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Hostile News: Partisan Use and Perceptions of Cable News Programming

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Two trends have marked the development of U.S. cable television news in recent years: a blurring of hard and soft news and an increase in overt partisanship. This paper reports the results of 2 studies that provide insight into the nature and impact of these trends. The first study analyzes national survey data to identify the factors that lead political partisans to choose particular cable television news networks and programs. The second study employs experimental methods to demonstrate how viewers' partisan leanings influence their perceptions of content from CNN, Fox News, and The Daily Show. We found evidence of a relative hostile media phenomenon, in which partisans perceive more bias in programs that do not align with their own political perspective. Furthermore, the results indicate that partisanship informs viewers' perceptions of news content as interesting and informative.

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Two trends have marked the development of U.S. cable television news in recent years. The first is that cable news networks and programs have increasingly defined themselves in relation to particular political perspectives (ADT Research, 2002). Led by Fox News, which began as a response to what its founders saw as a liberal U.S. media system, many cable news programs have begun to take more explicitly partisan positions—a sharp departure from the norm of objectivity that characterized television news for decades (Tuchman, 1972). The change has been noticed. In 2004, for example, the *Columbia Journalism Review* editorialized about the growth of “Red news, blue news” (*Columbia Journalism Review*, 2004), and in 2006, the Project for Excellence in Journalism’s annual “State of the Media” report found that cable news programs were becoming ever more “prone to opinion mongering” (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2006).

This trend toward more overt partisanship has been paralleled by—and, to a degree, probably fueled by—a second trend: the increasing prominence of “soft news” programs. Soft news programs are those that package political information in

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an entertaining form, often through the use of an interview format wherein the interaction between host and guest provides ample comedy or conflict (e.g., Baum, 2003b; Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2005). Such programs are not exclusive to cable television, of course, but it is on cable that they have multiplied and found their greatest success. Indeed, programs such as Comedy Central's *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and Fox News' *The O'Reilly Factor* draw large and loyal audiences that rival and sometimes even exceed those of more traditional primetime cable news programs (United Press International, 2005). Despite the claim by some of these programs that they are "fake news," soft news programs are rightly conceptualized and studied as news programs, as we discuss below.

The present research sheds light on these two key trends by considering (a) what leads political partisans to choose particular cable television news networks and programs over others and (b) how viewers' partisan leanings influence their perceptions of the cable television news content that they watch. We report the results of two studies—one that analyzed national survey data and another that employed experimental methods—that advance two important bodies of literature. First, this research extends the rapidly expanding work on soft news. Whereas much of this scholarship has focused on whether citizens can learn from soft news and put this information to effective political use (e.g., Baum, 2003a, 2003b; Kim & Vishak, 2006; Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2005; Young, 2004), we provide insight into why citizens are attracted to such programs in the first place. Second, we contribute to the literature on perceptions of bias in the news media—what scholars have called the "hostile media" phenomenon (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985; see also Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994; Schmitt, Gunther, & Liebhart, 2004). We bring this theory into the realm of soft news and also extend its reach. Whereas most of the work in this area has focused solely on partisans' perceptions of bias, we also consider whether partisan leanings shape how interesting and informative audiences perceive news content to be.

The changing nature of cable news

Cable television news is on the rise as a source of information for U.S. residents. Between 1997 and 2005, for example, the average primetime audience of the three primary cable news networks—Fox, CNN, and MSNBC—grew from 1.2 million to 2.8 million (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2006). For many citizens, cable television is now a primary source of news, sometimes outpacing even the broadcast networks. Consider that between the 2000 and 2004 U.S. presidential campaigns, the percentage of people who reported watching broadcast news dropped from 45 to 35%, whereas the percentage of people who watched cable news increased from 34 to 38% (Pew Research Center, 2004a). As more Americans tune in to cable news, what they are finding is quite different from what they would find on the networks. Indeed, one cause of cable news organizations' elevated prominence is their practice

of presenting news in ways that differ from the traditional broadcast network format (Bae, 1999; Davis & Owen, 1998).

Nowhere is the uniqueness of cable television news more evident than in its willingness to blur the line between hard and soft news. As Baum (2003b) has pointed out, “[I]n at least some instances, the difference between soft and hard news is one of *degree* rather than *kind* (p. 6, emphasis in original). Cable news programs often make this distinction particularly difficult to draw. For example, popular Fox News commentator Bill O’Reilly hosts *The O’Reilly Factor*—an interview format news show that thrives on the entertainment value provided by the clash of his conservative politics with the views of his guests. Meanwhile, popular comedian Jon Stewart hosts *The Daily Show*—an interview format “fake news” show that thrives on the entertainment value provided by the clash of his wit with the problems and personalities of everyday politics. More and more, the difference between such shows, and between hard and soft news more generally, is a matter only of degree.

Given this, it is useful to imagine news—in all its harder and softer forms—as existing along two continua. The first continuum gauges the style of presentation, running from more objective or neutral presentation of the news to more openly opinionated presentation. The second continuum gauges the primary emphasis of the news; some focuses more on informing the public and some more on entertaining them. At different times in U.S. history, the news environment has occupied different positions along these continua. The partisan press of early America, for example, focused on serious political information but did so from an overtly partisan perspective. The “yellow journalism” of the late 19th century shifted along the second continuum, emphasizing the sensational and even the untrue in an attempt to build audiences (Schudson, 1978). Within a given era, specific news organizations and specific news content will also vary along these continua—one news organization or news story might place more emphasis on entertainment than another, for instance. From this perspective, the increasing prominence of soft news can be thought of as yet another shift in the news environment along these two continua. For much of the 20th century, news organizations emphasized the delivery of sound information, even basing their reputations on the fulfillment of this task. Journalists, in turn, adopted a more “professional” orientation that encouraged them to adhere ritually to the norm of objectivity (Schudson, 1978; Tuchman, 1972). The soft news we have today operates from the other end of both continua: It typically prioritizes entertainment over information, and its nontraditional format means that objectivity is often the exception rather than the rule.

Thinking of news in this way suggests that to fully understand the nature and effects of the 21st century news environment, scholars must study the news in all its forms—whether that be hard, soft, or “fake.” And indeed, scholars have begun to do so (e.g., Baum, 2003a, 2003b; Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2005; Prior, 2003; Young, 2004). This research has demonstrated that soft news—sometimes referred to as “infotainment” or the “new news”—has the potential to increase public attentiveness to political issues, shape public perceptions of political

leaders, and enhance political engagement. In other words, soft news can lead to outcomes not unlike those generated by hard news. Interestingly, though, recent work suggests that audiences may process hard news messages and infotainment via different psychological routes (Kim & Vishak, 2006).

Where we depart from previous scholarship is in our initial focus in this research. The majority of the extant work has focused on the processes or outcomes of soft news use. We ultimately focus on outcomes as well and on perceptions in particular, but we begin by asking a simpler question: What draws people to particular cable news programs? Stated formally:

RQ1: What predicts exposure to different cable news networks and programs?

Study 1 provides a preliminary answer to this question through secondary analysis of national survey data. The emphasis in popular discussion is that partisanship is a force that determines cable news choice. That may be, but might the effect of partisan leanings be explained by other, more mundane, demographic characteristics? In addition, we test whether one can distinguish between the audiences for news networks and programs by their appreciation for the particular attractions (such as humor) offered by the new cable environment. This initial analysis is only a start, however. We are also interested in how partisan leanings might influence people's perceptions of the cable television news content to which they are exposed. In attempting to answer this second question, it becomes necessary to explore the issue of bias.

Perceptions of bias: The hostile media

Perceived bias is the focus of what researchers have come to call the hostile media phenomenon. First documented by Vallone et al. (1985), the hostile media phenomenon predicts that audiences will perceive neutral messages to be biased against their own position. Scholars have explored this phenomenon in a variety of contexts, including conflict in the Middle East (Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994; Vallone et al., 1985), the use of primates in research (Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chia, 2001), the 1997 UPS strike (Christen, Kannaovakun, & Gunther, 2002), and sports-fan rivalries (Arpan & Raney, 2003). That partisans perceive relatively neutral content as biased against their own position might be thought of as the *absolute* hostile media phenomenon. It is absolute in the sense that it assumes neutrality as a starting point, and perceptions move from that position of neutrality. The difficulty with conceptualizing the phenomenon in this way is that it fails to account for perceptions that arise when content is clearly biased toward one side or the other. Realizing this, scholars have more recently identified the *relative* hostile media phenomenon (e.g., Gunther & Chia, 2001; Gunther & Christen, 2002; Gunther et al., 2001), which can arise even when an audience is exposed to genuinely biased content. In such cases, partisans on both sides perceive the story to be biased in the same direction, but they perceive the coverage as more unfavorable toward their position than others'.

In both its relative and absolute forms, the hostile media phenomenon enjoys substantial empirical support, having now “been replicated often enough to qualify as a robust finding” (Schmitt et al., 2004, p. 624).

Two factors, both crucial to consider when studying the dynamics of cable television news, might influence viewers’ hostile media perceptions. The first of these is group attachments. Basic theory in intergroup relations suggests that people are motivated to protect their own groups. For example, social identity theory holds that individuals categorize themselves through membership in stratified groups, effectively contrasting their in-group with opposing out-groups (Tajfel, 1982). When faced with media content, then, in-group psychological processes can cause judgments of accuracy and bias to be made through a political lens (Turner, 1987). In particular, if media content makes in-group identification salient, it can increase perceptions of media bias among those who exhibit strong group identification (Duck, Terry, & Hogg, 1998; Matheson & Dursun, 2001). Thus, in the current cable news environment, where partisanship is highly salient, we would expect that in-group processes would lead liberals and conservatives to perceive the same content very differently.

The second factor that might influence hostile media perceptions is judgments that news users make about the news source. Few studies have directly examined the role such judgments might play in the hostile media phenomenon (e.g., Arpan & Raney, 2003; Austin & Dong, 1994; Slater & Rouner, 1996). In the current cable news environment, the source of the content (i.e., the network or program) is especially important because many cable news networks and programs have begun a kind of partisan branding. The most notable example of this trend is Fox News, which developed with the goal of providing a “fair and balanced” antidote to the “liberal media.” Fox News has been criticized for what many believe to be a conservative bias (e.g., Rutenberg, 2001; Weaver, 2005), and those who watch the network tend to be more conservative than other news consumers (Morris, 2005; Pew Research Center, 2004b; there is also evidence that the content of Fox News is more conservative than that of CNN, see ADT Research, 2002). This is not just a conservative phenomenon, however. *The Daily Show*, a multiple award winner that is perhaps the most prominent soft news program on cable (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006), is generally thought to take a more liberal perspective. This is due in large part to the fact that it pokes fun at those in power and, until recently, the majority of those in power were conservatives. Still, it would be hard for viewers to miss host Jon Stewart’s liberal leanings (Baym, 2005).

In sum, the current cable news environment is one in which audience members’ partisan perspectives and the increasingly obvious partisan positions of certain news sources are likely to interact to shape how viewers perceive news content. On the basis of the above considerations, then, we expect that liberals should perceive more bias in the Fox News evening broadcast (a program thought to lean conservative) than should conservatives, and the opposite should hold true for perceptions of *The Daily Show* (a program thought to lean liberal). Thus, consistent with the *relative*

hostile media phenomenon, we expect an interaction of partisanship and program, such that partisans' perceptions of the news will depend on its source.

H1a: Conservatives will perceive more bias in *The Daily Show* than will liberals.

H1b: Liberals will perceive more bias in the Fox evening news than will conservatives.

These hypotheses allow for a test of the relative hostile media phenomenon. To test the *absolute* hostile media phenomenon, however, a more neutral stimulus is necessary. The CNN evening news might function in this way. Whether or not it is truly neutral, CNN's longer history and more traditional branding at least position its evening news program as something of a midpoint between the relative extremes of the Fox evening news and *The Daily Show*. Consequently, it should allow for an adequate test of the absolute hostile media phenomenon. Given this, and consistent with the absolute hostile media phenomenon, we expect that viewers will perceive bias in the CNN evening news in line with their ideological perspective.

H2a: Conservatives will perceive the CNN evening news as biased against their position.

H2b: Liberals will perceive the CNN evening news as biased against their position.

The extant hostile media research has generally focused on bias. When brought into the current cable news environment, however, an interesting corollary presents itself. Cable news has had success partly due to its heavy use of soft news—which is intended to make the news more entertaining but might do so at the expense of information. With this in mind, we extend the current research on the hostile media phenomenon by asking whether partisanship and program might interact not just to influence viewers' perceptions of bias but also to influence how interesting and informative they perceive news content to be. Previous hostile media studies generally have not used such measures (except a few that use an informative/uninformative question as a manipulation check; e.g., D'Alessio, 2003). This question takes on particular importance in the context of the scholarly discussion about whether soft news programs facilitate political learning (e.g., Baum, 2003a; Prior, 2003). In much the same way that people may be motivated by partisanship to perceive bias, they may be motivated to see content with which they agree as particularly informative and entertaining. Thus, we offer a final research question:

RQ2: Will there be a partisan and program interaction in how interesting and/or informative viewers perceive the story to be?

Study 1

The first study examines the antecedents of exposure to specific cable networks and programs to determine whether partisanship predicts selection once we account for the effects of demographics and the appreciation that audiences have for the entertaining elements of news.

Method

Sample

Data for this study were obtained from the Pew Research Center's biennial national media use study. The 2004 study included questions relevant for examining predictors of exposure to two cable networks (Fox News and CNN) and two specific cable programs (*The O'Reilly Factor* and *The Daily Show*). The computer-assisted telephone survey was conducted from April 19 to May 12, 2004. Telephone numbers were generated through a list-assisted random digit dialing method; up to 10 callbacks were made. The contact rate (in which a person at a working number was asked to participate) was 84%, the co-operation rate 45%, and the completion rate (those completing a survey once agreeing to do so) 94%; the final response rate was 34%. A total of 3,000 adults in the continental United States completed the survey.

Exposure to programming

A set of questions asked respondents how often they watch specific cable networks and programs. The response options for the questions about CNN, Fox News, *The O'Reilly Factor*, and *The Daily Show* were "never," "hardly ever," "sometimes," and "regularly." For each program or network, the latter two responses were coded 1 and the others 0; volunteered "don't know" responses were considered missing. A randomly selected half of the sample was asked about CNN and Fox News and the other half about *The O'Reilly Factor* and *The Daily Show* programs, making the maximum effective sample for any one analysis 1,500.

Predictors of exposure

Partisanship/ideology was a dichotomous measure created from two variables. The first was a party identification measure fashioned from a forced-choice party identification question and a party leaning follow-up for those indicating no initial preference (coding: Republican = 0, leaning Republican = 0.33, leaning Democrat = 0.66, and Democrat = 1). The second variable was a 5-point ideology measure (*very conservative* = 0, *conservative* = 0.25, *moderate* = 0.5, *liberal* = 0.75, and *very liberal* = 1). These variables were averaged together ($r = 0.45$, $p < .01$; $M = 0.48$, $SD = 0.30$). The bottom and top thirds were recoded 0 (35.4%) and 1 (34.4%), respectively, to create a measure of strong Democrat/liberal affiliation. This was done to focus the analysis on the perceptions of those with fairly strong political attachments, that is, those who could reasonably be considered partisans, the primary interest of this study.

A set of three questions measured news content affinities. Respondents reported whether they like it (1; dislike or does not matter = 0) when a news source "is sometimes funny" (47.4% liked), "makes the news enjoyable and entertaining" (47.8% liked), or "shares your point of view on politics and issues" (37.2% liked). A measure of news knowledge was included as a proxy for general exposure to current events information (Price & Zaller, 1993). This was a summative index of correct responses to four forced-choice questions about current events (e.g., "Do you happen to know

which political party has a majority in the U.S. House of Representatives?;" $M = 2.68$, $SD = 1.17$). Also included were a 7-point education measure (1 = none, or 1–8 grades and 7 = postgraduate training or professional schooling after college; $M = 4.61$, $SD = 1.67$), age in years ($M = 47.73$, $SD = 17.62$), and sex (female = 1, male = 0, 55% female).

A categorical variable measuring whether the respondents subscribed to cable or satellite television was created by combining responses to questions that assessed the two technologies separately (83.6% subscribe to at least one). A set of three questions asked whether the respondents had watched television news, read a newspaper, or gone online for news the day before. The affirmative responses were summed to create a general index of news use ($M = 1.32$, $SD = 0.90$). In the analyses reported below, news use and cable/satellite subscription serve as controls designed to reduce the likelihood that the criterion measures of network and program exposure are tapping cable access or general news use tendencies. An additional control in each model is a measure of exposure to the competing news content. For example, the model that predicts exposure to CNN includes a measure of Fox News exposure. These controls are designed to control for respondents' general tendency to watch cable news programming. The measures also assess the extent to which there is cross-viewing of competing cable content.

Results

Prior to the analyses, all the scale and index variables were recoded to a 0 to 1 scale. Table 1 presents the results of binary logistic regressions of network and program exposure. The results reveal substantial variety in the predictors of exposure. Age serves as a negative predictor of *The Daily Show* viewing but shows no relationship with CNN or Fox News exposure. Education, on the other hand, is a negative predictor of viewing both Fox News in general and the *The O'Reilly Factor* program in particular. Males showed a stronger tendency than females to view *The Daily Show*. General political knowledge predicted only exposure to *The O'Reilly Factor*.

The measures of news content affinities were not significant predictors of general CNN or Fox News exposure. However, they did predict exposure to specific programs. Respondents who reported liking news that was enjoyable or entertaining were less likely to report watching *The O'Reilly Factor*. Those who reported liking news that shared their point of view reported watching *The O'Reilly Factor* and *The Daily Show*. Thus, viewers appear to perceive these two programs as being relatively opinionated. Perhaps most importantly for this project, partisan ideology was a substantial significant predictor of exposure in all the models. Liberals/Democrats were more likely than their opposite numbers to watch CNN and *The Daily Show* and were less likely to watch Fox News and *The O'Reilly Factor*. Surprisingly, this did not mean that the audiences for these networks and programs were mutually exclusive. In all the models, exposure to relevant other cable content was a significant positive predictor.

Table 1 Predictors of Exposure to Cable Networks and Programs

	CNN	Fox News	<i>The O'Reilly Factor</i>	<i>The Daily Show</i>
Age	-0.52	0.11	-0.02	-2.85***
Education	0.04	-0.88**	-0.90**	0.25
Female	0.14	-0.10	-0.02	-0.62**
Political knowledge	0.24	-0.28	1.06**	0.32
Have cable or satellite	1.71***	0.82***	0.81**	0.95**
News media used yesterday	1.09***	0.70**	1.51***	-0.01
Likes news that is enjoyable	0.06	0.14	-0.50**	-0.32
Likes news that is funny	-0.20	-0.12	0.25	0.23
Likes news that shares point of view	-0.03	0.27	0.27*	0.41*
Liberal	0.80***	-0.90***	-1.46***	0.95***
Watches Fox News	1.03***	—	—	—
Watches CNN	—	1.03***	—	—
Watches <i>The Daily Show</i>	—	—	0.69**	—
Watches <i>The O'Reilly Factor</i>	—	—	—	0.72**
Intercept	-3.48***	0.61	-0.52	-3.55***
Model χ^2	191.07***	155.48***	162.11***	92.50***
Final -2 Log Likelihood	1,137.60	1,178.12	988.19	713.38
Cox and Snell Pseudo R-squared	.18	.15	.16	.09
Model N	969	969	950	950

Note: Cell entries are coefficients derived by binary logistic regression. All variables have been coded on 0–1 scales.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Discussion

The results of Study 1 provide considerable insight into RQ1. In particular, they suggest that political partisanship plays a significant role in exposure to CNN, Fox News, *The O'Reilly Factor*, and *The Daily Show*. Liberals were more likely to report viewing *The Daily Show* and less likely to report viewing the Fox content. Somewhat surprisingly, they were also more likely to report viewing CNN. By this measure, partisan divisions in news audiences extend beyond the boundaries of what most observers are saying about CNN and its audiences. The findings of the analyses also suggest that part of the appeal of *The O'Reilly Factor* and *The Daily Show* is their tendency to present a relatively partisan view of current events. In both cases, audience appreciation of news that shares their point of view was a significant, though modest, predictor of exposure. Thus, it appears audiences perceive there to be partisan content in those programs and perhaps adjust their viewing choices accordingly. Interestingly, respondents who reported liking enjoyable and entertaining news were unlikely to report viewing *The O'Reilly Factor*. It may be that the level of interpersonal conflict in O'Reilly's interactions with guests deters some members of the audience seeking

enjoyable content. Of course, these are all speculations. The survey design here does not permit testing of temporal order in the observed relationships.

There are some elements of Study 1 that limit its external validity. Chief among them is the fact that the available measures of exposure were unusually blunt. It is not possible, given the questions asked and the study design, to determine what specific content the audiences had viewed. One cannot be confident about how familiar the respondents were with the news networks and programs in question. “Regularly” and “sometimes” as descriptors of exposure to the content were both coded as exposure. However, one can imagine substantial variance in how often respondents view the networks and programs and in the sort of news content they were considering when making their reports. Thus, it would be very useful to examine how political partisanship predicts perceptions of content when story topics and exposure duration are carefully controlled. Study 2 is designed to provide that level of control while relying on naturally occurring content produced by the specific cable programs.

Study 2

The second study examines the outcomes of exposure to specific cable programs, focusing on how partisan beliefs interact with news content to influence audience perceptions.

Method

A 2 (partisan ideology: liberal, conservative) \times 3 (cable program: Fox evening news, CNN evening news, *The Daily Show*) \times 3 (news topic: Bush trip to Europe, Iraqi election, Harvard President controversy) between-subjects full factorial experiment was used to test the hypotheses and answer the remaining research question. Participants in the study were asked to view a single news story and complete a short questionnaire.

Sample

A convenience sample of 360 U.S. undergraduate students in communication courses completed the study. Just over half of those participating (52.5%) were female, and about three fourths (73.8%) were Caucasian (9.9% were African American and 11% were Asian or Asian American). The mean age was 19.5 years ($SD = 1.19$). The study took place in the classroom; participants were offered no incentives to participate, but they were given a small snack at the end of data collection. Classes were randomly assigned to one of the exposure conditions. A statistically significant difference between conditions was observed for participant sex. No other measured demographic variable (i.e., age, race, ethnicity, religiosity, political party identification, or political ideology) exhibited significant differences between conditions. However, as a precaution, we conducted all statistical tests with sex and the other demographic variables (apart from political party and ideology, see below) included as covariates.

Stimuli

The Daily Show and the primary evening news programs on Fox News and CNN were taped for several weeks in February 2005. The three topics chosen appeared on all three programs and contained roughly parallel content. The first of the topics was a trip that President Bush made to a NATO summit in Europe. The Fox News story (2 minutes 42 seconds) was an upbeat report that featured images of the President with other leaders and included direct quotations from the President. The CNN story (2:56) also quoted the President and reported the upbeat news from his trip, but featured more qualifications about those successes. *The Daily Show* (2:36) took a less serious approach by mocking the President's statements and including pop culture references.

The second topic was the Iraqi parliamentary election results. The Fox News story (2:14) began with information about an attack on U.S. National Guard troops and an attack on Iraqis and then described the election results. CNN (2:35) focused initially on the election results, including visuals and descriptions of daily life in Iraq, before reporting an attack on Iraqi police. *The Daily Show* (2:33) featured comments by an Iraqi journalist and President Bush. Two references were made to violence in the country, but specific information was not included.

The final topic was the conflict between Harvard University President Lawrence H. Summers and the faculty over comments Summers had made regarding women. The Fox News report (1:53) briefly described the situation and the results of a meeting between the faculty and the President. The CNN story (2:40) gave the issue a more general treatment, providing more information about the President's background and talking about people who supported him. *The Daily Show* (1:30) made extensive use of the CNN footage, provided only general information about the situation, and mocked faculty and alumni of the University.

Measures

A measure of partisan ideology was created through the combination of three questions. The first asked participants to name their political party affiliation. They were then asked how strongly they identified with that party or position. The response options were "very strongly," "somewhat strongly," "not very strongly," and "not at all strongly." A 0 to 1 scale of partisanship was created by coding those who identified very strongly with the Republican party as 1, somewhat strongly with the Republican party as 0.88, and so on. Those who identified very strongly with the Democratic party were coded 0. Those who labeled themselves as Independents were coded as 0.50. All other responses were coded as missing. A third question asked participants to describe their political viewpoint using endpoints of 1 = *extremely liberal* and 7 = *extremely conservative*. The midpoint was labeled "moderate." This item was reduced to a 0 to 1 scale and averaged with the two-question partisanship measure ($r = .78$, $p < .01$; final scale $M = 0.46$, $SD = 0.27$). The top and bottom thirds of participants on the resulting measure were identified as conservatives ($n = 112$) and liberals ($n = 116$), respectively. The middle third were coded as missing. This reduced the effective

sample to 228 participants. This focus on partisans is consistent with Study 1 and the overall research aims.

To measure perceptions of the program and story, a series of questions were used. After viewing the news story, participants completed a semantic differential battery that asked them to characterize the news segment (adapted from Gaziano & McGrath, 1986). Between the items in each pair were seven spaces; participants placed a check in the appropriate space. The word pairs were fair/unfair, tells the whole story/tells part of the story, unbiased/biased, complete/incomplete, can be trusted/cannot be trusted, accurate/inaccurate, tells the whole story/does not tell the whole story, represents reality/does not represent reality, and factual/false.¹ A factor analysis showed the presence of one factor, so the items were averaged to form a measure of perceived story bias ($\alpha = .94$, $M = 4.25$, $SD = 1.32$).

A similar item was created for perceptions of the program. Again, the respondents placed checks on a 7-point scale between word pairs. The pairs were unbiased/biased, can be trusted/cannot be trusted, competent/incompetent, fair/unfair, believable/not believable, and neutral/favors one side. A factor analysis showed that there was one factor present, so the items were averaged to create a measure of perceived program bias ($\alpha = .94$, $M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.46$). The story and program bias measures were strongly correlated ($r = .82$, $p < .01$).

A directional story bias item was created from two items to test the hypothesized absolute hostile media phenomenon (adapted from Schmitt et al., 2004). The first asked participants to estimate the percentage of the story that suggested one particular outcome. The response scale ran from 0 to 100% in 10% increments. In the President's European trip condition, the question asked how much of the story suggested the trip would be a success. In the Iraq condition, the question asked how much of the story suggested that the new Iraqi government would not be successful. In the Harvard President condition, the question asked how much of the story suggested that the Harvard President might lose his job. The next question in each condition asked how much of the story suggested the opposite perspective. The responses to these two items were subtracted from one another to form a measure of perceived relative emphasis ($M = 13.98$, $SD = 49.30$). Only 16.9% of the participants saw the stories as balanced.

A set of two items assessed how interesting the participants found the story. The semantic differential asked participants to record their reactions (on an unmarked 7-point scale) with the pairs of not concerned/concerned and interested/not interested. Responses to the second pair were reversed and the items were averaged ($r = .50$, $p < .01$; $M = 4.25$, $SD = 1.43$). A measure of perceptions of the informative value of the story was created from two types of items. The first was a semantic differential pair. Participants were asked to report their reaction to the story (using an unmarked 7-point scale) with the word pair of well informed/ill informed. The item was reversed. A second question asked participants to report how informative they found the story (responses were given on a 7-point scale). The next question asked them how informed they felt (on a 7-point scale) as a result of having seen the story. These

three items were averaged to create a scale of perceived information value in the program ($\alpha = .84$, $M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.29$).

One final methodological note should be made. The programs examined here do not present equivalent content. Consequently, potential confounds exist between program, story, and content, which will constrain our interpretation of the findings. However, because partisan perceptions are the focus of our analysis, the actual content of the stories is less important than are audience perceptions of that content. In none of our analyses was there a significant interaction of a variable of interest and the story topics. Therefore, the use of multiple messages increases our ability to talk about the programs on an aggregate level and helps minimize the influence of vagaries introduced by individual story details. Furthermore, using multiple stories and networks more closely approximates the real-world news environment than would a single-story design.

Results

We tapped hostile media perceptions on two levels: the relative and the absolute. In line with our expectations for the relative hostile media phenomenon (H1a and H1b), an interaction of program and partisanship predicted viewers' perceptions of bias in the news stories, $F(2, 218) = 5.93$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$, and the programs more generally, $F(2, 219) = 9.25$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$.² The means in Table 2 show that whereas conservatives and liberals reported very similar levels of story bias in the CNN stories, conservatives perceived significantly more bias in *The Daily Show* stories and liberals perceived more bias in the Fox News stories (although the latter difference was not significant). Even more strongly in line with expectations, the data in the right side of Table 2 show that liberals saw more program bias in Fox News and conservatives saw more bias in *The Daily Show*.³ These findings provide support for the relative hostile media phenomenon predicted in H1a and H1b. Interestingly, post hoc analyses reveal that both liberals and conservatives see significantly more story bias in *The Daily Show* content ($p < .05$) than in either of the other programs.

Table 2 Perceived Bias of Story and Program by Political Ideology

	Perceived Story Bias		Perceived Program Bias	
	Liberals	Conservatives	Liberals	Conservatives
CNN	4.05 (1.27)	3.86 (1.27)	3.46 (1.40)	3.32 (1.38)
Fox News	4.10 (0.98)	3.27 (1.28)	4.27 (1.36) _b	3.06 (1.27) _b
<i>The Daily Show</i>	4.81 (0.95) _a	5.37 (0.97) _a	4.52 (1.05) _b	5.20 (1.03) _b

Note: Values are expressed as means (and standard deviations). Larger values indicate perceptions of more bias in the stories and the programs. In the CNN conditions, there were 33 liberals and 31 conservatives. In the Fox News conditions, there were 34 liberals (33 in the story bias analysis) and 39 conservatives. In *The Daily Show* conditions, there were 41 liberals and 41 conservatives. Cells sharing lowercase subscript letters within rows are significantly different from one another, $p < .05$.

Liberals also see significantly more program bias in *The Daily Show* and Fox News than in CNN ($p < .05$), and conservatives see more bias in *The Daily Show* than in either of the other two programs ($p < .01$). Thus, *The Daily Show* is roundly perceived to contain more bias than the other programs studied here.

Our expectations of an absolute hostile media phenomenon (H2a and H2b) were not supported, $F(2, 216) = 0.15$, $p = .86$, observed power = .07. The dependent variable in this case is the measure that represents the relative percentages of content that supported one side of the topic versus the other. Neither conservatives nor liberals saw CNN stories as biased against their own position. Notably, though, program and topic interacted, such that some topics elicited significant differences in perceptions of bias according to program, $F(2, 216) = 9.37$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .16$. For example, in the Iraq story, CNN viewers had a mean perceived bias score of 6.39 ($SD = 38.33$), to Fox News viewers' -20.25 ($SD = 32.93$) and *The Daily Show* viewers' 65.00 ($SD = 32.03$). These substantial mean differences in perceived bias are consistent with the view that Fox News and *The Daily Show* offer a more partisan treatment of the news than does CNN.

RQ2 explored the possibility that partisanship and program might interact to influence viewers' perceptions of the story as interesting and informative. Findings indicate that this interaction was significant for both perceptions that the story was interesting, $F(2, 219) = 4.33$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$, and perceptions that the story was informative, $F(2, 219) = 6.40$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$.⁴ Means in Table 3 reveal that, after watching *The Daily Show*, liberals reported feeling significantly more interested and informed than did conservatives. Similarly, viewing Fox News made conservatives feel significantly more interested in the program (and noticeably, but not significantly, more informed). Viewing CNN, however, elicited no significant differences between liberals' and conservatives' perceptions that the story was interesting or informative. Thus, it appears that partisans feel more interested in, and informed by, a news story when the program running that story aligns with their own partisan perspective.

Table 3 Partisans' Perceptions of Program Content

	Interested		Informed	
	Liberals	Conservatives	Liberals	Conservatives
CNN	4.80 (1.37)	4.74 (1.38)	3.83 (1.29)	3.76 (1.08)
Fox News	3.99 (1.72) _b	4.37 (1.35) _b	3.50 (1.20)	4.31 (1.20)
<i>The Daily Show</i>	4.26 (1.19) _a	3.48 (1.33) _a	2.96 (1.12) _b	2.29 (0.81) _b

Note: Values are expressed as means (and standard deviations). Larger values indicate perceptions that the stories are more interesting and informative. In the CNN conditions, there were 33 liberals and 31 conservatives. In the Fox News conditions, there were 34 liberals and 39 conservatives. In *The Daily Show* conditions, there were 41 liberals and 41 conservatives. Cells sharing lowercase subscript letters within rows are significantly different from one another, $p < .05$.

Almost uniformly, partisans of both stripes considered *The Daily Show* content to be less interesting and informative. Post hoc analyses show no significant differences in perceptions of interesting content among liberals. However, conservatives perceived *The Daily Show* content to be significantly ($p < .05$) less interesting than either the CNN or the Fox News content (no significant differences between perceptions of those shows were observed). Liberals found *The Daily Show* to be significantly less informative ($p < .05$) than CNN and marginally less informative ($p < .10$) than Fox News, and conservatives found *The Daily Show* to be significantly less informative ($p < .01$) than either of the other programs. Interestingly, conservatives found the Fox News content to be marginally more informative ($p < .10$) than CNN. These patterns suggest that *The Daily Show* is thought to be inferior to the others on these dimensions, though partisanship moderates these perceptions.

Discussion

The results of Study 2 clearly show that partisanship influences viewers' perceptions of bias in cable news programs and content. Consistent with the relative hostile media phenomenon (e.g., Gunther & Chia, 2001; Gunther & Christen, 2002), our findings indicate that cable news viewers are more likely to perceive bias in programs and content that do not align with their own partisan perspective. This finding may be cause for concern if viewers' hesitance to perceive bias promotes a disinclination to view news critically. It is clear that imagining bias in the news when it is not present will not benefit audiences; nevertheless, if viewers allow their partisan perceptions to blind them to real bias, the marketplace of ideas will surely suffer. In this sense, it is heartening that viewers, irrespective of their partisan leanings, identified *The Daily Show* as more biased than Fox News or CNN. This would seem to suggest that the more traditional news format used by the CNN and Fox programs portrays a more neutral stance than does the soft news format of *The Daily Show*. Viewers expect greater neutrality in news programs than they do in comedy programs, and this expectation rightly shaped their perceptions of bias.

Our findings offer strong support for the presence of a relative hostile media phenomenon but no support for an absolute hostile media phenomenon. This may point to the importance of highly polarizing contexts or content in generating this response. Indeed, several previous studies (e.g., Arpan & Raney, 2003; Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994; Vallone et al., 1985) elicited absolute hostile media perceptions within either a highly politicized context (e.g., a political campaign) or using pathos-laden content (e.g., the Israel–Palestine conflict). Our stimuli were not of this variety and may have consequently failed to generate such extreme responses. The use of college students, who are not the most politically ardent members of the population, may also have contributed to these null findings.

The results of Study 2 also extend the hostile media literature by demonstrating that bias is not the only audience perception influenced by partisanship. When exposed to programs thought to align with their own political perspective, viewers were more likely to find the content interesting and informative. These findings may

help explain the current trend toward polarization of cable news audiences. Viewers are likely to select news programs they think will align with their partisan perspective (see Study 1). In turn, viewers perceive this partisan content to be more interesting and informative than content that contradicts their own views, so they may continue to select programs with which they already agree. The outcome of this trend would appear to be even greater polarization of cable television news audiences. Notably, though, partisanship does not yet seem to be an overpowering force driving audience perceptions. Both liberals and conservatives in this study saw more bias and less informative and interesting content on *The Daily Show* than on the other programs, although there were few differences of this sort observed between perceptions of CNN and Fox News. Thus, viewers seem to temper their partisan perceptions with realistic assessments of programs and their content.

Study 2 was limited by the use of a student sample, which reduces the generalizability of our findings. In this case, we felt such a sample was appropriate because this study is one of the first to address perceptions of bias in the realm of “soft news” and because college-age students make up much of the audience for *The Daily Show* and similar soft news programs (Baym, 2005). Nevertheless, future research in this area should seek to replicate these findings using a more representative sample. Additionally, this study was limited by our decision to assign participants to conditions by group rather than by individual. This decision had the potential to bias the randomization process, but the inclusion of a host of demographic covariates in the analysis should have muted the effect of any assignment problems. Finally, participants in the study viewed the stimulus in groups, which does not perfectly replicate the manner in which most people view television news. Group viewing could have encouraged commonality among responses, but the presence of clear partisan divisions *within* conditions suggests it did not.

Conclusions

Taken together, the results of these studies demonstrate that the world of cable news is increasingly one in which partisanship is a driving force. It appears to have a substantial impact on both network and program selection and one’s perceptions of particular stories. These findings suggest that media researchers need to incorporate partisanship into models of how people use news media and messages, and they point to substantial developments in the evolution of news and audiences. Indeed, even though the evidence in this particular study focused on news use and content from 2004, there is good reason to believe that partisanship continues to be a crucial factor in the modern news environment (e.g., Iyengar & Hahn, 2007; Mindlin, 2007). Future research in this area should therefore continue to explore the nature and effects of the ongoing changes to the cable news environment. As programs increasingly blur the line between hard and soft news and between neutrality and partisanship, scholars will need to find ways to understand these changes—and the impact they are likely to have on viewers.

Notes

- 1 The unipolar scales used here lack a neutral point for participants who wanted to indicate that they were ambivalent about the object or were unsure how to rate it. This limits the extent to which one can infer the presence of such reactions. The participants may have interpreted the middle of the scales as representing some point of ambivalence, but an inspection of the individual item distributions revealed no general tendency to use the midpoint of the scales.
- 2 The analyses of covariance (ANCOVA) also revealed a marginally significant three-way interaction of program, story topic, and ideology for perceptions of story bias, $F(2, 218) = 2.16, p < .10, \eta_p^2 = .04$. Analyses that examined the topics separately showed that for all stories, liberals saw more bias in the Fox News stories than did conservatives. The differences were significant only in the Iraq story condition. Similarly, conservatives saw more bias in *The Daily Show* in all conditions, but the differences were significant only in the Iraq story and the European trip conditions. Because of the three-way interaction, these analyses were undertaken with very little statistical power to detect anything other than very large effects. Thus, it is not clear how much to make of the differences between story conditions.
- 3 A repeated measures analysis of variance with the two bias measures as the repeated factor and ideology, program type, and story type as fixed factors showed an interaction of the repeated factor and program type, $F(2, 218) = 8.60, p < .001$. The interaction reveals that there was no significant difference between perceived story bias and perceived program bias for Fox News ($M = 3.65, SD = 1.22$ and $M = 3.63, SD = 1.45$, respectively) and CNN ($M = 3.95, SD = 1.26$ and $M = 3.39, SD = 1.38$, respectively). However, perceived story bias was marginally significantly greater than perceived program bias for *The Daily Show* ($M = 5.09, SD = 1.00$ and $M = 4.86, SD = 1.09$, respectively). In sum, these results suggest that the relationship between perceptions of programs and stories depends, in a small way, on the programs and topics in question.
- 4 The ANCOVA also revealed a marginally significant three-way interaction of program, story topic, and ideology for perceptions of story information value, $F(2, 219) = 2.01, p < .10, \eta_p^2 = .04$. Analyses that examined the topics separately showed that for all stories, conservatives saw more informational value in the Fox News stories than did liberals. The difference was marginally significant only in the European trip story condition. Similarly, liberals saw more informational value in *The Daily Show* in all conditions, but the difference was significant only in the Iraq and Harvard story conditions. Notably, liberals saw significantly more informational value in the CNN story than did conservatives. The very low level of power available to detect anything but very large effects in this analysis leaves us with little to say for certain about these interactions.

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**Nouvelles hostiles : Les perceptions et usages partisans de la programmation
des bulletins d'informations câblés**

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Résumé

Ces dernières années, le développement des informations télévisées câblées aux États-Unis a été marqué par deux tendances : la différence entre nouvelles chaudes et froides est de plus en plus brouillée et la partisanerie de plus en plus manifeste. Cet article rend compte des résultats de deux études qui donnent un aperçu de la nature et de l'impact de ces tendances. La première étude analyse des données d'enquête nationale afin d'identifier les facteurs qui mènent des partisans politiques à choisir des émissions et des réseaux particuliers d'informations télévisées câblées. La deuxième étude emploie des méthodes expérimentales afin de démontrer la manière dont les penchants partisans des téléspectateurs influencent leurs perceptions des contenus de CNN, Fox News et *The Daily Show*. Nous constatons un phénomène de relative hostilité médiatique, où les partisans perçoivent plus de biais dans les émissions qui ne s'alignent pas sur leurs propres idées politiques. De plus, les résultats indiquent que la partisanerie influence les téléspectateurs dans leurs perceptions du contenu des informations comme étant intéressant et informatif.

Feindliche Nachrichten: Voreingenommene Nutzung und Wahrnehmung von Kabelnachrichtenprogrammen

Die Entwicklung der U.S. Kabelfernsehnachrichten ist in letzter Zeit von zwei Trends gekennzeichnet: zum einen von einer Vermischung von harten und weichen Nachrichten und zum anderen von einer Zunahme offenkundiger Parteilichkeit. Dieser Artikel dokumentiert die Ergebnisse zweier Studien, die Erkenntnisse über die Natur und den Einfluss dieser Trends bieten. Auf Basis nationaler Umfragedaten identifiziert die erste Studie Faktoren, die politische Anhänger dazu bewegen, bestimmte Kabelfernsehnachrichtennetworks oder -programme zu wählen. Die zweite Studie nutzt empirische Methoden, um darzustellen, wie die Parteipräferenzen der Zuschauer ihre Wahrnehmung der Inhalte von CNN, Fox News und *The Daily Show* beeinflussen. Die Ergebnisse bestätigen die Vermutung eines relativen feindlichen Medien-Phänomens, da Parteianhänger häufiger eine tendenzielle Berichterstattung in solchen Programmen wahrnehmen, die nicht mit ihrer eigenen politischen Überzeugung übereinstimmen. Außerdem zeigen die Studien, dass eine Parteipräferenz die Wahrnehmung der Zuschauer dahingehend beeinflusst, dass Nachrichteninhalte als interessant und informativ wahrgenommen werden.

Noticias Hostiles: El Uso Partidario y las Percepciones de la Programación de Noticias por Cable

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Resumen

Dos tendencias han marcado el desarrollo de las noticias de la televisión por cable en los EE.UU. en años recientes: una mezcla de noticias duras y suaves, y un incremento abierto de lo partidario. Este artículo reporta los resultados de dos estudios los cuales proveen de entendimiento sobre la naturaleza y el impacto de estas tendencias. El primer estudio analiza los datos de una encuesta nacional que identifica los factores que llevan a los partidarios políticos a elegir particulares redes de noticias y programas de televisión por cable. El segundo estudio emplea métodos experimentales para demostrar cómo las inclinaciones de los partidarios televidentes influyen sobre las percepciones de contenido de CNN, Fox News, y *The Daily Show*. Encontramos evidencia de un fenómeno de hostilidad mediática relativa, en el cual los partidarios percibían más prejuicios en los programas que no se alineaban con sus propias perspectivas políticas. Más aún, los resultados indican que lo partidario informa a las percepciones de los televidentes sobre el contenido de las noticias como interesante e informativo.

敌意新闻：党派倾向的使用以及对有线新闻节目的观感

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美国有线电视新闻近几年出现两种发展趋势：一种是硬新闻和软新闻之间的界限变得模糊，另一种是公然的党派偏见在增长。本文报告了两项研究的结果，这两项研究探讨了上述趋势的本质和影响。第一项研究分析了全国性的调查数据，以界定持政治偏见的人选择特定电视新闻网及节目的诱导因素。第二项研究运用实验法来验证观众的党派倾向怎样影响了他们关于 CNN，福克斯新闻以及 The Daily Show 内容的感知。我们发现媒体带有相对的敌意证据，即持党派偏见的人认为那些政治立场与他们相左的节目带有更多的偏见。研究结果还表明，党派色彩还给观众造成该新闻节目有趣且富有信息量的印象。

호전적인 뉴스: 케이블 뉴스 프로그램의 정당적 사용과 인지에 관한 연구

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요약

최근들어 미국 케이블 텔레비전 뉴스에서는 두가지 경향들이 발전하고 있다: 첫번째는 강성뉴스와 연성 뉴스의 경계가 불명확해진다는 것이고, 두번째는 케이블 네트워크의 명백한 정당지지 경향이 증가한다는 것이다. 본 논문은 이러한 경향들의 본질과 영향에 대한 통찰력을 제공하는 두가지 연구 결과에 관한 것이다. 첫번째 연구는 정치정당들이 특별한 케이블 텔레비전 뉴스 네트워크와 프로그램을 선정토록 이끄는 요소들을 확인하기 위하여 국가적 조사연구 데이터를 분석했다. 두번째 연구는 시청자들의 정치적 편향이 어떻게 CNN, Fox News, 그리고 *The Daily Show* 프로그램의 내용적 인지도에 영향을 미치는 가를 증명하기 위해 실험연구를 단행하였다. 본 연구는 상대적으로 호전적인 미디어 현상을 발견하였는바, 특정 정당원들은 그들 자신의 정치적 견해와 일치하지 않는 프로그램에 대해 보다 편파적으로 인지하는 것으로 나타났다. 결과들은 또 정파심은 뉴스 내용에 대한 시청자들의 인지도를 재미있고 정보적인 것으로 나타낸다는 것을 보여주고 있다.

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