Political Persuasion and Attitude Change


CHAPTER 3

News Media Impact on the Ingredients of Presidential Evaluations: A Program of Research on the Priming Hypothesis

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Since the 1920s, social scientists in the United States have been concerned with the effects of the mass media on citizens' attitudes and behaviors. Initially, the fear that the news media could be a powerful propaganda tool led researchers to explore the persuasive impact of media messages (Roberts and Mackoby 1985). However, in 1960, Klapper reviewed the existing body of available research and concluded that the media do not in fact persuade individuals to change their attitudes but rather simply reinforce attitudes already in place. Support for this conclusion comes from investigations undertaken during World War II as part of a U.S. Army attempt to inculcate new worldviews (Hovland, Lumsdaine, and Sheffield 1949), studies of presidential debates (Katz and Feldman 1962; Sears and Chaffee 1979), studies of the television series "Roots" (Har and Robinson 1978; Ball-Rokeach, Grebe, and Rokeach 1981) and "Roots" (e.g., Patterson and McClure 1976).

The psychological process of interest in this research, persuasion, presumably occurs when individuals decide to change an attitude in response to a message advocating a particular position or point of view. This can occur either because an individual finds the arguments contained in the message to be compelling or because the source of the message is viewed as credible (e.g., because of his or her expertise or attractiveness). In general, such attitude change is rare because preexisting attitudes guide individuals' exposure to and interpretation of media messages. Specifically, people are usually exposed only to attitude-consistent media messages (see Sears and Freedman 1965; Frey 1986), and attitude-inconsistent messages are typically interpreted and recalled in ways that reinforce rather than challenge existing attitudes (see, e.g., Cooper and Jahoda 1947; Lord, Ross, and Lepper 1979; Roberts 1985). Furthermore, attitudes changed as a result of perceiving the source of the message to be credible or attractive are unstable and as a result do not persist over time (Petty and Cacioppo 1986).
However, much research challenges the assumption that the media have no effects at all, by showing that they can influence attitudes by more subtle mechanisms (see, e.g., MacKuen 1981). Even as early as the 1920s, Lippsmann (1920, 1922, 1925) proposed that the news media may affect public opinion by focusing attention on some national problems and political issues while ignoring others. This idea has come to be known as the agenda-setting hypothesis: media coverage of an issue increases the national importance that Americans ascribe to it (see, e.g., Keoski 1993; McClosky 1993). A great deal of evidence offers support for this hypothesis, from longitudinal analyses matching survey data to content analyses of media coverage (e.g., Baur and Iyengar 1985), and from laboratory experiments that systematically manipulated media exposure (Iyengar and Kinder 1987).

Building on the notion of agenda-setting, Iyengar, Kinder, Peters, and Krosnick (1984) proposed another hypothesis regarding subtle media impact, this time on assessments of presidential performance. Such evaluations have important political implications. A president’s power in Washington depends partly on how favorably he is evaluated by the nation, because popular presidents tend to have things their way with Congress. Thus, if the media do, indeed, shape what individuals consider important, they may alter the basis of judgments about presidential performance. More specifically, by focusing on some issues and not others, the news may determine the standards by which a president’s performance is evaluated and may, as a result, provoke surges and declines in presidential popularity. If this notion, dubbed the priming hypothesis, is correct, then it identifies a subtle mechanism by which the media alter the conduct of public policy-making.

In this chapter, we will describe a program of research on the priming notion. First, we will describe the five hypotheses that form the core of this work. Then we will review two laboratory tests of these hypotheses and two survey studies of them. Finally, we will highlight the implications of our findings for future research. As will become apparent, our original ideas regarding priming were quite straightforward and were largely empirically supported. But as we progressed through our investigations, our results began to paint an increasingly complex picture of how the media shape presidential appraisal.

Priming

The notion of priming is based upon psychological research showing that when people make decisions, they rarely take into consideration the entire array of available relevant evidence. Rather, because of the cognitive burden imposed by a complete and comprehensive information search and integration process, people tend to “satisfice” rather than “optimize” (see Simon 1957, Simon and Stedry 1968). That is, they often derive their decisions from limited subsets of the available information, so as to make satisfactory judgments without expending a great deal of effort.

According to the theory of priming, satisfying occurs in political decision making just as it does for other sorts of judgments. When Americans are asked to evaluate the job performance of their president, an optimal assessment might entail gauging the president’s performance in a wide array of policy domains and integrating those domain-specific judgments into an overall summary. More likely, according to the theory of priming, would be a satisficing approach: assessing presidential performance in only a small sample of policy domains.

Which particular pieces of information get used, according to the priming hypothesis, may be those that come to mind quickly and automatically for an individual—those that are most accessible (Higgins and King 1981; Wey and Hartwick 1980; see also Taller and Feldman 1992). And the accessibility of various policy domains are in turn presumed to be determined importantly by news media coverage. Issues that have been the subject of extensive attention on television and radio and in newspapers may be particularly likely to come to citizens’ minds shortly thereafter and thereby enjoy enhanced impact on presidential evaluations. In contrast, topics that have been addressed only minimally in the news media are presumably rarely primed and are therefore likely to play little if any role in presidential assessment processes. Hence, by calling attention to some matters while ignoring others, news media may alter the standards by which the president is evaluated.

This notion of priming proposes quite a different mechanism by which the media may affect attitudes than the traditional persuasion approach proposed. Whereas persuasion focuses on media messages advocating particular positions, priming can be provoked simply by a news story devoting attention to an issue without advocating a position. And whereas persuasion is thought to result from effortful decision making about a message’s likely veracity, priming presumably occurs as a result of automatic and effortless processes of spreading activation in people’s minds.

The Gradient Hypotheses

In order to understand precisely what attitudes will be primed by what stimuli, it is useful to think of a person’s stable of political attitudes as structured in memory within an associative network (Anderson 1983; Collins and Loftus 1975). In such a network, political attitudes can be thought of as nodes, each one having some inherent strength. The strength of a node is presumed to be a
function of prior activation of it (see, e.g., Anderson 1983). The more one has thought about an attitude in the past, the stronger its node will be.

Within this representational structure, nodes are linked to one another. For instance, a person's attitude toward affirmative action may be linked to his or her attitude toward school integration. Such linkages evolve when the attitudes are thought about simultaneously and when one attitude is perceived to imply, support, or contradict the other (Judd and Downing 1990; Judd et al. 1991). Attitudes that are not conceptually related in some way are unlikely to become linked.

When a specific attitude is called to mind, activation of its node will spread to other attitudes to which it is linked. The stronger the activated node, the more spreading activation would be expected. Consequently, we would expect that priming induced by a news story would occur mostly for attitudes that are directly relevant to the story. For example, news stories about Presi
dent Clinton’s economic plan would presumably activate attitudes about eco
nomic performance most strongly. However, we might also observe spreading activation to, say, attitudes about health care policies, because they have economic implications. Thus, there might be a gradient of priming effects, decreasing in strength as attitudes become more and more remote from those being directly activated by a story.

At the same time, as media attention to certain issues enhances their impact, other issues are likely to see their impact diminish, for two reasons. First, people have neither the ability nor the motivation to comprehensively incorporate every potentially relevant issue into their presidential evaluations. As some issues are brought into the foreground of people's thinking by the news media, others will be pushed into the cognitive background. Second, because television news broadcasts are limited in length and newspaper front pages are of a fixed size, they can only focus on a small set of issues on any given day. Therefore, when the media devote attention to certain issues, they must of necessity devote less discussion to others. Consequently, priming it
likely to be hydraulic in nature; increases in the impact of some issues should be accompanied by decreases in the impact of other, unrelated issues.

However, simply priming attitudes does not mean they will have en
hanced impact on all political judgments. Rather, the impact of accessible attitudes may be great or negligible depending on their perceived relevance to the judgment at hand. Information regarding a person's intelligence may be largely ignored when evaluating that same person's honesty, for example (Hamilton and Fallot 1974). Therefore, increasing the accessibility of some information will influence only those judgments to which the information is relevant, and only to that degree.

When studying presidential evaluations, it is useful to distinguish among three types of judgments: evaluations of the president's general performances,
more resistant one should be, because knowledge helps one to withstand influence. Individuals who have a lot of knowledge about politics presumably have relatively crystallized calculi by which they make evaluations of a president's performance. Because these people are practiced at making such judgments, the weights they give to various pieces of information may become established and justified by knowledge about particular issues and politics in general. Consequently, knowledgeable people may be especially resistant to temporary increases in accessibility of one or another policy domain. Individuals with little knowledge, on the other hand, are presumably not practiced at making presidential performance evaluations and probably do not have crystallized formulas for making such judgments. Therefore, they should be highly responsive to increases in accessibility of policy domains emphasized by the media.

Overview

The two experimental studies (Iyengar et al. 1984a; and two survey studies (Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Krosnick and Brannen 1995) we will describe tested all these hypotheses. We expected the media to influence only those aspects of public opinion that were already implicated by a story and that the priming effect would be moderated by the relevance of the news stories to the judgment being made. In addition, we hypothesized that media impact would be greatest on people with the highest levels of expertise and attention and the lowest levels of knowledge about politics.

Laboratory Study 1: Energy Policy

Both of our laboratory studies were conducted while Jimmy Carter was president. The first study tested the basic priming hypothesis as well as the consequence-accuracy hypothesis. Yale undergraduates viewed one of three 35-minute sets of network television news stories. The sets of stories varied levels of exposure to energy stories. Some subjects viewed a set of stories that included six about energy, totaling 16 minutes (high exposure condition); others viewed three energy stories, totaling 8.5 minutes (in- mediate exposure condition), while others viewed no energy stories (no exposure condition). The energy stories were distributed evenly throughout the set, surrounded by stories about other contemporary problems.

After viewing one of the three sets of news stories, subjects completed a questionnaire that assessed (a) judgments of President Carter's performance in each of the key specific areas, including "implementing a national energy policy"; (b) judgments of Carter's overall performance; and (c) judgments of his competence and integrity.

As expected, the effect of energy performance on ratings of Carter's

overall performance was significantly larger in the intermediate and high exposure conditions than in the no exposure condition (see Table 1). Thus, individuals who watched news stories that emphasized energy policy weighed their evaluations of Carter's overall performance more heavily than did those who watched no such stories. Contrary to the dosage hypothesis, however, no differences appeared between subjects in the intermediate and high exposure conditions, which suggests that even moderate amounts of activation are sufficient to maximize priming.

Consistent with the consequence gradient hypothesis, priming of energy performance ratings had more influence on evaluations of Carter's overall job performance than on judgments of his competence and integrity evaluations (see table 1). However, this gap was bigger than we expected: in fact, the impact of the news stories on the latter two judgments was negligible. Thus, energy stories made attitudes about Carter's energy performance more acceptable and thereby enhanced their influence on overall evaluations of his job performance, but they did not alter competence or integrity judgments.

Thus, the results of study 1 were consistent with both the priming and gradient hypotheses, though not the dosage hypothesis. To explore the generalizability of these findings to other issues and subject populations and to examine the role of political knowledge, we conducted a second laboratory study.

Laboratory Study 2: Energy, Defense, and Inflation

Subjects in our second study were adult residents of New Haven, Connecticut. As in study 1, these individuals viewed a set of 12 television news stories lasting again approximately 40 minutes. The amount of exposure to stories about three target issues (energy, defense, and inflation) varied across individuals. Subjects in the high exposure condition saw six stories about

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1. Impact of Energy Performance Ratings on Overall Evaluations of President Carter in Study 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Condition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Evaluations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Table entries are unstandardized regression coefficients.
* p < .05.
** p < .001.
either energy, defense, or inflation. Subjects in the intermediate exposure condition saw three stories about one of these issues, and some subjects saw no stories about each issue. After viewing the news stories, subjects completed the same basic measures as in study 1. In addition, subjects answered nine political knowledge questions; three on each issue (energy, defense, and inflation).

As expected, subjects who viewed news stories on a target issue weighed President Carter's performance on that issue more heavily in deriving overall performance evaluations than did subjects who saw no stories on that issue (see Table 2). Thus, exposure strengthened the relationship between evaluations of Carter's performance on the specific issue and evaluations of his overall performance. Again, as in study 1, no differences appeared between subjects in the intermediate and high exposure conditions, which reinforces the notion that even moderate dosage can maximize priming.

Consistent with the consequence gradient hypothesis, judgments of Carter's competence and integrity were less influenced by the television story content manipulations. In fact, as Table 2 illustrates, these latter effects were almost always nonexistent. Finally, as anticipated, subjects who were less knowledgeable about an issue were consistently more influenced by the priming manipulation than were more knowledgeable subjects (see Table 3).

In sum, study 2 replicated the results of study 1 with a more heterogeneous sample of subjects. In addition, the results of study 2 were consistent with the hypothesis that political knowledge constitutes a basis for resisting priming effects.

The Iran-Contra Study

Next, we moved outside of the laboratory to evaluate how well these hypotheses explain presidential evaluations as they evolve naturally among representa-

tive samples of adults. Our first such attempt focused on the Iran-Contra scandal (Krosnick and Kinder 1990).

The Iran-Contra drama was ignited on November 25, 1986, when Attorney General Edwin Meese announced to a national television audience that funds obtained from the secret sale of weapons to Iran had been channeled to the Contras fighting to overthrow the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. In the months following this revelation, the news media were virtually consumed with the scandal. Along with this media attention came a major decline in President Ronald Reagan's approval ratings. The media's focus on the Iran-Contra scandal, as well as the priming hypothesis, should have enhanced the impact of attitudes toward U.S. policy in Central America on the public's views of President Reagan. Because citizens' attitudes toward U.S. intervention in Central America during this time were quite negative, Reagan's approval ratings would be expected to decline as a result, just as they did (Krosnick and Kinder 1990).

In order to test the priming hypothesis in this context, we analyzed data from the 1986 National Election Study. In late 1986, face-to-face interviews were conducted with a national probability sample of more than 2,000 U.S. adults, 1,086 of whom completed Form A of the questionnaire. This form included elaborated assessments of views of President Reagan as well as a battery of foreign affairs questions and standard questions about the campaign, the candidates, parties, national problems, policy attitudes, and demographics.

To test the priming hypothesis, we estimated regression equations predicting Reagan's overall performance from attitudes toward U.S. aid to the Contras and involvement in Central America, U.S. involvement in the affairs of other countries in general, or what we call isolationism, U.S. strength in the world, the health of the national economy, and federal aid to blacks. Such an equation was estimated once for respondents who were interviewed before the November 25 revelation (the prerevelation group) and again for those who were interviewed after that date (the postrevelation group).

As anticipated, attitudes toward aid to the Contras and involvement in
and fenced black attitudes were both strong among less knowledgeable respondents and were reduced to nonsignificance among respondents high in knowledge. Interestingly, the priming effect on isolationist attitudes appears to be confined to the less knowledgeable respondents. This may reflect the fact that such individuals were more likely to have such attitudes and to see them as linked to more specific attitudes associated with particular regions of the world. Thus, it seems less knowledge about the content of the news coverage, whereas more knowledgeable individuals were influenced at a more abstract level.

The Gulf Crisis Study

Just as the news media's focus on the Iran-Contra scandal altered the standings of Bush and Reagan, so did the Gulf War. In 1990, when the war began, Bush's approval ratings were moderate at best. However, after the swift and decisive victory and the liberation of Kuwait, Bush's approval ratings soared. The second Gallup poll, taken in December 1990, showed a dramatic shift in public opinion. Bush's approval rating had jumped to 80%, with only 14% disapproving. The Gulf War was seen as a clear victory, and Bush was credited with the success. This positive shift in public opinion had a significant impact on the political landscape, influencing the presidential election of 1992.

The results were also consistent with the view that the laboratory studies tapping into the more primary emotions of fear and disgust were less effective than those tapping into more primary emotions of fear and disgust. The findings also support the idea that the priming effect of the Iran-Contra scandal was not due to a general increase in political awareness, but rather to a more specific emotional response to the news.

Finally, as expected, the Iran-Contra scandal had a substantial priming effect on people who already held relatively negative views of Reagan. Specifically, the principal effect of the Iran-Contra scandal was on people who already had negative views of Reagan. For people who had already formed negative opinions of Reagan, the scandal reinforced these views, whereas it had less of an impact on people who had more neutral or even positive views of Reagan. This selective priming effect highlights the importance of understanding individual differences in political attitudes and the potential for priming to influence those attitudes.

Table 4. Evaluations of the Impact of Policy Attitudes on the Iran-Contra Revolution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option Domain</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>Significance</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Covert-Covered America</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic assessments</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approval</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: From the data in Table 3, p. 10.
Middle East and U.S.-initiated air attacks on Iraq beginning in mid-January 1991, the news media became obsessed with these events and provided nearly nonstop coverage of them for weeks. Interestingly, at the same time, Bush’s approval ratings increased to a high of 90 percent (see Krosnick and Brannon 1993).

According to the theory of priming, the dramatic shift in news coverage at the onset of the war and continued focusing on the crisis for months after the war may have led individuals to weigh attitudes toward Bush’s Persian Gulf performance more heavily when they evaluated his overall performance. Because most individuals approved of Bush’s Persian Gulf decisions, this could partially explain the increase in his approval rating beginning in mid-January.

We tested this possibility using data from the 1990–1991 National Election Panel Study of the Political Consequences of War. For this survey, a nationally representative sample of 1,385 U.S. adults was interviewed in late fall 1990, before the major events of the war and the dramatic increase in media attention to the Gulf crisis. These individuals were reinterviewed in summer 1991, long after the military strike was completed. During both the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinion Domain</th>
<th>Pre-revolution</th>
<th>Post-revolution</th>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low-Knowledge Respondents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contra—Central America</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolation</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. strength</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic indicators</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aid to blacks</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>191</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-Knowledge Respondents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contra—Central America</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolation</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. strength</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic indicators</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aid to blacks</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>105</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: Krosnick and Kinder 1990.

Media Impact on Ingredients of Presidential Evaluations

pre- and postwar surveys, respondents were asked questions gauging evaluations of President Bush’s overall job performance and his handling of the Gulf crisis, foreign affairs generally, and the domestic economy. To estimate priming, we computed regression equations predicting the first of these attitudes with the latter three.

Consistent with the priming hypothesis, the impact of Bush’s Persian Gulf crisis performance on his overall evaluations increased after the war (see table 7). And consistent with the target gradient hypothesis, the impact of foreign policy performance and domestic economic performance did not change significantly. Thus, it seems that, for the nation as a whole, news media attention to the war increased the weight people attached to Bush’s handling of the Gulf crisis in deriving their overall performance evaluations without shifting the impact of some other ingredients.

This latter finding is interesting, partly because it is conceivable that focusing the American people’s attention on this conflict overseas might have increased attention to other political attitudes as well. That is, when a war occurs and news coverage of it is intense, it may stimulate thinking about related issues on which the conduct of the war has effects. At the very least, because the Gulf War involved complex coordination of efforts by many countries worldwide, Americans might have become more attentive to and concerned about U.S. relations with these various other countries. Instead, consistent with the experimental studies, our results suggest that no such widening of attention occurred.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Performance Domain</th>
<th>Pre-war</th>
<th>Post-war</th>
<th>Pre-Post Difference</th>
<th>Significance of Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gulf crisis</td>
<td>.21***</td>
<td>.30***</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign relations</td>
<td>.22***</td>
<td>.21***</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economy</td>
<td>.20**</td>
<td>.27***</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>1050</td>
<td>1050</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Krosnick and Brannon 1993.

*p < .05, two-tailed test.
Exposure and Attention

So where does this leave us? First, across all four studies, we have seen consistent evidence of a priming effect linkages between the news and an increasing willingness to use military force in response to terrorism. While this is somewhat surprising, we can also see that the priming effect, at least in this case, may be more important in influencing attitudes rather than policy decisions. Consider the results of the first study, where priming was manipulated by reading an editorial in the New York Times advocating the use of military force. In this case, priming was found to have a significant impact on individuals' willingness to support the use of force, even after controlling for other factors such as political ideology or prior exposure to the issue. In the other three studies, the priming effect was also found to be significant, but the impact was smaller, suggesting that other factors may also influence individuals' attitudes toward military force.

The finding that priming can influence attitudes, but not necessarily policy decisions, is important for several reasons. First, it highlights the potential for media to shape public opinion in ways that can influence political decisions, even if those decisions are not directly affected by the priming effect. Second, it suggests that priming may be an effective way to influence public opinion on complex issues, such as the use of military force in response to terrorism. Finally, it raises important questions about the role of the media in shaping public opinion and the potential for media to influence political decisions in ways that may not be immediately apparent.

In conclusion, the findings of this study suggest that priming can have a significant impact on individuals' willingness to support the use of military force in response to terrorism. However, it is important to note that the priming effect, while significant, is not the only factor influencing individuals' attitudes on this issue. Other factors, such as political ideology or prior exposure to the issue, also play a role in shaping public opinion. Therefore, while priming may be an important factor to consider when evaluating the impact of the media on public opinion, it is important to consider other factors as well.
presidential performance evaluation. So I'll reduce its weight a bit.' This could explain why weaker priming effects appeared among the most attentive citizens.

There is one other possible explanation for the attention and exposure findings as well (see Hastie and Park 1986; Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989). People who are highly attentive and exposed to the news of political events are likely to think a great deal about political affairs. This extensive thought may lead them to form a set of general political evaluations (e.g., regarding a president's overall job performance) stored in memory and to continually update them as new relevant information is acquired. Therefore, if asked by a pollster to report an assessment of a president's performance, these individuals need only retrieve and report these previously formed evaluations. Such judgments have a great deal of inertia, because they are based on large sets of previously acquired information, so new pieces of information have only small impact on them. Consequently, recent news media content might have relatively little effect on highly attentive and exposed citizens.

In contrast, citizens low in attention and exposure are unlikely to have such general political evaluations stored in memory. They will most likely be unable to respond to an inquiring pollster by recalling whatever they can about presidential performance and deriving an overall evaluation on the spot. As the priming hypothesis suggests, instead of drawing upon expansive arrays of performance domains, these individuals are most likely to consider only the small handful of performance domains that come to mind most easily. Thus, lower levels of exposure and attention would again be associated with the greater priming effects because a memory-based judgment strategy would be employed.

Knowledge

In our two laboratory studies, we found low knowledge respondents to be more susceptible to priming. But when we controlled for exposure and attention, higher knowledge was found to facilitate priming in the Gulf War Study; whereas no knowledge effect was present in the Iran-Contra Study. One possible explanation for this discrepancy goes as follows. In the laboratory studies, presidential evaluations were assessed immediately after exposure, and knowledge was presumably positively associated with resistance. Therefore, priming was stronger among the least knowledgeable (see the top line in figure 1). But in the Gulf War Study, presidential evaluations were measured long after the media exposure of interest. The news media content would only affect these evaluations if it was stored in people's memories and could be retrieved at the time of judgment. Thus, factors that enhance the likelihood of storage and retrieval should enhance media priming effects, and political knowledge may be one such factor.

In general, the more schematically organized knowledge one has about a domain, the more efficiently and effectively one can make sense of new information, find an appropriate place to incorporate it into one's memory, and retrieve it sometime later (see Fish and Taylor 1991, 121–32). The more knowledge one has about politics, the more quickly and easily one can make sense of a news story, and the more efficiently one can store it and retrieve it from an elaborate and organized mental filing system. Therefore, when there is a delay between media exposure and attitude assessment, as in the Gulf War Study, knowledge might facilitate priming by facilitating retention over time.

The bottom line in figure 1 illustrates how the resistance and retention functions of knowledge might combine with one another. When presidential evaluations are measured a significant period of time after media exposure, the priming effect decays a great deal among low-knowledge individuals (shown on the left side), whereas it decays only a small amount among high-knowledge people (shown on the right side). Conversely, after a delay, the priming effect that remains is stronger among the latter individuals than among the former, even though the opposite was true immediately after exposure.

In the Iran-Contra Study, presidential evaluations were assessed after a relatively short delay of days or weeks. After this moderate delay, there could
be no effect of knowledge on the strength of the priming effect, as the middle line of Figure 1 illustrates.

Directions for Future Research

The research we have outlined suggests a number of useful directions for future research. First, the speculations we have offered can all be tested in future laboratory experiments manipulating dilution, awareness, delay, and other factors. In addition, future work might attempt to test the mechanism of priming explicitly. Although it has been widely assumed that the relevant mechanism is accessibility, its mediational role has never been documented. One could expose individuals to news stories on a particular geopolitical issue and assess impact on the accessibility of attitudes on that issue directly (see, e.g., Fario and Williams 1986). One could also see whether increased accessibility is responsible for any increased impact of the issue on presidential evaluations.

Although accessibility may turn out to be the sole mediator of priming, it is also possible that agenda setting mediates priming. That is, increased accessibility of an issue may increase the likelihood that people will view that issue as nationally important. And that belief in national importance may cause increased weight to be attached to the issue in presidential evaluations. This, too, can be tested in future studies.

Coda

If accessibility mediates priming, our results imply a rather unflattering view of the American public. Indeed, they would hark back to the first phase of media research, in which citizens were viewed as passive recipients of "hypodermic" injections from the media. And if people are simply victims of the architecture of their minds, then the attitudes they express toward presidential performance should probably not play the central role in policy-making that they do.

NOTES

1. Our conceptions of dosage and resistance are a bit different from treatments of similar concepts by others. For example, although we view political knowledge simply as a basis for resistance, Zaller (1987, chap. 2 in this book) views knowledge as a measure of political awareness, which he defines as the confluence of high exposure to political information, high attention to that information, and good understanding of it, yielding high levels of absorption (see Zaller 1992, 21). We believe that exposure and attention can be conceptualized to distinct from the amount of knowledge a person has stored in memory, that these various constructs can be effectively measured separately, and that understanding their effects may require multivariate statistical analyses using all of such measures simultaneously. In such analyses, we treat knowledge as a measure of just that: the amount of political information a person has stored in memory.

2. We did not measure attention in either of the two laboratory studies, so we could not control for it.

3. In this study, we combined respondents' answers to questions about their frequency of watching television news in general, watching television news about the 1990 elections, reading newspaper in general, and reading newspaper stories about the 1990 elections to yield an index of general exposure to the news media. Attention was assessed using answers to a question regarding how much attention respondents had paid to news about the Gulf War.

REFERENCES


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