Slanted Objectivity? Perceived Media Bias, Cable News Exposure, and Political Attitudes*

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Objectives. This research explores the consequences of a fragmented television news audience. The recent proliferation of a wide array of television news sources has influenced the manner in which a large number of Americans get their information about politics and government. The political consequences of media fragmentation and the polarization of the U.S. television news audience are explored. *Methods.* I analyze data on television news-gathering habits and political attitudes collected from several surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center during the 2004 presidential election campaign. *Results.* The Fox News Channel has been the main beneficiary of television news fragmentation by appealing to those individuals who have become disillusioned with what they perceive as a liberally-biased mainstream media. The findings show that the Fox News audience has a distinct set of political attitudes regarding President Bush and his opposition. Evidence also indicates that the Fox News audience has distinct voting behavior patterns, even when controlling for party identification. Finally, the results illustrate that Fox News watchers have perceptions of political reality that differ from the rest of the television news audience. *Conclusions.* The television news audience is divided along political lines. This division could contribute toward further political polarization among the U.S. mass public as the content of television news coverage of politics becomes less and less homogenized.

Claims of media bias in political news reporting have been commonplace for decades. Pundits, journalists, and interest groups constantly spar over whether or not bias exists as well as which political actors tend to benefit and suffer most as a result. Elected officials and candidates for office, especially Republicans, bemoan how the media impedes their ability to effectively govern or conduct a campaign. Bob Dole, for example, argued in 1996 that his presidential campaign against Bill Clinton was stumbling because of the news media's leftward tendencies, particularly those of the *New York Times* (Kurtz, 1996). George H. W. Bush criticized the press along the same lines,

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and made his displeasure in this regard a common theme in his reelection campaign, frequently echoing the slogan: "Annoy the media: reelect Bush" (Eveland and Shah, 2003).

In recent years, however, accusations of bias in political news reporting have intensified (Niven, 2002). Although media critics continue to rail against what they consider to be a liberal media (see Bozell, 2004; Goldberg, 2002; Kohn, 2003), others argue that bias exists in the opposite direction, stemming primarily from the pressure of media owners that favor Republicans (see Alterman, 2003; Bagdikian, 2004; Brock, 2004; Scheuer, 2001). Politicians, of course, continue to criticize media bias as well, arguing that the political agendas of media owners, managers, and reporters often distort their messages and ultimately do a disservice to the democratic process.

This barrage of impugnment against the news media's political reporting has increased the mass public's cynicism regarding journalistic objectivity (Crawford, 2005). Skepticism toward the media has intensified to unhealthy levels. For example, a poll conducted in 2004 found that over two-thirds of the U.S. public (69 percent) saw at least a fair amount of political bias in the news, and only 7 percent saw no bias at all.[1]

Is this public perception of rabid media bias accurate? Some work points toward the possibility of a subtle liberal bias under certain circumstances (Lowry and Shidler, 1995; Lichter and Noyes, 1995; Lichter, Noyes, and Kaid, 1999; Watts et al., 1999). To illustrate this point, several researchers note that a vast majority of political news reporters are self-identified liberals and/or Democrats (Beyle, Ostdiek, and Lynch, 1996; Bozell, 2004; Dautrich and Hartley, 1999; Lichter and Noyes, 1995; Patterson and Donsbach, 1996). However, a great deal of empirical research into the actual content of coverage finds little evidence to support this perception in past television news (Frank, 1973; Hofstetter, 1976), or in recent news (Domke et al., 1999; Niven, 1999, 2002, 2003, 2004; Shah et al., 1999; Waldman and Devitt, 1998). A few systematic studies that identify evidence of bias also find that the bias goes in both ideological directions depending on the communication medium (see D'Alessio and Allen, 2000). When there is evidence of more positive coverage of one party or candidate over another, it is not always possible to determine that media bias exists. Candidates and events do not exist in a vacuum; therefore, more positive or negative coverage may reflect reality more than bias (see Hofstetter, 1976; Niven, 2002). Recent work that uses content analyses, which evaluate coverage on comparable "baseline" issues and events, finds little evidence of bias in mainstream news (see Niven, 1999, 2002, 2003, 2004).

[1]Specifically, the survey question asked: "To what extent do you see political bias in news coverage? A great deal [33 percent], a fair amount [36 percent], not too much [21 percent], or not at all [7 percent]?" Data were accessed from the Pew Research Center's Mid October, 2004 Political Survey, release date October, 24, 2004.

Nevertheless, Americans' perception of a politically-biased news media persists. The purpose of this study is not to examine whether or not media bias exists, or determine the direction of that bias. Instead, this study intends to examine how different television news audiences *perceive* political bias in the news. This article argues that, in the current U.S. media environment, the effects of perceived political bias in the media are not benign. Paying particular attention to the most common source of news, television, this study examines how perceptions of bias contribute to the dramatic fragmentation of the audience. The consequences of this fragmentation for political polarization among the mass public are explored in detail.

Perceived Bias and Public Opinion

Americans commonly believe that bias exists in the news, but the nature of the apparent bias varies (Eveland and Shah, 2003; Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken, 1994). Most significantly, individuals who see bias in political news reporting believe that the direction of the bias is counter to their own political beliefs (Perloff, 1989; Vallone, Ross, and Lepper, 1985). Research indicates that strong partisans are more likely to see counterattitudinal media bias than independents or weak partisans (Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeldt, 1998; Gunther, 1992). This phenomenon, together with intense elite rhetoric about the presence of bias (Watts et al., 1999), contributes to a heightened public sense of a media bias even though little evidence from content analysis supports it (see Niven, 2002).

Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985) label the tendency to perceive political news as antagonistic toward one's own personal views as the "hostile media phenomenon." Vallone, Ross, and Lepper use experimental analyses of television coverage of the 1982 Beirut massacre and find that both pro-Arab and pro-Israeli subjects interpret the same news stories on the massacre as hostile to their personal opinion. Perloff (1989) uncovers a similar set of differential responses to news coverage of the war in Lebanon among Arab and Jewish subjects. One cause of the hostile media phenomenon is the social-psychological theory of social judgment (Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken, 1994), which posits that individuals evaluate the legitimacy of media coverage from a personally determined "latitude of acceptance" (Sherif and Hovland, 1961). Statements agreeable to an individual's own attitudes fall within their latitude of acceptance, while counterattitudinal statements fall into their latitude of rejection. In this regard, preexisting beliefs regarding issues in the news actually drive the reaction.

The Hostile Media Effect, Fragmentation, and the Fox News Channel

The hostile media effect has been examined at length, but the consequences of the phenomenon have received less attention, especially in the

modern media environment. One exception is the research of Tsfati and Cappella (2003), who find that individuals slightly tailor their media consumption habits to account for which sources they trust to be accurate and even-handed. They argue that lower levels of trust in mainstream media drive a greater tendency to use newer sources of news, such as the Internet and talk radio. The relative accessibility and pervasiveness of traditional news, in their estimation, compels most individuals to still rely on it even if they harbor suspicions of biased coverage. Tsfati and Cappella note: "Skeptics' differing media diets might show that they are seeking alternatives to the mainstream. However, in current media environments, a real alternative to mainstream news is hard to find. Mainstream news is everywhere, whereas nonmainstream channels are, at present, less pervasive" (2003:519).

The realities of the "fragmented" media age, on the other hand, have altered this situation (West, 2001), resulting in the empowerment of individuals to avoid political news sources that they perceive to be biased. Technological advances and regulatory modifications in the communications industry have allowed the number of news sources to flourish in the last decade, therefore fragmenting the mass media environment (West, 2001). More than ever before, Americans have a plethora of alternatives to chose from when collecting political news. With unprecedented ease, individual news consumers can sidestep traditional news mainstays such a daily newspapers, weekly magazines, and network news. By simply clicking the remote control or computer mouse, individuals can access any one of the countless news sources that best fits their personal preferences.

On television, the main beneficiary of this fragmentation has been the Fox News Channel. Founded in 1996, by 2001 Fox News replaced the Cable News Network (CNN) as the ratings leader in the cable news wars (Barkin, 2003; Collins, 2004), and has remained the highest-rated cable news source to date. As Table 1 demonstrates, Fox News is the most commonly used primary source of political information for television news watchers. In fact, daily newspapers are the only media outlet that is used more often as a primary news source than Fox News.

Several political observers and pundits credit the success of Fox News to the station's ability to appeal to conservatives who were disenchanted with traditional network television news and who perceived traditional venues as possessing a liberal bias (Alterman, 2003; Bozell, 2004; Brock, 2004; Collins, 2004). Although data backing up this claim are sparse, the reasoning behind the creation of the Fox News Channel was to provide a legitimate "fair and balanced" alternative to those fed up with the liberal media (Barkin, 2003; Collins, 2004). Preliminary empirical research on this topic indicates that the regular Fox News audience has in fact become more Republican since the channel's inception (Morris, 2005; Pew Research Center, 2004). Figure 1 substantiates this claim with data from the Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumption studies. More than one-third of all Republicans (36 percent) watch Fox News on a regular basis—a

TABLE 1

Primary Sources of News

	Percentage of the Public Using as Primary Source for Information on National and International News*
Television	
Fox News	13
Cable News Network (CNN)	12
MSNBC	2
CNBC	1
ABC News	7
CBS News	5
NBC News	9
Local News	9
Other	
Daily newspaper	17
Radio	10
Magazines	2
Internet	12

*Due to rounding and "don't know" responses, percentages may not add to 100.

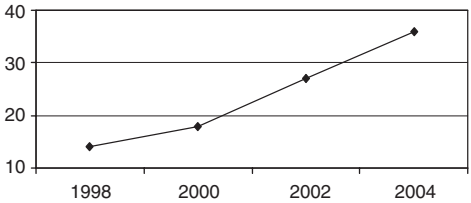
NOTE: Data collected from the Pew Research Center's December 2004 Political Typology Survey, release date May 10, 2005.

dramatic increase from a mere 14 percent in 1998. Almost two-thirds (63 percent) of all Republicans watched Fox News at least sometimes in 2004, while less than one-half (45 percent) did so in 1998. Furthermore, according to Pew Research Center data from late 2004, almost one-fourth (22 percent) of all Republicans reported using Fox News as the *primary* source of political information (more than any other news), compared to just 5 percent of Democrats.

A major aspect of the fragmented news era is a heterogeneous news environment where media accounts of the same issue or event can differ significantly depending on the source (West, 2001). Does the news product on the Fox News Channel differ from other television sources? Some recent content analysis research on Fox News indicates that the station's coverage may be friendlier to Republican issues and leaders than their Democratic counterparts. Aday, Livingston, and Hebert (2005) demonstrated that Fox News' coverage of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 displayed significantly more support for the Bush-led invasion than did ABC, CBS, CNN, or NBC. Other research found that prime-time coverage of the 2004 Democratic National Convention on Fox News was significantly more negative in tone than its coverage of the Republican Convention (Morris and Francia, 2005). This same study also found that Fox News' convention coverage of Democratic nominee John Kerry was more negative than coverage of George W.

FIGURE 1

Percent of Republicans Who Watch Fox News Regularly



SOURCE: Pew Research Center (2004).

Bush and that Fox News devoted more time featuring floor speeches at the Republican Convention than at the Democratic Convention.

If perceived liberal bias and the emergence of Fox News have aided in polarizing the television-viewing audience, what are the consequences? A few studies have examined this question, but the findings are limited primarily to the effect of Fox News exposure on knowledge of issues of foreign policy. A study conducted by the Program in International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) and Knowledge Networks in 2003 found that the Fox News audience was more likely than other news audiences to incorrectly believe that there was a legitimate link between Saddam Hussein and the al-Qaida terrorist group and that the United States found weapons of mass destruction in Iraq after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion (Kull, 2003). Morris (2005) found that increased exposure to Fox News was positively associated with the tendency to *underestimate* the number of U.S. casualties in the Iraq war.

Evidence regarding additional attitudes of the Fox News audience, however, is lacking. It is important that research examine the opinions of the Fox News audience—and whether those opinions do indeed differ from other audiences. Additionally, it is important to understand if Fox News viewers differ from other news viewers in regard to *political behavior*, particularly voting. Speculation abounds on this topic in the popular press, but multivariate empirical evidence is lacking.

Hypotheses

Before the era of cable news, those individuals who were hostile toward the media had almost no viewing alternatives. However, recent fragmentation of television news sources, primarily via the emergence of cable news, now allows viewers to indulge their disdain for the "liberal media" by selecting alternative sources. Pundits have argued that Fox News became the most popular cable news channel by marketing itself as a "fair and balanced" haven from the so-called liberal media (Alterman, 2003). This situation works to the economic advantage of Fox News (from a ratings

perspective), and it satisfies those news consumers who had grown weary of what they perceive to be liberally dominated mainstream news.

Based on this rationale, I offer a series of hypotheses regarding the relationship between partisanship, perceived bias, television news habits, and political attitudes. The first hypothesis is as follows.

H_1: *Partisan identification is associated with perceived media bias.*

Democrats are more likely to see a Republican bias in the news, and Republicans are more likely to see a bias toward Democrats. This hypothesis, of course, is not groundbreaking. Nevertheless, an empirical demonstration of this relationship is necessary to illustrate the existence of the hostile media effect.

Additionally, I also expect that the Fox News audience is more hostile toward the mainstream news media as a whole. Specifically, I expect that the perception of bias and overall evaluations of the mainstream media will be associated with the television news source an individual uses most often.

H_2: *Those individuals who perceive bias in the mainstream media are more likely to use Fox News as their primary source of news.*

H_3: *Those individuals with low opinions of the news media as an institution are more likely to use Fox News as their primary source of news.*

The final hypotheses relate to how the Fox News audience has political attitudes and behaviors that are unique from other television news audiences. Based on the preceding discussion, the Fox News audience can be expected to have greater support for the Republican Party and its leadership, particularly President Bush. It is also expected that Fox News watchers will have lower support for Democratic leadership. I will examine this relationship while controlling for the effect of partisan identification and other demographic factors. Additionally, I present evidence that suggests that potential swing voters (self-identified "independents") who watch Fox News are more likely to vote Republican. Finally, I will show that, compared to other audiences, Fox News watchers see the ongoing events in the political world from a unique perspective.

H_4: *The Fox News audience will have more positive attitudes toward President Bush, and more negative attitudes toward his opposition (in this case John Kerry), even when controlling for party identification.*

H_5: *Independents who watch Fox News are more likely to vote Republican.*

H_6: *Fox News watchers' view of current political events differs from that of other television news audiences.*

Data and Methods

This article relies on data from the Pew Research Center to test the above hypotheses. The Pew Research Center frequently conducts nationally

representative surveys of media habits. Often, these surveys include an item that asks subjects: "How have you been getting most of your news about national and international issues? From television, from newspapers, from radio, from magazines, or from the Internet?" If a respondent reports television as his or her first answer, the respondent is then asked to list the specific television news source.[2] This allows for a more valid approach to measuring an individual's *primary* source of news. Earlier research on the Fox News audience relied on scaled measures of viewing frequency (never, hardly ever, sometimes, or regularly) from the Pew Research Center's Biennial Media Consumptions studies (Morris, 2005). Although these self-reported scales of media exposure were used with success, they have validity issues that the measure employed in this analysis does not. Price and Zaller argue that "[i]n trying to estimate their typical rates of media use, respondents may have trouble recalling the details of what may often be a set of low salience behaviors (e.g., casually browsing through the newspaper, watching television while relaxing with the family, or picking up a magazine at the doctor's office)" (1993:135). The survey item used in this analysis, on the other hand, alleviates this shortcoming by requiring respondents to report only the one source they use most frequently for national and international news.

In total, I use data from four different Pew Research Center surveys. Each of the surveys was administered in 2004 or late 2003 by telephone by Princeton Survey Research Associates with nationally representative samples of adults in the continental United States, and each survey contained the exact same media exposure item discussed above. Additionally, the other variables used as controls (party identification, gender, age, race, education, and income) were measured identically in each survey. The first survey was conducted between December 19, 2003, and January 4, 2004, and was based on a sample of 1,506 adults. The margin of sampling error is ± 4 percentage points. The second survey was conducted between October 15–19, 2004, and was based on a sample of 1,307 adults; the margin of sampling error is ± 4.5 percentage points. The third survey was conducted between November 5–8, 2004, and was based on a sample of 1,209 registered voters. The margin of error in this sample is ± 3.5 percentage points.[3] The fourth survey occurred between December 1–16, 2004, using 2,000 registered voters, and the margin of error

[2]Response options were read to the subjects. The possible answers were local news programming, ABC network news, CBS network news, NBC network news, CNN cable news, MSNBC cable news, the Fox News cable channel, or CNBC cable news. ABC, CBS, NBC, and local news were combined into one measure of network news.

[3]This survey was a set of reinterviews of registered voters contacted in October 2004. Several of the independent, particularly demographic, variables were taken from the pre-election interviews. However, the dependent variables, including the vote for president in the election as well as judgments of media coverage, were collected in the reinterviews. The smaller margin of error is due to the generalizability to registered voters, as opposed to the continental U.S. adult population.

was ± 2.5 percentage points.[4] Multiple Pew surveys are used because each has unique items measuring various aspects of perceived bias, political behavior, and attitudes toward the media and public officials. The nature of the dependent variables analyzed below (dichotomous) dictate that maximum likelihood estimation (logistical regression) be used as the method of analysis.

Findings

Relying on Pew data from January 2004, the evidence in Table 2 illustrates strong evidence of the hostile media phenomenon (Hypothesis 1). As previous literature has demonstrated, Democrats are likely to see a Republican bias in mainstream media, and Republicans are likely to see a Democratic bias. Additionally, Democrats and Republicans are both significantly less likely to perceive a media bias that is in favor of their own partisanship. This finding confirms Hypothesis 1.

Is the hostile media effect linked to current television news consumption patterns? Specifically, Hypotheses 2 and 3 address this issue by stating that those individuals with perceptions of bias and unfairness in the media overall are more likely to watch Fox News. Using data from the Pew survey conducted in mid-October 2004, Table 3 indicates that this is the case.[5] Those who perceive members of the media to be politically biased are significantly more likely to rely on Fox News as their primary source of news, even when controlling for the effect of party identification and other factors. Also, those individuals who reported lower overall evaluations of the press during the 2004 presidential election are more likely to watch Fox News as well. Table 3 also demonstrates that these variables relate to exposure to other television news sources differently than Fox News. Perceived bias is not significantly associated with exposure to CNN, MSNBC, or network news. Also, those individuals who rated the overall performance of the press higher were more likely to watch CNN and network news. This effect is in the opposite direction of the relationship between press evaluation and exposure to Fox News, thus lending support to the argument that the television news audience is indeed fragmented by their overall feelings toward the mainstream media.

The impact of mainstream media evaluations on exposure to Fox News is not small. Holding the control variables in the Fox News exposure model in Table 3 constant, it is estimated that an individual with high regard for the media (lowest level of perceived bias and highest rating of the press) only has

[4]For further information on these surveys and their methodologies, please see ⟨http://people-press.org/⟩.

[5]Data were accessed from the Pew Research Center Mid October, 2004 Political Survey, release date October, 24, 2004.

TABLE 2

Perceived Bias by Party Identification

	Perceived Democratic Bias[a]	Perceived Republican Bias[a]
Party ID (1 = Rep; 2 = weak Rep; 3 = Indep; 4 = weak Dem; 5 = Dem)	− 0.48	0.47
	(0.04)***	(0.05)***
Sex (1 = male; 0 = female)	0.23	0.04
	(0.14)*	(0.15)
Age	0.00	− 0.00
	(0.00)	(0.00)
Race (1 = white; 0 = nonwhite)	− 0.07	− 0.17
	(0.21)	(0.19)
Education	0.11	0.20
	(0.04)**	(0.05)***
Income	0.06	− 0.03
	(0.03)*	(0.03)
Constant	− 1.04	− 3.81
	(0.39)***	(0.44)***
LR x^2	162.32***	122.53***
N	1,289	1,289

[a]Question asked: "In the way they have been covering the presidential race so far, do you think that 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?

*$p<0.10$; **$p<0.05$; ***$p<0.01$ (two tailed).

NOTE: Cell entries are logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

a 0.04 (± 0.02) probability of using Fox News as his or her primary source of news. However, a media skeptic (highest level of perceived bias and lowest rating of the press) has a 0.25 (± 0.04) probability of using Fox as the skeptic's primary source of news.[6]

To further address Hypotheses 2 and 3, Table 4 illustrates this relationship further using data collected immediately following the 2004 presidential election.[7] Respondents were asked to rate whether or not they felt the coverage of candidates in the mainstream media was fair. As the findings show, those who saw mainstream coverage of George W. Bush as unfair were significantly more likely to be Fox News viewers. Holding all other variables in the model constant, those who viewed coverage of Bush as fair had a 0.09 (± 0.01) probability of using Fox News. This probability

[6]Predicted probabilities were generated in STATA 8.1 using CLARIFY (see King, Tomz, and Wittenberg, 2000; Tomz, Wittenberg, and King, 2003). The standard errors generated by CLARIFY are listed in parentheses.

[7]Data were accessed from the Pew Research Center's Post-Election, 2004 Political Survey, release date November 11, 2004.

TABLE 3

Television News Usage by Perceived Bias and Overall Ratings of the Press

	Primary Source of News			
	Fox News	CNN	MSNBC	Network[c]
Perceived bias[a]	0.41	– 0.07	0.10	– 0.22
	(0.22)*	(0.20)	(0.38)	(0.14)
Press evaluation[b]	– 0.29	0.51	– 0.40	0.37
	(0.13)**	(0.17)***	(0.27)	(0.10)***
Party ID	– 0.37	0.25	0.31	0.01
	(0.08)***	(0.09)***	(0.15)**	(0.05)
Sex	0.37	0.09	0.20	– 0.45
	(0.25)	(0.30)	(0.50)	(0.19)**
Age	0.00	0.00	– 0.00	0.00
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(-.01)	(0.00)
Race	– 0.74	– 0.33	—dropped—	– 0.29
	(0.35)**	(0.36)		(0.27)
Education	0.00	0.16	– 0.08	– 0.27
	(0.08)	(0.11)	(0.17)	(0.07)***
Income	0.04	– 0.06	0.18	0.01
	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.12)	(0.04)
Constant	– 1.48	– 4.46	– 4.10	0.85
	(1.26)	(1.33)***	(2.23)*	(0.87)
LR x^2	57.29***	26.74***	8.35	57.64***
N	548	548	467	548

[a]Question asked: "How often do you think members of the news media let their own political preferences influence the way they report the news . . . often, sometimes, seldom, or never?" (1 = never; 2 = seldom; 3 = sometimes; 4 = often).

[b]Question asked: "All in all, how would you rate the job the press has done in covering the presidential campaign so far—excellent, good, only fair, or poor?" (1 = poor; 2 = only fair; 3 = good; 4 = excellent).

[c]Includes national nightly news on ABC, CBS, NBC, or local network news.

*$p<0.10$; **$p<0.05$; ***$p<0.01$ (two tailed).

NOTE: Cell entries are logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

grows to 0.16 ($\pm$ 0.02) for those who viewed coverage of Bush as unfair. None of the other audiences display this sentiment, and individuals who agreed that coverage of Bush was fair were significantly more likely to watch network news. Additionally, Table 5 shows that individuals who thought members of the mainstream media wanted John Kerry to win the election were significantly more likely to be members of the Fox News viewing audience.[8] Conversely, those individuals who disagreed with the notion that the media wanted Kerry to win were more likely to be network news

[8]These data were taken from the Mid October Political Survey.

TABLE 4

Television News Usage by Assessments of 2004 Election Coverage

	Primary Source of News			
	Fox News	CNN	MSNBC	Network
Agreed coverage of Bush was fair[a]	−0.68	0.10	0.51	0.66
	(0.22)***	(0.29)	(0.48)	(0.19)***
Agreed coverage of Kerry was fair[a]	−0.05	−0.15	0.07	0.10
	(0.21)	(0.28)	(0.47)	(0.19)
Party ID	−0.42	0.24	0.13	0.04
	(0.06)***	(0.07)***	(0.11)	(0.04)
Sex	0.11	−0.14	0.28	−0.44
	(0.18)	(0.23)	(0.36)	(0.15)***
Age	0.01	0.00	−0.01	−0.00
	(0.00)**	(0.00)	(0.01)	(0.00)
Race	−0.29	0.22	0.67	−0.08
	(0.28)	(0.31)	(0.62)	(0.21)
Education	−0.07	−0.06	−0.13	−0.19
	(0.06)	(0.08)	(0.12)	(0.05)***
Income	−0.02	−0.06	0.13	−0.05
	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.09)	(0.03)
Constant	−0.47	−3.04	−4.25	−0.20
	(0.57)	(0.68)***	(1.14)***	(0.44)
LR x^2	90.56***	26.11***	10.80	72.66***
N	1,042	1,042	1,042	1,042

[a]Question asked: "Would you say the press has been fair or unfair in the way it has covered [John Kerry's/George W. Bush's] election campaign?" (1 = fair; 0 = unfair).

*$p<0.10$; **$p<0.05$; ***$p<0.01$ (two tailed).

NOTE: Cell entries are logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

watchers. No such trend existed among those who primarily watched CNN or MSNBC. Taken as a whole, the findings from Tables 3 through 5 confirm Hypotheses 2 and 3.

The Fox News audience is especially linked to the hostile media phenomenon, and the other audiences appear not to share this characteristic, but are there significantly different political attitudes across these audiences that transcend perceived media bias? That is, does the Fox News audience possess unique attitudes toward political issues and/or leaders, and does that translate into a tendency to vote one way or another? As listed above, Hypotheses 4 states that the Fox News audience was more pro-Bush in its orientation, and more anti-John Kerry. Indeed, Table 6 uses data from mid-October 2004 to illustrate that the Fox News audience had attitudes about both presidential candidates that differed significantly from those of the other television news audiences, even when controlling for party identification. This finding confirms Hypothesis 4. Fox News watchers were much

TABLE 5

Television News Usage by Perceived Media Bias in 2004 Presidential Election

	Primary Source of News			
	Fox News	CNN	MSNBC	Network
Believe the media was for Bush[a]	−0.91	−0.26	−0.60	0.02
	(0.50)*	(0.37)	(0.85)	(0.25)
Believe the media was for Kerry[a]	0.70	−0.09	0.52	−0.53
	(0.31)**	(0.33)	(0.59)	(0.23)**
Party ID	−0.32	0.25	0.34	0.01
	(0.08)***	(0.09)***	(0.15)**	(0.05)
Sex	0.39	−0.17	0.21	−0.47
	(0.24)*	(0.28)	(0.49)	(0.19)**
Age	0.01	0.00	0.00	−0.00
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.01)	(0.00)
Race	−0.76	−0.35	—dropped—	−0.19
	(0.35)**	(0.34)		(0.26)
Education	−0.01	0.08	−0.06	−0.30
	(0.08)	(0.10)	(0.17)	(0.06)***
Income	0.04	−0.07	0.17	0.02
	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.13)	(0.04)
Constant	−1.32	−2.50	−5.24	1.50
	(0.74)***	(0.87)***	(1.53)***	(0.57)***
LR x^2	64.33***	17.40**	7.86	48.00***
N	561	561	476	561

[a]Question asked: "Who do you think most newspaper reporters and TV journalists want to see win the presidential election—John Kerry or George W. Bush?" (This item was broken up into two variables where 1 = media wants Kerry/Bush; 0 = media want other, neither, or don't know.)

*$p<0.10$; **$p<0.05$; ***$p<0.01$ (two tailed).

NOTE: Cell entries are logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

more likely to report that criticism of John Kerry's "flip-flopping" (i.e., changing his mind too much), as well as criticisms of his liberal ideology, was more likely to cause them not to vote for him. No other audience displayed this tendency. Regarding George W. Bush, it can be seen that the CNN audience was significantly more likely to report that its chances of voting for him were damaged by criticisms of his inability to admit mistakes and misleading the public on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction programs. Fox News watchers were significantly less likely to agree that those criticisms of Bush were going to influence their vote.

Taken together, the findings in Table 6 show that Fox News watchers had very different perceptions of the presidential candidates than other television news audiences in 2004. But did these perceptions associate with voting tendencies? Although there are significant associations between exposure to Fox and voting Republican, and between exposure to CNN and voting Democrat, these effects are marginalized after controlling for party

TABLE 6

Candidate Perception by Media Exposure

	Perceived Candidate Attribute Negatively Influenced Chance of Voting for that Candidate (1 = yes; 0 = no)			
	Kerry Changes His Mind Too Much[a]	Kerry is Too Liberal[a]	Bush is Unwilling to Admit Mistakes[a]	Bush Misled the Public about War in Iraq[a]
Fox News most	0.74	0.70	−0.78	−0.81
	(0.31)**	(0.31)**	(0.34)**	(0.35)**
CNN most	−0.09	−0.58	1.02	0.92
	(0.35)	(0.42)	(0.35)***	(0.36)**
MSNBC most	−0.76	−0.85	−1.14	0.47
	(0.74)	(0.84)	(0.74)	(0.68)
Network most	−0.21	−0.22	−0.31	−0.27
	(0.25)	(0.27)	(0.24)	(0.25)
Party ID	−0.62	−0.60	0.65	0.75
	(0.06)***	(0.07)***	(0.06)***	(0.06)***
Sex	−0.19	0.18	0.03	0.03
	(0.21)	(0.22)	(0.21)	(0.22)
Age	−0.00	0.00	0.00	−0.00
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Race	−0.12	0.08	0.32	−0.28
	(0.30)	(0.34)	(0.27)	(0.28)
Education	−0.10	−0.09	0.07	0.05
	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.05)	(0.07)
Income	0.00	−0.03	−0.03	0.06
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Constant	1.98	1.03	−3.08	−2.56
	(0.61)***	(0.65)	(0.61)***	(0.62)***
LR x^2	140.55***	125.22***	165.57***	208.96***
N	552	552	552	552

[a]Questions asked: "Now I'd like to read a few concerns critics of Senator Kerry/President George W. Bush have raised during the campaign. Have you heard critics say that . . . " If respondents answered "yes," the follow-up question asked if that made them LESS likely to vote for that individual (yes = 1; no/never heard/don't know = 0).

*$p<0.10$; **$p<0.05$; ***$p<0.01$ (two tailed).

NOTE: Cell entries are logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

identification (results not shown). The overwhelming effect of partisanship in the model renders media predictors primarily insignificant, as partisanship is the overwhelming determinant of the vote (see Miller and Shanks, 1996). However, when the models are run only on those respondents who identify themselves as "independent" instead of Democrat or Republican, we can observe significant effects. These effects illustrate that, among independents, the usage of Fox News is associated with voting for Bush, and the usage of CNN is associated with voting for Kerry (see Table 7). These

TABLE 7

2004 Presidential Election Vote by Media Exposure—Self-Described "Independents" Only

	Vote for Bush[a]	Vote for Kerry[b]
Fox News most	0.72	– 1.08
	(0.37)*	(0.40)***
CNN most	– 0.68	0.84
	(0.45)	(0.45)*
MSNBC most	0.63	– 0.58
	(0.75)	(0.75)
Network most	0.34	– 0.52
	(0.31)	(0.32)
Sex	0.22	– 0.24
	(0.24)	(0.25)
Age	0.00	– 0.00
	(0.00)	(0.00)
Race	0.14	– 0.12
	(0.33)	(0.34)
Education	– 0.06	– 0.05
	(0.09)	(0.09)
Income	0.03	0.03
	(0.06)	(0.06)
Constant	– 0.30	0.40
	(0.66)	(0.67)
LR x^2	11.96	18.60**
N	291	291

[a]Questions asked all reported voters in the sample: "Did you happen to vote for George W. Bush, for John Kerry, or for Ralph Nader for president?" (1 = voted for Bush; 0 = Kerry or other answer).

[b]Questions asked all reported voters in the sample: "Did you happen to vote for George W. Bush, for John Kerry, or for Ralph Nader for president?" (1 = voted for Kerry; 0 = Bush or other answer).

*$p<0.10$; **$p<0.05$; ***$p<0.01$ (two tailed).

NOTE: Cell entries are logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

findings support Hypothesis 5. This is especially important given that the vast majority of swing voters, who ultimately decide presidential election outcomes, are most likely to identify themselves as nonpartisans. Controlling all other variables in the model, independents who received most of their news from Fox had a 0.65 (± 0.08) probability of voting for Bush. Independents who received most of their news from CNN, on the other hand, had only a 0.31 (± 0.09) probability of voting for Bush. Fox News watchers had only a 0.26 (± 0.07) probability of voting for John Kerry, but CNN watchers had a 0.69 (± 0.09) probability of voting for Kerry.

In and of themselves, the findings from Table 7 could be called into question, as a significant portion of the 291 independent voters in the sample were likely faux independents, that is, people who consistently

support one party but are not necessarily willing to label themselves. A more telling piece of evidence regarding Fox News usage and vote choice concerns those individuals who intended to change their vote in the presidential election in 2004 from 2000. Data from mid-October 2004 indicate that 5 percent of voters in the sample intended to change their vote for president from Democrat to Republican or vice versa (in relation to their vote in 2000). This probability of changing one's vote is modeled in Table 8, where the first column estimates the probability of being an intended Bush voter in 2004 who actually voted for Al Gore in 2000. The second column estimates the probability of being an intended Kerry voter in 2004 who voted for George W. Bush in 2000.[9] As the findings indicate, Fox News watchers have a higher probability of changing their intended vote from Gore in 2000 to Bush in 2004. Thus, when controlling for other variables, the Fox News audience has a significantly greater chance of shifting its vote from Gore in 2000 to Bush in 2004 than non-Fox News watchers. CNN, on the other hand, has no statistically significant relationship with the probability that an individual would change his or her vote in one direction or the other.

A surprising finding is that exposure to network news is also significantly associated with a higher probability of shifting a vote from Democrat in 2000 to Republican in 2004. This is the only finding from this analysis that illustrates a similarity between the Fox and network news audiences. This finding also offers evidence that the so-called liberal network news broadcasts are unable to move potential swing voters to the left. If anything, those viewers are moving to the right.[10]

The findings presented above confirm the proposed hypotheses, and also demonstrate attitudinal and behavior fragmentation of the television news audiences. The implication is that these audiences hold different views of the same political world. Indeed, this appears to be the case. The results listed in Table 9 use data from late 2004 to show that the Fox News audience has a different perception than others regarding the state of events at home and abroad.[11] These findings confirm Hypothesis 6. Even when controlling for party identification, the first column of Table 9 indicates that Fox News watchers are significantly more likely to think the war in Iraq is going "very well." A person who uses Fox News as his or her primary source of

[9]The frequency of switching one's presidential vote from Democrat in 2000 to Republican in 2004 is a rare event (5 percent of the sample). Thus, to ensure that the distribution of the dependent variable did not bias the estimates, the models were replicated using the rare events estimation procedure developed by King and Zeng (1999). The replicated models did not produce results significantly different from the initial logit model.

[10]Exposure to MSNBC had to be dropped from the logit analysis presented in Table 8, as the MSNBC variable predicted failure perfectly. This is not surprising given the rare occurrence of switching one's vote over a four-year period (only 5 percent of the sample) and the small number of individuals who rely on MSNBC as their primary source of political information (2.8 percent of the sample).

[11]Data were accessed from the Pew Research Center's December 2004 Political "Typology" Survey, release date May 10, 2004.

TABLE 8

Intended Vote Switch by Media Exposure

	Intended to Switch Vote from . . .	
	Gore in 2000 to Bush in 2004	Bush in 2000 to Kerry in 2004
Fox News most	1.90	0.08
	(0.70)***	(0.55)
CNN most	0.74	0.69
	(0.92)	(0.45)
Network most	1.33	0.40
	(0.65)**	(0.38)
Party ID	−0.02	0.30
	(0.12)	(0.10)***
Sex	−1.05	0.26
	(0.46)***	(0.31)
Age	−0.00	0.01
	(0.01)	(0.00)
Education	0.08	−0.06
	(0.14)	(0.10)
Race	−0.35	0.39
	(0.55)	(0.46)
Income	0.10	0.09
	(0.10)	(0.07)
Constant	−4.92	6.01
	(1.29)***	(0.96)***
LR x^2	17.26**	18.66**
N	1,318	1,318

*$p<0.10$; **$p<0.05$; ***$p<0.01$ (two tailed).

NOTE: Cell entries are logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

information has a 0.12 ($\pm$ 0.03) probability of agreeing that the war is going very well, while a nonwatcher has just a 0.05 ($\pm$ 0.01) probability of thinking the same thing. This relationship is not significant for any of the other television news audiences. Furthermore, the second set of estimates in Table 9 shows that the Fox News and CNN audiences have opposing views on how politically divided the U.S. public is. Compared to other audiences, Fox News watchers are less likely to agree that the U.S. public has become more politically divided in recent years. Based on the estimates, a Fox News watcher has a 0.63 ($\pm$ 0.05) probability of agreeing that the country is more divided than it used to be, while a CNN watcher has a 0.77 ($\pm$ 0.05) probability of thinking the same thing. This finding illustrates that these audiences have different views of the current state of politics in the United States. Although there is no way of examining which view is the more "correct" perception, the divergence is evident and suggests that these

TABLE 9

Attitudes on Iraq and Perceived Political Polarization by Media Exposure

	Believe Iraq War is Going "Very Well"[a]	Believe U.S. is More Politically Divided than in the Past[b]
Fox News most	0.89	− 0.48
	(0.22)***	(0.23)**
CNN most	0.46	0.20
	(0.29)	(0.29)
MSNBC most	− 0.28	0.17
	(0.75)	(0.53)
Network most	0.27	0.00
	(0.23)	(0.20)
Party ID	− 0.54	0.22
	(0.07)***	(0.05)***
Sex	0.53	− 0.15
	(0.18)***	(0.16)
Age	0.00	0.00
	(0.00)	(0.00)*
Race	− 0.32	0.01
	(0.27)	(0.23)
Education	− 0.07	0.00
	(0.06)	(0.05)
Income	− 0.02	− 0.06
	(0.04)	(0.04)
Constant	− 0.83	0.28
	(0.50)*	(0.46)
LR x^2	125.18***	44.34***
N	1,679	806

[a]Question asked: "How well is the U.S. military effort in Iraq going?" (1 = very well; 0 = other response).

[b]Question asked: "What's your view . . . Do you think the country is more politically divided these days than in the past, or not?" (1 = more divided; 0 = not more divided).

*$p<0.10$; **$p<0.05$; ***$p<0.01$ (two tailed).

NOTE: Cell entries are logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

different audiences have different views of reality. The conclusion discusses possible implications.

Conclusion

Decades of intense rhetoric regarding bias in the media have taken their toll on the mass public. Americans are leery of trusting the mainstream media, and evidence presented in this analysis indicates that different television news audiences have different attitudes toward the media and the political world. Although a limited number of outlets constrained people's

choices in the past, the modern media environment offers an unprecedented number of news options. This is certainly the case for television. In 1992, over 60 percent of Americans reported watching broadcast network news on a regular basis. By 2004, this percentage was cut in half as more accessible and user-friendly options emerged on cable (Pew Research Center, 2004).

The main beneficiary of this fragmentation of the television news audience is the Fox News Channel, and Fox News is now one of the most popular news sources in the United States. This study shows that a major factor behind the success of Fox News is the hostile media effect. Individuals with negative perceptions of mainstream media are increasingly turning to Fox News as their primary source of news on national and international events.

Hostility toward the media is not the only attribute that makes the Fox News audience unique. This analysis illustrates a number of attitudinal and behavior differences as well, and these differences persist even when controlling for party identification. The use of Fox News as a primary source of information is significantly associated with a higher tendency to subscribe to negative stereotypes of Democratic leaders and reject negative stereotypes of Republican leaders. More importantly, this analysis also shows that vote choice is associated with Fox News usage as well as with CNN watching, and it also shows that the Fox News and CNN audiences perceive the current state of domestic and international affairs differently.

The implications of these findings are relevant to the ongoing debate regarding political polarization in the United States. Evidence from prior research indicates that political elites have grown more divided in recent years, but the public remains less polarized (Fiorina et al., 2004; Forgette, 2003). In the past, the homogenized television news environment gave the mass public a greater ability to hear rhetoric from both sides of an issue and often take a more moderate perspective. However, as negative feelings toward the media persist, individuals continue to take advantage of the fragmented media environment and find sources of news that fit better with their own political views. Recent research indicates that some of the more popular alternatives to traditional news, such as the Fox News Channel, might be portraying a picture of the political world that differs from other sources (see Aday, Livingston, and Hebert, 2005; Kull, 2003; Morris, 2005; Morris and Francia, 2005). Particularly, this past research indicates that Fox News is covering political events from a perspective that favors the Bush Administration, the Republican Party, and their agenda.

The findings from this analysis do not address content, nor do they empirically prove that exposure to Fox News *causes* an individual's political perspectives to be altered. The findings in this article do, however, suggest that the Fox News audience is indeed more favorable toward Bush, and has greater hostility toward his opposition, even when controlling for party identification. Also of interest is the finding that, when compared to other audiences, Fox News watchers are more apt to think the war in Iraq is

progressing well and less likely to think the U.S. public has become more politically divided in recent years. Which of the audiences is more or less "correct" is a subject empirical research cannot tackle. The significance of this particular study is the illustration that different news audiences have different perceptions of the media, political leaders, and the state of current events.

As viewers pursue news sources that are more tailored to their own political beliefs, the probability of exposure to divergent points of view decreases. Thus, Americans are getting different versions of the same issues and events, which may hinder the chances of political moderation and compromise among the mass public. This phenomenon exposes a possible irony of the fragmented media era: as the number of available news sources increases, the likelihood that the public is exposed to counterattitudinal perspectives might actually decrease. Future research should explore this possibility.

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