from traditional media. The

theory of the Internet as improving democracy and increasing knowledge among the populace has not yet gained acceptance by U.S. citizens.

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