
31 Anatomy of News Media Priming

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On January 16, 1991, President George Bush began the U.S. military attack on Iraq (in alliance with various other Western nations) that became known as the Gulf War. Over a period of just 43 days, the allied forces succeeded in driving Iraq from Kuwait, and only 148 soldiers gave their lives in the process. Thus, the Gulf War appeared to be a clear military triumph for the president, and the American public's approval of his job performance soared to an all-time high.

Just 21 months later, however, George Bush lost his 1992 re-election bid for the White House to Bill Clinton, although little had changed in the country during that time interval. Why did President Bush not easily win the election based on his success in the Gulf? According to a sign on President Clinton's campaign manager James Carville's office wall, celebrated in the film *The War Room*, it was the economy, stupid. And indeed, according to a *New York Times* poll (November 4, 1992), many Americans interviewed after the election said they had voted against Bush because they were disappointed with his handling of the U.S. economy. If this was in fact the reason for his defeat, however, why had Americans apparently forgotten completely about the Gulf? What forces provoked the transformation of people's enthusiastic cheers of support for President Bush in 1991 into grumbling disapproval in 1992?

In this chapter, we will explain what we think took place in 1992, pointing our fingers squarely at the news media. Walter Lippmann (1922) described news coverage by newspapers and magazines in the early 1920s as like "the beam of a searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of darkness into vision"

(Lippmann, 1922, p. 229). We believe that when the contemporary news media's searchlights move from one topic to another, they can produce dramatic changes in the American public's evaluations of their president's job performance, even when the news stories never mention the president at all.

The process by which the media produce these changes is called "priming." In the pages to follow, we will tell you what priming is, how we think it occurs, and which sorts of people are most likely to be influenced by the media in this way. Then, we will describe four studies we have performed to document priming and to illuminate its psychological and political dynamics. In reading this, you may be surprised to learn how the news media may have been influencing your own political judgments, even without your being aware of it.

What Is Priming?

When people make decisions in the course of their daily lives, they rarely consider all of the relevant evidence that might be used to reach an optimal conclusion. Rather, because doing so would usually take more time and effort than people have available to devote to a decision, they usually make decisions based on subsets of the available information. For example, when deciding which college to attend, you could have considered various schools' costs, their locations, their student-teacher ratios, what majors they offer, their prestige, the leadership opportunities they offer, the types of jobs graduates obtain, the classes they require students to take, and so on. To get all this information on all the colleges you might consider, however, would be quite burdensome. Most people faced with this sort of situation choose to make "adequate" decisions based on only a few considerations, thus avoiding the expenditure of a great deal of time and effort. Making a choice in this way is called "satisficing."

Just as people satisfice when making decisions about colleges, they also do so when making political judgments. To decide how well the president is doing his job, a person could evaluate how well he has been handling all of the issues on which he has been working. This would be a very tough task, however, because presidents typically address a great many issues in very short periods of time. In his first year in office, for

example, President Clinton worked on a number of issues, including reform of the U.S. health care system, staffing of the U.S. military, abortion laws, reducing the deficit, appointments to his Cabinet, U.S. involvement in Somalia, the North American Free Trade Agreement, Supreme Court appointments, and more. A careful evaluator could have graded his handling of each of these issues and then averaged those grades together into an overall assessment. Most Americans, however, probably had neither the information nor the motivation to do such labor-intensive thinking. Instead, they probably satisfied by evaluating his handling of just a few issues.

The news media exert their influence on this process, we believe, by determining in part which issues people use in making their overall evaluations. In mid-1992, for example, the news media paid lots of attention to the U.S. economy (see Krosnick & Brannon, 1995), which probably led many Americans to think frequently about economic conditions, to talk with friends and family about them, and to believe that the economy was a significant issue on the political landscape. When deciding how good a job President Bush was doing, people were therefore probably especially inclined to bring the economy to mind as one consideration. If instead the media had been focusing on the triumph of the Gulf War during that period, Americans may have been inclined to evaluate him on that basis and to overlook the state of the domestic economy, considering the former to be the more significant current political issue. In this sense, we think, the issues the media choose to cover most end up being primed, meaning that they become the predominant bases for the public's evaluations of it's president.

How Specific Is the Impact of a Story?

If we are to understand the dynamics and political consequences of priming, one important question is how specific the impact of any particular story is. That is, does a story about a particular issue prime only that specific issue, or does it prime other issues as well? And if so, which other issues are primed and which are not?

Consider, for example, news media coverage of affirmative action in late 1995. Although there was a great deal of national debate about

affirmative action at that time, there was special media attention paid to a push by some residents of California to eliminate that state's affirmative action programs. Perhaps such stories primed only the proposed plan for California. These stories, however, might also have primed affirmative action as a more general issue for the nation as a whole. In addition, these stories might even have primed other, quite different issues if Americans perceived them to be related to affirmative action. For example, school busing programs to achieve integration might be perceived to be related to affirmative action because both are policies aimed at improving the conditions of minority group members. Therefore, news stories about affirmative action might prime school busing in some Americans' minds but not as strongly as these stories would presumably prime affirmative action.

What about a very different issue, such as inflation? Inflation is probably related to affirmative action very distantly, if at all. As such, we would not expect news coverage of affirmative action to prime inflation. In fact, extensive news coverage of affirmative action might even lead people to see inflation and other unrelated issues as less significant nationally, thus perhaps even reducing their impact on people's evaluations of a president's job performance. Because most people probably have neither the ability nor the motivation to evaluate the president based on a large number of policy domains, as some issues are brought into the foreground of people's minds (presumably as a result of news media coverage), others may be pushed into the background.

Does every story on nightly television news programs affect presidential evaluations by priming the issue explicitly discussed in the story? We suspect not, because to do so, a story must be relevant to the nation's political situation. For example, in 1994 and 1995, the American public was seemingly fixated on the O. J. Simpson trial, presumably because it received nearly nonstop coverage by the news media. "Is O. J. guilty?" debates occurred in the office and at the dinner table, with friends and with strangers, all across the country. It seems quite unlikely, however, that people based their evaluations of President Clinton's performance on this issue because the case was not directly relevant to presidential performance. This coverage may indeed, however, have primed related issues, such as race relations in America or the state of the U.S. criminal justice system, and thereby increased their impact on presidential evaluations.

Which Presidential Evaluations Are Influenced?

People make many different sorts of judgments about their president besides how good a job he is doing. Perhaps most obviously, people also judge a president's character, especially his competence and his integrity. A president's ability to get re-elected is based partly on how good a job he has been perceived as doing but also on how competent he seems to be and how much integrity he seems to have (Kinder 1986).

News media coverage of national policy issues (such as inflation, unemployment, international military actions, and so on) presumably affects evaluations of the president's general performance because all of these issues touch on domains of presidential responsibility. Coverage of such issues may also sometimes affect evaluations of presidential character, but probably not as much as it affects presidential performance evaluations. Whether or not the president can effectively solve a national problem depends only partly on his competence—a fact that most Americans probably recognize. Forces beyond his control, such as the Congress, U.S. businesses, and the governments of other countries around the world, also play significant roles in solving or creating national problems. Therefore, people may assess presidential competence only partly from how he has handled issues that have been in the news. News media coverage of national policy issues probably has even less impact on evaluations of a president's integrity, except when an issue is scandalous in nature.

Who Is Most Influenced?

If the media do, in fact, influence presidential evaluations, are certain types of people more vulnerable than others or are all people equally influenced? We suspect that under certain conditions, the media's influence is likely to be concentrated among a subset of individuals, namely, those who know the most about politics.

People who possess much political knowledge are especially capable of storing information obtained from even peripheral attention to a news story in what psychologists think of as elaborate filing systems in their memories. Therefore, these people are especially likely to be able to retrieve that information, perhaps even long after news coverage of the

issue has waned. Consequently, people who know much about politics may be particularly likely to manifest priming when there is a long delay between news coverage of an issue and the time when they evaluate the president's performance. When there is no such delay, however, knowledge in and of itself may not magnify priming.

Evidence of Priming

Now that we have outlined for you the theory of priming, we will describe four of the studies we have performed that document these processes. These studies examined the impact of news coverage on presidential evaluations both in the course of everyday life and in our laboratory. We begin where we started this chapter—with President George Bush and the Gulf War.

The Gulf War

As mentioned previously, President Bush enjoyed a spectacular increase in national popularity in early 1991. In October 1990, national surveys by the Gallup Organization and the CBS-*New York Times* team found that approximately 55% of the American public approved of President Bush's performance. This proportion then grew steadily, reaching a high of nearly 90% in March 1991. This surge in approval ratings occurred precisely when the U.S. news media were obsessed with the Persian Gulf War, about which we suspected most Americans felt quite positively. Therefore, the theory of priming suggested that President Bush's popularity may have risen because the media focused on an issue that played well for him.

To test this hypothesis, we analyzed survey data collected by the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center from a representative sample of American adults (for details of this study, see Krosnick & Brannon, 1993). These people were interviewed twice—once before the news media focused almost exclusively on the Gulf War (in the fall of 1990) and again after the constant barrage of coverage (in the summer of 1991). During these interviews, people were asked how they evaluated the president's performance in general and how they evaluated his handling of the Gulf War, international relations more generally, and the

domestic economy. Using a statistical technique called multiple regression, we were able to gauge the impact of these latter three specific evaluations on people's overall assessments of the president's job performance.

As expected, overall performance assessments were based only minimally on the president's handling of the Gulf crisis before the media coverage but were powerfully based on his handling of the crisis after the issue received extensive attention. Also as expected, most people evaluated the president's handling of the Gulf situation positively; therefore, increasing its impact made people's overall evaluations of his performance more positive. In this sense, President Bush's popularity soared not simply because the Gulf War was perceived as a successful effort. It was due as well to the news media's decision to focus on the Gulf.

Did the media's coverage of the Gulf War also affect the impact of other issues on evaluations of President Bush's overall job performance? It is conceivable that when a war occurs and news coverage of it is intense, thinking about related issues for which the conduct of the war has implications may be stimulated. At the very least, because the Gulf War involved a complex coordination of efforts by many countries around the world, media attention to the issue might have induced people to also consider U.S. relations with these various other countries. If this were so, then coverage of the Gulf War might have increased the impact of evaluations of President Bush's handling of international relations generally on overall job performance assessments. Interestingly, however, this was not the case. The impact of President Bush's handling of international relations was not affected by news media attention to the Gulf crisis. Apparently, thinking about the Gulf War did not provoke attention to other aspects of international relations.

In this light, it is not surprising that coverage of the Gulf War also did not affect the impact of President Bush's handling of the U.S. economy on overall evaluations of his job performance. Presumably, this is because the economy is even less directly linked to the Gulf War than international relations in general. This is therefore evidence of one of the limits of the media's influence—priming effects only appear for issues that are perceived to be directly relevant to the news stories.

People who were especially knowledgeable about politics manifested bigger increases in the impact of President Bush's Gulf War performance than did less knowledgeable individuals. This is presumably because knowledge facilitated memory of the media stories, and assessments of

the president's performance were made some time after news media coverage of the issue had waned.

The 1992 U.S. Presidential Election

Why didn't President Bush's tremendous popularity in the summer of 1991 catapult him to victory in the 1992 presidential election? One possibility is that after the news media moved their searchlights away from the U.S. victory in the Persian Gulf, they focused instead on an issue that negatively affected evaluations of President Bush's performance. In fact, this appears to have occurred: Although the domestic economy was nearly invisible in the media during the summer of 1991, it was a primary focus in September and October of 1992 (see Krosnick & Brannon, 1995). According to the theory of priming, this increase in news coverage of the domestic economy should have led citizens to think more about the issue, thus perhaps conferring upon it enhanced impact on presidential job performance assessments.

To test whether media focus on the economy caused the decline in President Bush's popularity, we analyzed survey data collected by the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center. In this survey, the people who had been interviewed in 1990 and 1991 in conjunction with the Gulf War were again interviewed in the fall of 1992, just before the November election. This allowed us to gauge the impact of assessments of President Bush's handling of the Gulf War, foreign relations in general, and the economy on overall performance evaluations after the media's searchlight was turned on the economy.

The impact of economic performance judgments for overall performance evaluations was nearly double in 1992 what it had been in 1991. Thus, enhanced media attention to the economy increased its impact on assessments of the president's performance. Had the media focus remained on the Gulf, perhaps George Bush would have enjoyed an enthusiastic re-election. The focus, however, on a domain in which he was perceived to have performed poorly was instead his undoing.

What happened to the impact of the Gulf War and general foreign relations assessments on overall job performance ratings once the news media turned their searchlights off of the Gulf War and on to the economy? Although each of these issues had a strong impact on presidential popularity only a short time after the Gulf War, the impact of

President Bush's Gulf War performance dropped nearly 50% in 1992, and the impact of foreign relations in general decreased 30%. Thus, decreased media attention to the Gulf War was followed by a decreased impact of the war and foreign relations in general—issues on which President Bush was evaluated favorably. This, too, helps to explain why the president's popularity in 1991 did not catapult him to re-election in 1992.

The 1992 survey was performed in the midst of heavy media coverage of the economy. Therefore, it was not necessary for Americans to reach into the backs of their minds to remember the media's messages for priming of economic performance to occur. And indeed, highly and less knowledgeable citizens manifested priming equivalently during the fall of 1992.

The Iran-Contra Affair

A third study we conducted focused on President Ronald Reagan and the Iran-Contra affair. In the late fall of 1986, the Gallup, ABC-*Washington Post*, and CBS-*New York Times* polls all reported sharp declines in the proportion of Americans who approved of President Reagan's job performance—from a high of 70% in October 1985 to approximately 50% in November, to a low of 40% in February 1986. Just prior to this nosedive, U.S. Attorney General Edwin Meese had announced that the United States was involved in a secret plan to sell weapons to Iran to fund a group of rebels who were trying to overthrow the government in Nicaragua. This announcement touched off continuous national news coverage of the Iran-Contra scandal in the months that followed. Was the news media's focus on this issue at least partly responsible for the drastic decline in President Reagan's approval ratings? The theory of priming would say "yes," so we set out to test this possibility.

To do so, we again analyzed the data from a survey of a representative national sample of American adults performed by the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center (for details of this study, see Krosnick & Kinder, 1990). Some of the respondents in this study were interviewed just before the scandal broke (in September, October, and early November of 1986), and others were interviewed just afterward (in late November, December, and January). All respondents were asked to evaluate President Reagan's overall job performance, his competence, and his integrity. In addition, respondents were asked whether they

supported or opposed U.S. involvement in Central America, U.S. involvement in the affairs of other countries more generally, and federal programs to provide aid to African Americans. People also reported whether they felt the national economy was in good shape or bad shape. Again using multiple regression, we gauged the impact of these latter judgments on assessments of President Reagan.

As expected, people interviewed before the media coverage of the Iran-Contra affair based their overall evaluations of President Reagan's job performance only minimally on whether they felt the United States should intervene in Central America. After the onslaught of coverage, however, this issue became a much more potent determinant of overall job performance assessments. Because most Americans were opposed to U.S. involvement in Central America, this surge in impact made overall assessments of President Reagan more negative.

News media coverage of the Iran-Contra scandal also increased the issue's impact on people's assessments of President Reagan's competence and integrity, but this increase was smaller than the increase in the impact of the scandal on overall presidential performance evaluations. This reliance on the Iran-Contra affair to evaluate President Reagan's competence and integrity seems understandable because the interpretations of events that had unfolded in the White House explicitly implicated the President's competence ("He was completely out of touch with what was going on around him!") and his integrity ("He willingly went along with an intentional deception of the U.S. Congress and the American people!"). These links, however, were more uncertain than were the implications of the scandal for his job performance, thus presumably yielding weaker priming effects for competence and integrity assessments.

Did media attention to the Iran-Contra affair increase the impact of other issues besides the scandal on evaluations of President Reagan's overall job performance? It is conceivable that thinking about Iran-Contra might cause people to think about the issue of U.S. involvement in other countries in general, of which U.S. involvement in Central America is a subset. At the very least, there are some consequences to our involvement in Central America that people might have been induced to consider in relation to our involvement in other countries. If this were so, then coverage of Iran-Contra might have increased the impact of attitudes toward U.S. involvement in other countries in general on evaluations of President Reagan's overall performance. In fact, people interviewed

after the Iran-Contra revelation did manifest increased impact of attitudes toward U.S. involvement in other countries in general. Thus, the Iran-Contra affair was perceived to be linked to this issue, and people relied on it to evaluate the president accordingly.

However, although media attention to the Iran-Contra affair generalized to foreign relations attitudes, it did not generalize to assessments of the economy, just as it had not in the Gulf War case. Specifically, coverage of Iran-Contra did not increase the impact of economic attitudes on evaluations of the president, presumably because the scandal was not perceived to be relevant to the issue of the economy.

In addition, attitudes toward federal programs to aid African Americans actually had less of an impact after the Iran-Contra revelation than before. Thus, not only can the media's focus on an issue increase the impact of related issues on presidential performance evaluations while leaving the impact of other issues unaffected, it can also decrease the impact of still other issues. Presumably, coverage of the Iran-Contra affair took away the attention people had previously paid to federal aid to African Americans.

Finally, as expected, priming appeared equally strong among people knowledgeable about politics and those who knew less about politics (see Krosnick & Brannon, 1993, pp. 972-973). Because evaluations of the president's performance were made concurrently with news media coverage of the Iran-Contra affair, the advantage knowledge confers on memory did not enhance priming. Had the survey interviews been conducted 2 months later, highly knowledgeable citizens may indeed have manifested stronger priming.

Experiment: Crime, Pollution, and Unemployment

These three studies' results are quite consistent with the theory of priming. Following a large increase in news media coverage of an issue, that issue apparently had more impact on presidential evaluations. This increase was most apparent for job performance assessments, although it appeared for assessments of competence and integrity as well. News media coverage of an issue not only increased its impact but also increased the impact of related issues and sometimes decreased the impact of unrelated issues. In addition, these changes were more apparent among people who knew more about politics when there was a delay

between news media coverage and assessments of the president's performance. When there was no such delay, people high and low in political knowledge manifested priming to the same degree.

As closely as these patterns conform to predictions made by the theory of priming, we cannot be sure from these data alone that shifts in news media content were responsible for the changes we observed in how people evaluated Presidents Bush and Reagan. The fact that the shifts in judgment strategies occurred after the shifts in media coverage are certainly encouraging in this regard, but the only way to be sure about what influenced what is to perform an experiment manipulating news media coverage. This is what we have done in a number of studies. In each case, we had some people watch television news stories about an issue, whereas other people watched stories on different topics. We then observed differences between these groups of people in how they constructed presidential evaluations.

In one of our experiments, conducted in 1993, people came to our lab, watched television news stories taken from recent national network broadcasts, and completed questionnaires measuring their opinions on various political matters. Each respondent was randomly assigned to watch two stories about crime, pollution, or unemployment. In addition, all respondents watched five "filler" stories on topics not directly related to President Bill Clinton's job performance (e.g., hot-air ballooning). In the questionnaire, respondents reported their evaluations of President Clinton's overall job performance and his handling of crime, pollution, and unemployment. We again conducted multiple regressions to gauge the impact of the latter evaluations on overall performance assessments separately for respondents who watched crime, pollution, or unemployment stories (for details of this study, see Miller, 1995).

As expected, watching stories about an issue increased the impact of that issue on evaluations of the president's overall performance. This was even true for pollution, although the news stories we showed our respondents on this topic did not mention President Clinton at all—instead discussing particular cases of pollution in New York and Mississippi. Thus, it appears that news media coverage of an issue can alter presidential performance assessment procedures, even when the president is not explicitly discussed.

In our study of the Gulf War, in which presidential evaluations were made some time after news media coverage of the issue had waned,

highly knowledgeable people were more susceptible to priming than people who knew less about politics. This is presumably because people who knew much about politics were more likely to remember the news stories longer than people who knew less about politics. In our studies of the 1992 election and the Iran-Contra affair, however, in which there were no delays between media coverage and presidential assessments, there were no differences between people low and high in political knowledge in their susceptibility to priming. Likewise, these two groups should presumably manifest equivalently strong priming effects in this experiment because there was no delay between the news media exposure and evaluations of the president's performance. In fact, this was the case.

In this experiment, we were also able to examine whether another characteristic regulated susceptibility to priming. Specifically, people who trusted the news media may have been more likely to manifest priming than people who were less trusting of the media. To assess media trust, respondents were asked the extent to which they thought the media deal fairly with all sides of an issue, how often the stories the media report are accurate, and the extent to which the media focus on the important issues of the day. The answers to these three questions were then averaged to arrive at an overall measure of media trust. People who trusted the media were presumably more likely to pay close attention to a news story, to think about its political implications, and to take those implications into consideration when making presidential performance assessments. Indeed, people who were highly trusting of the media were more likely to rely on the issue the media focused on to evaluate President Clinton's performance.

Interestingly, the priming effects observed in this study were concentrated exclusively among a particular subgroup of the respondents: those who were both highly knowledgeable about politics and who trusted the media. People low in political knowledge or media trust or both failed to manifest any priming effect at all. Thus, although people who knew much about politics presumably had an easy time understanding the political meaning of a news story, this ability alone was not enough to increase their susceptibility to priming, at least when there was no delay between the media coverage and presidential evaluations. Rather, the susceptibility to priming among people who knew much about politics was most pronounced when they also trusted the media and were therefore motivated to pay close attention to the news stories.

If our survey studies had assessed citizens' trust in the media, we may have seen this same result, even when there was no time delay between media coverage and assessments of the president's performance.

Conclusion

At the end of every *CBS Evening News* broadcast, Dan Rather signs off with "And that's part of our world tonight." Explicit in this statement is the fact that television newscasts only provide information about a portion of the world. But how do the media decide what to cover, and do those choices matter? Taken together, these studies make a compelling case that they do matter—the media's choice to focus on one issue and not another influences the standards by which the American public evaluates its president. Such evaluations have important implications for the effective practice of democracy because a president's power in Washington depends partly on how favorably he is evaluated by the nation. A president who receives accolades from the public tends to have his way with Congress and other institutions and individuals involved in the policy-making process. In contrast, presidents whose actions elicit grumblings of frustration from the citizenry are less effective (Neustadt, 1960; Rivers & Rose, 1981). Furthermore, a president's likelihood of being re-elected, and thus his ability to continue to carry out his agenda, is also in part determined by his popularity. If the media focus on an issue that plays well for the president, his chances of re-election are much greater than if they pay attention to an issue on which he is perceived to have failed.

In this light, is the fact that people rely on the media to make presidential performance assessments normatively good or bad for the practice of democracy? The answer to this question depends crucially on how the media decide on which parts of the world to turn their searchlights. If, on the one hand, the media respond to world events by covering only the issues that are the most significant because they impact a large portion of the population and thus have implications for the nation as a whole, then this reliance on the news media to make presidential evaluations could be viewed as sensible. On the other hand, if the media are guided by other criteria, such as which stories are most likely to grab the audience's attention and thus boost ratings, then a democracy would not

be best served by this type of media influence because these opinions would be based on peripheral, if not trivial, considerations.

Some research does suggest that the media are primarily concerned with focusing on issues they judge to be important for the nation. According to Gans (1979), stories are judged to be important if they meet at least one of four criteria, each being an indication of the story's national significance. First, important stories are ones that involve a high government official (especially the president). Other government officials are covered to the extent that they in some way influence the president's policies or do something that will affect the lives of other Americans. Second, stories are considered important if they have implications for the national interest. Thus, international issues are covered to the extent that they impact on national security or on the rights of the nation's citizenry. Domestic stories are covered to the extent that they reinforce national values, such as ethnocentrism and capitalism. Third, important stories are ones that impact the lives (or have the potential to impact the lives) of a large number of people, with the most important story being one that affects every American. Finally, stories are more likely to be considered important if they have significant implications for the future. Journalists do not want to be criticized later for ignoring a story that, in retrospect, became historically significant.

Consistent with the notion that the media do focus on nationally significant issues, Behr and Iyengar (1985) found that the amount of coverage the television networks devoted to unemployment, energy, and inflation increased in response to increases in unemployment rates, surges in energy costs, and rises in prices, respectively. Thus, at least when it comes to these three issues, the media did appear responsive to the national significance of issues.

However, although significance for the nation as a whole influences the media's story selections, they are also partly determined by more idiosyncratic editorial, organizational, or commercial constraints (Altheide, 1976; Epstein, 1973; Gans, 1979; Lippmann, 1922). Stories are more likely to be covered to the extent that they are suitable for a particular news medium. In the case of television newscasts, for example, a story is more likely to be covered to the extent that it is visually interesting (e.g., involves a lot of action) or can be addressed in a short amount of time to fit into a 30-minute broadcast. In addition, the media are biased toward covering dramatic stories (Bennett, 1988) and toward reporting stories

that will not offend advertisers (Lippmann, 1922). Thus, considerations other than the significance of an issue for the nation may actually divert the public's attention from the "real" problems of the day.

Although evidence suggests that the media's story selection processes involve other criteria besides the importance of the story to the nation, it is less clear whether important stories are routinely excluded from news coverage because of these other considerations. Until more conclusive studies on the media's story selection process are conducted, it is difficult to make an assessment of whether news media priming is normatively good or bad for the practice of democracy.

If future studies conclude that nationally significant stories are rarely ignored, then the media could be considered an institution that aids the process of democracy. That is, if the media focus primarily on nationally significant issues, they provide information citizens need to make informed political judgments. Thus, a democracy would be best served if the prevalence of news media priming were increased.

One way to increase priming might be to encourage the media to make the implications of a news story for broader political concerns more explicit so that people could more readily see the relevance of the story to presidential performance evaluations. Because priming is concentrated among people who know much about politics and trust the media, another strategy to this end would be for schools to teach young Americans more extensively about policy issues and politics in general as well as to foster the view of the media as valid sources of political information. This would motivate people to pay close attention to the news media, better equip them to recognize the implications of a news story for political judgments, and increase their ability to remember media messages.

If, on the other hand, it is found that the media frequently forgo coverage of nationally significant issues, it would not be prudent for citizens to rely on the media to help them make political judgments. One is reminded of the old adage of a drunk searching for his keys under a lamppost. When a stranger walked by and asked, "Is that where you dropped your keys?" the drunk responded, "No, but the light is better here." Our research shows that people are likely to look in the beams of the media's searchlights for the standards by which to evaluate their president. If the stories they choose are typically the less significant, then democracy might better be served if the public were encouraged to focus on issues outside the searchlights.

One way to decrease the prevalence of priming would be to intervene on the subset of the population that is most susceptible to the media's influence—people who are both highly knowledgeable about politics and trusting of the media. Although it seems neither possible nor ethical to decrease people's political knowledge, it may be feasible to foster a less accepting view of news stories. Such a critical posture might lead more people to make political judgments unaffected by television, radio, newspapers, and magazines.

The effectiveness of such interventions would be a potentially fruitful direction for future priming research. For example, one could compare the prevalence of priming among people who are encouraged to believe that the media focus on nationally significant issues, people who are told that the media generally rely on other criteria to select stories, and people who are given no information about how the media select their stories. If informing the public about how story-selection decisions are made is effective, then people who are told that the media primarily focus on nationally important issues should show the strongest priming effect, and people who are told that the media frequently use other selection criteria should be least susceptible to priming.

Another potential strategy for counteracting detrimental effects of priming, if such effects are deemed thusly, might be to pressure the media to change the criteria by which they make story choices. Unfortunately, this course of action seems unlikely to succeed. The media have resisted time and time again pressure from political leaders, such as Bob Dole and Tipper Gore, to decrease the amount of violence depicted on television, in movies, and in music. As long as economic imperatives, such as the wants of advertisers and the need for high ratings and sales exist, it is unlikely that outside pressure to change the content of the news media will be effective, no matter how damaging.

Epilogue

The studies described in this chapter illustrate how the disciplines of political science and psychology can be brought together to provide new and exciting insights about a set of important, real-world issues. The strategy of using surveys to document processes as they unfold in everyday life is traditionally used by political scientists and other schol-

ars to study media effects. Had we stopped with such studies, however, we would not have been able to definitively conclude that the media are instigators of these processes. Only when we turned to the psychologists' practice of examining the observed phenomenon in a controlled laboratory setting could we be more certain that the news media do, in fact, cause changes in the standards by which the president is evaluated. We hope that future research will continue to capitalize on the strengths of both disciplines' approaches, to provide insights into the political process in general, and to contribute substantively to our understanding of basic psychological processes.

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