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Effect of Source on Perception of Bias in Cable News

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ABSTRACT

Problem: The central study question was whether or not believing that a certain media outlet is biased in a certain direction predisposes someone to perceive more or less bias in news content. The following hypotheses were formed:
Hypothesis One: News consumers would find a news story to be more biased toward the corresponding associated political viewpoint of its source regardless of the actual content of the story.
Hypothesis Two: Liberal respondents would be more likely to perceive the news stories as conservatively biased and conservative respondents would be more likely to perceive the new stories as being liberally biased.
Hypothesis Three: Liberal respondents would be more likely to view content presented as being from Fox News as more conservatively biased than conservative respondents and conservatives would be more likely to view content presented as being from CNN or MSNBC as more liberally biased.

Methods: A survey research design was created to test these hypotheses. Sixty-one participants read two different articles and were asked questions concerning their perception of bias in the articles. The articles were written by the researcher on two different topics from the spring of 2007: Iraq War troop reductions and universal health care proposals from Democratic presidential candidates. For each of these articles, three different versions were made (Neutral, Left-Leaning, and Right-Leaning) by either omitting or adding information that was more or less harmful to a certain political viewpoint or by word choice (i.e. "socialized" versus "universal" health care). Each article was then placed in three different visual contexts: FoxNews.com printout, CNN.com printout, and a text word document. Each participant was given only one version of the two article topics.

Results: None of the hypotheses were proven with statistical significance; however, the data do tend to suggest that they may be provable with a larger sample size. For hypothesis one, in the first article those reading the possibility of a troop reduction article in the FoxNews.com visual context found the story to favor the conservative viewpoint 55 percent of the time compared to 28 percent for CNN.com and 25 percent for the control version. The results for the health care article were not as strong because of more subtle alterations to "manufacture" bias. However, those reading the Fox versions were still much less likely (57 percent) to say the articles favored the liberal viewpoint compared to CNN (83 percent). Hypothesis two and three were unable to be substantially tested due to low sample size. The results also show that perceptions of bias based on content may actually be stronger than based on visual cues. For example, those reading the liberal troop reduction article (for any visual context) found it to be favoring liberals 69 percent of the time compared to six percent for those reading the conservative version at a significance level of .01.

Conclusion: It does appear that framing based upon preconceived ideas about the bias of certain news outlets can make someone more likely to perceive bias in that same direction. However, the actual content of the story is a better predictor of how someone in this participant pool would perceive bias.

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INTRODUCTION

The idea of bias has become a hot topic in the media. Recently, there have been

discussions in the media as to whether the media have been "biased" towards

Barack Obama and against Hillary Clinton.[1] Other instances in recent history of

supposed bias include calling the presidential election too early in 2000[2],

coverage of the Iraq War, and the "Rathergate" situation in which former CBS

anchor Dan Rather stood by a flawed news report about Bush's National Guard

service.

In all of these situations, including "Rathergate" though not directly, the

24-hour cable news channels have been involved prominently. In terms of Iraq

War coverage, it has been widely suggested that Fox News' coverage has been

biased toward the administration. Margie Reedy researched and produced a

documentary about cable news coverage of the Iraq War. In a brief description of

her research for the documentary, she put forward examples of Fox News having

a much more "positive" outlook on the Iraq War and seeming to try to appeal to

conservative males.[3]

Despite this widespread perception of bias in the mass media, the concept

of bias itself is a murky one. When something is said to be "biased" in the

journalistic sense, it is often meant that the reporter failed to be objective or even

intended to slant the story toward his or her views. The term objectivity has come

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[1] Ambinder, M. (4 Mar. 2008). "The Press And Bias." TheAtlantic.com. Available at
http://marcambinder.theatlantic.com/archives/2008/03/the_press_and_bias.php
[2] McClellan, S., Albiniak, P. and Higgins, J. (20 Nov 2000). "Networks on the defensive."
Broadcasting & Cable. 130(48).
[3] Reedy, M. (Winter 2003). "A Documentary Examines Cable News War Coverage."
Cambridge. 57(4) pg. 87.

to be thought of as some ideal practice where journalists strip themselves of all preconceived notions and biases to report the news truthfully and accurately.[4] Not surprisingly, many found this concept unattainable, including Dan Gillmor who wrote an essay called "The End of Objectivity" advocating for journalists to think more in terms of "thoroughness, accuracy, fairness, and transparency."[5] However, this was not the original idea of objectivity. It was meant more to be a uniformity of journalistic practice so as to avoid bias in the journalist's method of gathering information.[6] As found in the Elements of Journalism by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel:

> "In the original concept, in other words, the journalist is not
> objective, but his method can be…neutrality is not a fundamental
> principle of journalism. It is merely a voice, or device, to persuade
> the audience of one's accuracy or fairness." (pg. 83).

In some ways, the convention for avoiding bias in reporting, though, has not simply been this idea of an objective method but instead by presenting both sides of an issue equally in what is called balancing. This is typically done through the sources used. Often, this can lead to more biased sources being recruited for stories because they represent a particular viewpoint.[7] Sourcing in this manner can provide a very polarized view of certain issues (especially when you have a limited amount of time to present it, such as with television news)

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[4] Kovach, B. and Rosenstiel, T. (2007). The Elements of Journalism. Random House: New York. 81-86.

[5] Quoted from The Elements of Journalism by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, pg.81.

[6] Kovach, B. and Rosenstiel, T. (2007). The Elements of Journalism. Random House: New York. 81-86.

[7] Rouner, S., Slater, M.D., and Buddenbaum, J.M. (1999). How perceptions of news bias in news sources relate to beliefs about media bias. *Newspaper Research Journal, 20.2,* 41.

when a more accurate representation of the issue may give a broader spectrum of moderate opinions.

However, even if the reporter decided not to use a certain source because he or she felt the source was biased, this might not necessarily correspond to the same feelings by the reporter's audience and vice versa. A study by Rouner, Slater, and Buddenbaum found that the news audience's determination of a certain source (an "expert" source) as biased was inconsistent with the journalist's determination in the same news market.[8] They also found that the more the audience differed with the journalists on determination of the bias of sources, the less likely the audience was to think that the media are generally balanced. Whether story balance is the correct way or not to determine if a story is biased, it can often be the way that the news audience evaluates bias, "the extent to which members of the public perceive the news media as unbiased must depend in part on perceptions of story balance, as well as its actual occurrence."[9] This disagrees with what many journalists feel is the way to avoid bias, which is to be accurate and objective in method. Sometimes, being "fair and accurate" means not necessarily being balanced, particularly if the issue has no widely accepted merit on the opposing side. If most experts about an issue feel one way, it is not really being accurate to give equal time to both sides of the issue, though that would technically give the story balance.

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[8] Rouner, S., Slater, M.D., and Buddenbaum, J.M. (1999). How perceptions of news bias in news sources relate to beliefs about media bias. *Newspaper Research Journal, 20.2,* 41.
[9] Rouner, S., Slater, M.D., and Buddenbaum, J.M. (1999). How perceptions of news bias in news sources relate to beliefs about media bias. *Newspaper Research Journal, 20.2,* 41.

Contributing to this issue may be that when people believe something to be biased it is often based on preconceived views that they have established before viewing or reading news content. Particularly, those who have a firm point of view tend to perceive media coverage as being unfair to that point of view. Interestingly, both "sides" of an issue can see the same news story as being unfair to their side. This is what is called the "hostile media phenomenon."[10] One example is a study presented by Vollone et al. that "exposed American students, pro-Israeli and pro-Arab, to identical U.S. network coverage of the 1983 Beirut massacre and found that both groups perceived the televised segments as biased against their side."[11]

Similar to this is the concept of framing in which the way content is presented influences the audience's perception of a certain story. A more technical definition of framing is given by Entman, "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in communicating text in such a way to promote a particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation."[12] An example of the framing effect is shown in a study by Maoz involving Jewish-Israeli undergraduates.[13] In this study, the participants were given one of two different

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[10] Tsfati, Y., and Cohen, J. (2005). Democratic consequences of hostile media perceptions. *Press/Politics, 10(4),* 30.

[11] Quoted from Tsfati, Y., and Cohen, J. (2005). Democratic consequences of hostile media perceptions. *Press/Politics, 10(4),* 30. citing
Vollone, R.P., Ross, L., and Lepper, M.R. (1985). The hostile media phenomenon: biased perception and perception of bias in coverage of the Beirut Massacre. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 49*, 577–85.

[12] Entman, R. (1993). Framing: toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication, 43*, 52.

[13] Maoz, I. (2006). The effect of news coverage concerning the opponents' reaction to a concession on its evaluation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. *Press/Politics 11(4),* 70-88.

versions of a news report that reported the same proposal in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. The independent variable was that in one version the proposal was framed as being rejected by the Palestinians and the other was presented as being accepted by the Palestinians. The results showed that in general, participants who were exposed to the report that was framed as being rejected by the Palestinians found the concessions proposal to be more pro-Israeli and anti-Palestinian and vice versa for the report framed as being supported by the Palestinians[14](the idea being, in other words, that since the Palestinians rejected the proposal, it must be better for Israeli interests and vice versa).

The Maoz study also considered political viewpoint, though. This effect was found to be slightly more significant (both measures were significant). The two viewpoints measured were Hawks versus Doves, with Hawks taking "a relatively uncompromising position in the conflict with the Palestinians" and Doves "support[ing] compromise with the Palestinians."[15] Here, it was found that the Hawks were not affected by the framing of the news story, finding the stories to be Pro-Palestinian regardless of the framing, while the Doves were swayed based on the framing discussed previously. The rigidity of the Hawks' perception of bias in the stories seems to lend further credence towards the idea of the hostile media effect. It also seems to suggest that those who have a firm, anti-conciliatory (perhaps combative) viewpoint are more likely to view news content as being biased against them, regardless of the story framing.

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[14] Maoz, I. (2006). The effect of news coverage concerning the opponents' reaction to a concession on its evaluation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. *Press/Politics 11(4),* 70-88.
[15] Maoz, I. (2006). The effect of news coverage concerning the opponents' reaction to a concession on its evaluation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. *Press/Politics 11(4),* 75.

The hostile media effect, as the term implies, appears to only apply to the mass media. This was shown in a study by Gunther and Liebhart concerning perception of bias in an article discussing genetically modified organisms (GMO).[16] Participants from both sides of the issue (anti-GMO and pro-GMO) were asked to read an article in one of four different contexts: a USA Today article written by a professional journalist, a student paper for a class that was subsequently printed in the USA Today, a student essay simply written for a class, and an essay written for a class by a professional journalist on a leave of absence to attend a university to study environmental issues. The participants were then asked whether the portrayal of GMO foods in the article leaned toward either side of the issue. The hostile media effect held up such that each side perceived the articles to be slanted against its side. However, the effect was seen only in the versions that were mass published (news articles) or written by a journalist and not in the essay or student written versions.[17] In the opposite scenarios (essays and by a student) there was no strong effect shown at all. These results support that "the hostile media perception is peculiar to the mass media context. It reinforces the conjecture that a message associated with a large audience is more likely to generate a contrast bias, whereas a message in a low-reach context has no such effect and may instead invoke an assimilation bias."[18]

[16] Gunther, A.C., and Liebhart, J.L. (2006). Broad reach or biased source? Decomposing the hostile media effect. *Journal of Communication, 56,* 449-466.
[17] Gunther, A.C., and Liebhart, J.L. (2006). Broad reach or biased source? Decomposing the hostile media effect. *Journal of Communication, 56,* 458.
[18] Gunther, A.C., and Liebhart, J.L. (2006). Broad reach or biased source? Decomposing the hostile media effect. *Journal of Communication, 56,* 463.

It appears that perception of bias in the media, and further the hostile media effect, stems from a distrust of the mass media in general. The level of trust for the press has fallen off dramatically since the 1970s. According to the National Opinion Research Center, 30 percent of Americans had "a great deal" of confidence in "the press" in the mid 1970s.[19] By 1994, that percentage was down near ten percent, and despite some gains in confidence following 9/11, a year later the public's perception of the media was, as Howard Kurtz wrote in 2002, "back in the toilet – lower, even, than before that fateful day."[20] While certainly the press (and the media) has lost ground in the court of public opinion, the question is why this is the case. Many reasons have been postulated such as an increasing general skepticism in public institutions. One such analysis of this relationship found that 63 percent of respondents[21] who said they trust the government either "some of the time" or "never" (lower two options on a four point scale) gave about the same rating to the media.[22] Other reasons focus more on a possible content disconnect between journalists and the public they serve in certain news areas. For example, in politics, news outlets tend to cover the "horse-race" rather than the issues involved.[23] Another possibility is that people are becoming tired of the media's obsession with covering scandals. There is also the complaint that

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[19] From Jones, D.A. (2004). Why Americans don't trust the media. *Press/Politics, 9(2),* 61, citing:
Dautrich, K., and Hartley, T.H. (1999). How the news media fail American voters: causes, consequences and remedies. New York: Columbia University Press.

[20] Jones, D.A. (2004). Why Americans don't trust the media. *Press/Politics, 9(2),* 61, quoting:
Kurtz, H. (5 Aug 2002). "Public gives the press a thumbs down." *The Washington Post.*

[21] For 2000 National Election Study (NES).

[22] Jones, D.A. (2004). Why Americans don't trust the media. *Press/Politics, 9(2),* 69.

[23] Jones, D.A. (2004). Why Americans don't trust the media. *Press/Politics, 9(2),* 62.

too much of news (fed by the 24-hour cable news networks) has become interpretive rather than informative.[24]

This idea of a content-based disconnect between the press and its public hits right on what Michael Schudson contends is the source of "bias" in the news, or rather the way that people should think of "bias" in the news. Schudson argues that thinking of framing in the media, rather than "bias," is more helpful. "Frames in the media 'principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters."[25] This means that the real perception of "bias" may result in discrepancies in the way journalists perceive what news is and how to present it. As *Washington Post* columnist David Broder wrote:

> "The process of selecting what the reader reads involves not just objective facts but subjective judgments, personal values and, yes, prejudices. Instead of promising 'All the News That's Fit to Print,' I would like to see us say – over and over, until the point has been made – that the newspaper that drops on your doorstep is a partial, hasty, incomplete, inevitably somewhat flawed and inaccurate rendering of some of the things we have heard about in the past 24 hours – distorted despite our best efforts to eliminate gross bias, by the very process of compression that makes it possible for you to lift it from the doorstep and read it in about an hour."[26]

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[24] Jones, D.A. (2004). Why Americans don't trust the media. *Press/Politics, 9(2),* 62.
[25] Schudson, M. (2003). The sociology of news. San Diego: University of California Press, 35.
[26] Schudson, M. (2003). The sociology of news. San Diego: University of California Press, 33.

It almost goes without saying that despite journalists' best efforts, they simply do not at this time represent proportionally their audience in terms of ethnicity or even their outlook on life. As Howard Kurtz also said, "the plain fact is that newspapers reflect the mood and values of white, middle-class society."[27]

This lack of trust in the press is an important issue as it suggests the press is failing its fundamental objective, which is "to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing."[28] The effective passing of information from the press to the citizens has become imperative for our democracy. Trust in the media has been found to be positively correlated with trust in the democratic government in that country (from World Values Surveys, 2000), and without it people may not be able to believe in the fairness of the democratic process where they are.[29]

Returning to the 24-hour cable news networks, what role do they play in the degradation of trust in the press and in the news arena in general? As mentioned earlier, much of the content on these channels focuses on interpretation of the news rather than simply presenting it. With all this opinion, though, some channels have started to separate themselves from the competition by perhaps promoting one political point of view more than the other. Despite Fox News' denials, many media critics (and much of the public) perceive the channel as catering to the right. Fox News' success doing this resulted in some talk in late 2007 that perhaps MSNBC could position itself as the left-leaning equivalent of

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[27] Schudson, M. (2003). The sociology of news. San Diego: University of California Press, 45.
[28] Kovach, B. and Rosenstiel, T. (2007). The Elements of Journalism. Random House: New York. 32.
[29] Tsfati, Y., and Cohen, J. (2005). Democratic consequences of hostile media perceptions. *Press/Politics, 10(4),* 32.

Fox News (this came as they were considering hiring Rosie O'Donnell to host a talk show).[30]

Does this formation of certain political ideologies for cable news channels (true or not) influence people's perception of bias? It seems this could be another version of framing in that it is some background information that people bring with them when they watch the news on these channels. This predisposition to assume bias in a certain direction is not a real problem for the talk shows, but if this effect were to bleed over into regular news content on these channels it could pose a threat to legitimate news coverage on these channels. It is the hypothesis of the researcher that this effect will be seen in people's perceptions of bias from news on these channels such that:

> *Hypothesis 1:* News consumers will find a news story to be more biased toward the corresponding associated political viewpoint of its source regardless of the actual content of the story.

For example, those who watch Fox News will be more likely to perceive the content as biased towards conservatives. The perceived ideology of the source of the content will have a stronger effect than the actual content of the story. However, given the differences in perception based on framing from people's own political viewpoints (considering the hostile media bias), it is also necessary to test whether this same effect is seen across different sources that perhaps have strong political perceptions attached to them.

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[30] Steinberg, J. (6 Nov 2007). "Cable channel nods to ratings and leans left." *The New York Times,* A1.

Hypothesis 2: Liberal respondents will be more likely to perceive the news stories as conservatively biased and conservative respondents will be more likely to perceive the new stories as being liberally biased.

The test will also extend the idea of a hostile media effect beyond simply applying to content that "disagrees" with a person's point of view to media outlet's that have perceived biases that "disagree" with that person:

Hypothesis 3: Liberal respondents will be more likely to view content presented as being from Fox News as more conservatively biased than conservative respondents and conservatives will be more likely to view content presented as being from CNN or MSNBC as more liberally biased.

While these hypotheses make up the crux of the study, it is the interplay between these hypotheses and trust in the media that is perhaps the most important effect to consider. It is important to consider throughout this study whether it is these perceptions of bias that cause distrust in the media or distrust in the media that cause perceptions of bias. The direction of this "causation" is difficult to determine at this time. However, exploration of the three hypotheses above could help to design future studies meant to get to the heart of this issue.

METHODS

Research Design

The study aimed to determine the strength of perceptions of political lean or bias

in the cable news networks and its effects. It was felt that the best and most

feasible way to do this for research purposes was to use an online news format. In

this way, the articles could still maintain the "look and feel" of the cable news

stations while eliminating certain aspects of cable news that could draw away

attention from the actual content of the news stories themselves. For practical

reasons, online news articles were also much simpler to replicate and administer

than it would have been to create video of cable news that mimicked the actual

thing.

Two different topics were chosen for articles to provide for a wider base

of reactions. The two topics chosen were the Iraq War and discussions of

universal health care. The Iraq War was chosen because of its strong polarizing

political effect and its prominence in news coverage. Universal health care, while

certainly having much more support on the left than on the right, is a more policy-

based issue and was thought to be less likely to spur reactions based on emotion.

First, a "new" article about each topic was written by the researcher. The

content of the story was factual information drawn from actual news stories and

wire reports. The Iraq War story was about a proposed Senate bill in April 2007

that would have called for troop reductions in Iraq and Vice President Cheney's

opposition to the bill. The main story that was referenced was from the

Associated Press called "Cheney, Democrats Spar Over Iraq Bill."[31] The story

was made more concise and attempted to be "neutral" or "balanced," not in any

way suggesting that the original article was biased at all. The second article about

universal health care was about the three main Democratic Presidential

Candidates at that time (March 2007) promising to deliver universal health care.

Information for the article was found on several news websites (including

FoxNews.com) but were all either from Associated Press or Wire Reports.[32]

From these neutral or balanced versions, two other versions were made of

each topic: left and right leaning. While bias is often hard to quantify, the

researcher made the articles "lean" through two different techniques. First, in the

troop reductions article, certain information or quotes that were damaging to one

side may have been left out in the version that was "for" that side and included in

the "opposing" version. Also, the titles were altered to suggest different feelings

about the credibility of Vice President Cheney's "betting" the Senate would

change its mind. For the universal health care articles, the "bias" machinated was

done simply through word choice. For example, instead of using the buzzword of

universal health care, the term "socialized" health care was used in the right-

leaning version to engender different feelings. While the bias in these article

versions is certainly not as obvious, the intent was that this is the more likely

scenario for actual "bias" to appear in news articles, often times unwittingly by

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[31] Feller, Ben (April 15, 2007). Cheney, Democrats Spar Over Iraq Bill. Available at
http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/04/15/AR2007041500432.html
[32] The main article referenced is available at:
http://www.abqtrib.com/news/2007/mar/26/clinton-promises-universal-health-care/
Two other articles referenced were no longer available on the web but are provided in full-text in
the appendices.

the reporter. The full text of the different article versions can be found in Appendix I. It is important to note here that while each article was made to lean one way or the other, this was only done by manipulating accurate and true information. No false information was included in the articles to make the stories appear more or less biased.

A pilot test was then conducted to test whether these articles were successful in appearing to lean towards one viewpoint or the other. The pilot test took place in the fall of 2007 and involved 41 participants from one introduction communications course (the same basic population that was used for the full study). Participants read one version of each article set in a basic Word document context. As shown in Figure 1, the troop reduction article set was successful in having participants perceive the article to be slanted toward its supposed political side at a statistically significant level of less than .05 (actual Pearson Chi-Square result was .039).

Figure 1
Perceived Political Viewpoint Favored for Troop Reduction Article by Actual Lean
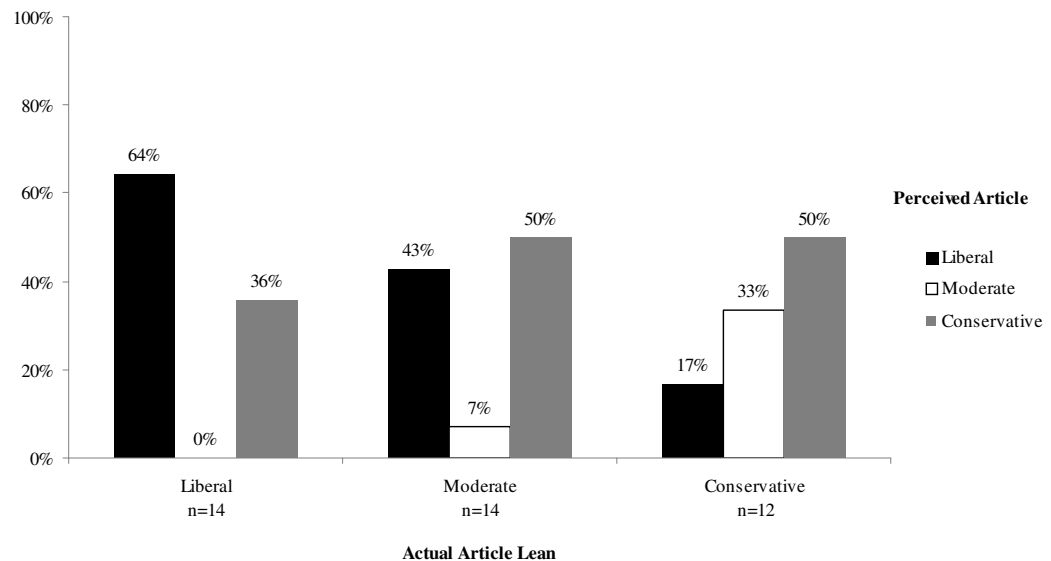
The universal health care articles were not successful in achieving this difference.

Most participants felt that these articles (no matter which version) favored the

liberal viewpoint. The conservative article does have a slightly lower percentage

than the liberal version but the difference is not statistically significant (see Figure

2).

Figure 2
Perceived Political Viewpoint Favored for Universal Health Article by Actual Lean
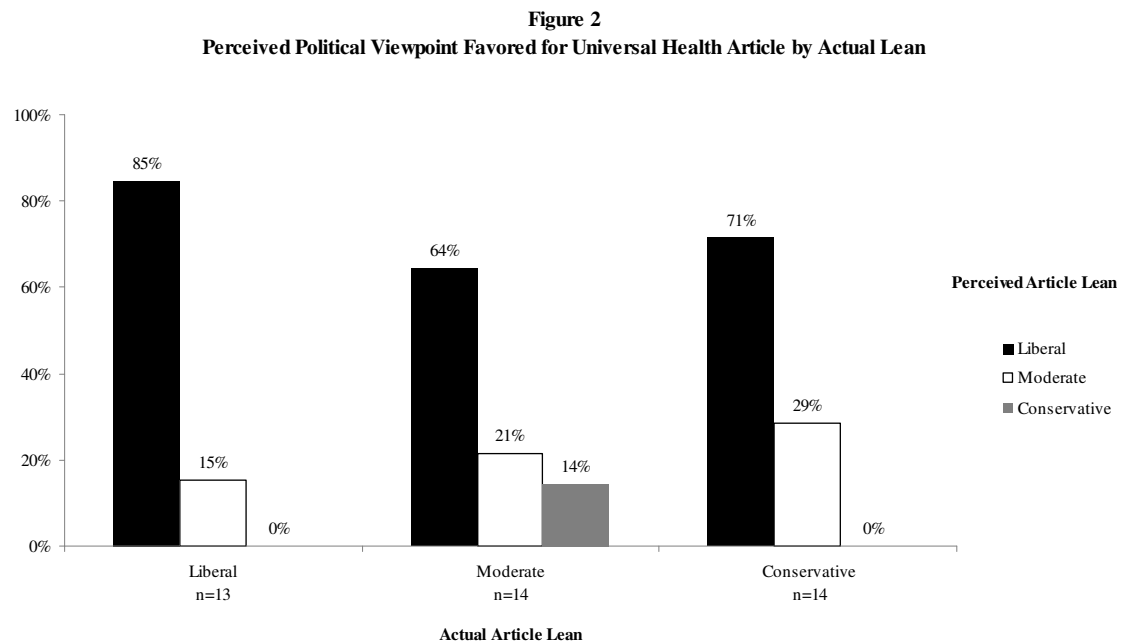
For both article topics, the relationship between the lean based on issue position

(for example, whether the conservative troop article is perceived as being against

troop reductions) was less significant. However, again the troop reduction articles

were more significant than the universal health care articles. For the troop

reduction articles, 73.3 percent of participants who read the liberal version felt it

was "for troop reductions" while 66.7 percent of participants who read the

conservative version felt it was "against troop reductions" (Chi-Square result of

.121). So, despite only one set of articles displaying effectiveness in manipulating

perceptions of political lean, it was decided to go forward with both of the article

sets as they were. This was because the articles would be tackling two separate questions: how much would source affect strongly perceived bias (troop reduction articles) and how much would source add bias to articles where there previously was no real perceived bias (universal health care articles).

To test the crux of the full study, which is the effect of the news source, three visual representations were used: plain MS Word text (found in Appendix I), a FoxNews.com web printout, and a CNN.com printout. The templates for FoxNews.com and CNN.com were created by replicating an actual web printout with a web editor. Versions of the web templates can be found in Appendix II. Each version of the two article topics was placed in the three different visual contexts. This means there were nine versions of each topic.

Finally, a research instrument was developed to measure responses by the participants. The questions asked participants whether or not they perceived bias in each article and which political side and viewpoint the article seemed to favor or lean towards. Other more general questions were asked concerning the participants' political viewpoints, news consumption habits, level of trust in certain media, and perception of political lean of news outlets.

Procedure

After receiving approval from the University's Institutional Review Board, the research study itself was conducted on several different occasions early in the spring semester of 2008. After signing the informed consent agreement, participants were given one version of each article in one visual context (two articles total). In each case, the troop reduction article preceded the universal

health care article in a stapled two page packet. They were instructed to read each

article and then to turn the articles over before proceeding to the questions. The

participants were not able to reference the articles while answering the questions.

This was intended to get a more accurate measure of the participants' initial

perception of the articles as typical readers would not go back searching for hints

of bias in articles. Once finished reading, the participants moved on to answer the

questions found in the research instrument provided in Appendix IV. Most

participants completed the study within 15 to 45 minutes.

Participants

The 61 participants were recruited from intro-level communications courses

during spring semester 2008. As such, 93 percent of the students (56) were in

either their first or second year. The participants' home colleges were

predominantly Arts and Sciences (44 percent) and S.I. Newhouse School of

Communications (22 percent). Students were encouraged to attend outside

research study days for extra credit. There were difficulties in attracting students

to participate in the study which accounts for the low sample size. The number of

participants makes it possible to see trends in the data but difficult to realistically

generalize the results to a larger population.

Participant Characteristics

Before discussing the results of the study, it is necessary to first establish further

characteristics of the participants that took part in the study. Many of these

variables will be used later in cross-tabulations.

First, 98 percent of participants said news stories are at least "sometimes" biased with 41 percent saying they "usually" are biased. However, only 64 percent are at least "somewhat concerned" about bias in the news. Participants do seem to have a general trust in the media with 72 percent saying they at least "somewhat trust" information from the mainstream media. This percentage of trust is only somewhat less for cable news outlets at 68 percent.

Participants were also asked about their perception of political lean of different news outlets. Participants scored the sources on a scale of one to seven with one being "extremely liberal" and seven being "extremely conservative." Figure 3 shows that most of the media outlets were found to be either slightly liberal or close to moderate on the average (about a four). However, the main exception relevant to this study was Fox News that on average scored a point higher towards the conservative end of the spectrum.

Figure 3
Perceived Lean of Media Outlets
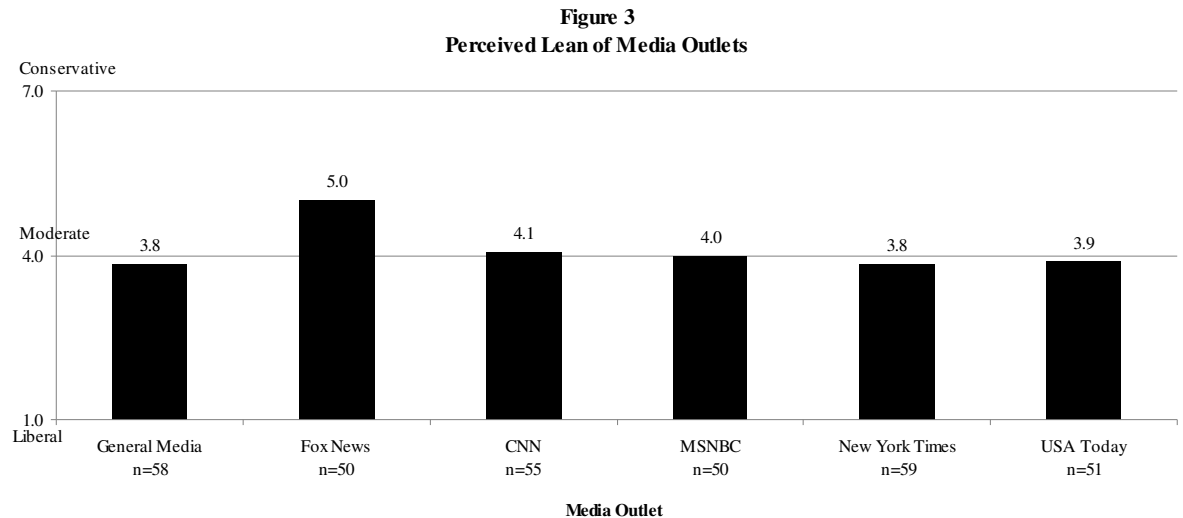
The differences in the n for each outlet is mainly a result of the number of participants who said they "didn't know" which way a particular source leaned.

Other more basic characteristics of the participant pool was that the majority were female (68 percent female to 32 percent male) and classified their hometown as suburban (74 percent suburban, 13 percent urban, and 12 percent rural). Also, most participants classified themselves politically as Democrats at 75 percent with Republicans at 15 percent and Other at 11 percent.

RESULTS

The first hypothesis was that participants would find a certain news story to be more biased toward the corresponding associated political viewpoint of its source regardless of the actual content of the story. This hypothesis is partially supported by the data available although it is not statistically significant. In the first article (see Figure 4) those reading the possibility of a troop reduction article in the FoxNews.com visual context found the story to favor the conservative viewpoint 55 percent of the time compared to 28 percent for CNN.com and 25 percent for the control version. These results are from responses to the question "Which political viewpoint do you think the story favored?" Participants chose a response based on a seven point scale with one being "extremely liberal", four being "moderate" and seven being "extremely conservative." For ease of analysis, responses were re-coded into three categories: Liberal, Moderate, and Conservative. This was done by combining responses of one through three as "Liberal" and five through seven as "Conservative." This combination technique is used throughout the results where these three categories are shown unless further noted. See the study instrument in the Appendices to see the original scales for questions.

Figure 4
Political Viewpoint Favored by Troop Article "Source"
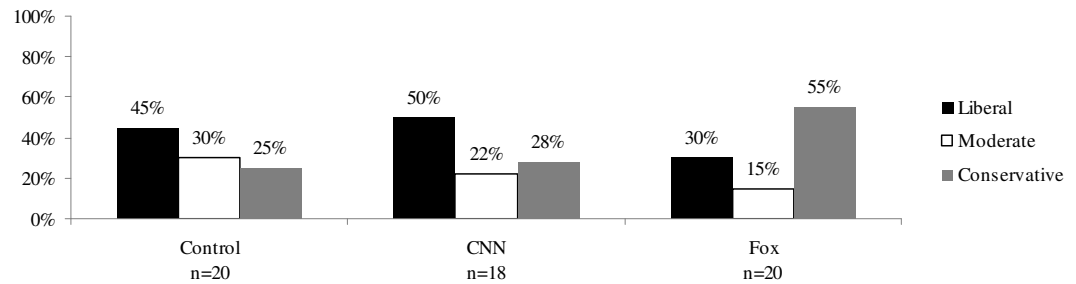
A similar effect was seen for the universal health care articles (see Figure 5). Though most participants said the articles favored the liberal viewpoint, the rate was much lower for the Fox versions (57 percent) compared to CNN (83 percent).

Figure 5
Political Viewpoint Favored by Health Article "Source"
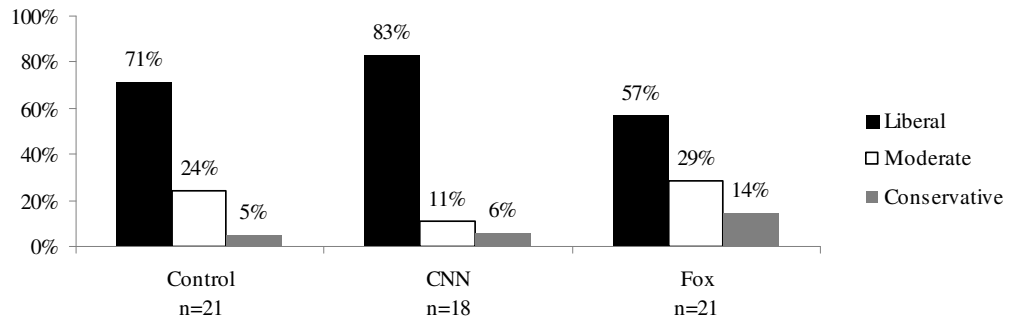
The differences shown in Figures 4 and 5 are not statistically significant but they do suggest that hypothesis one may be true. This is because there does appear to be an obvious effect on the perception of bias by source, especially with Fox where the lean was perceived to be more conservative for both article sets.

However, the effect by source was not stronger than the effect of the actual content of the articles. Readers of the conservative-leaning troop article version (regardless of "source") found the article to favor the conservative viewpoint 50 percent of the time compared to 19 percent for those reading the liberal-leaning version (see Figure 6). On the other side, those reading the liberal version found it to be favoring liberals 69 percent of the time compared to six percent for those reading the conservative version. These differences are statistically significant at less than a .01 level according to the Pearson Chi-Square test.

Figure 6
Political Viewpoint Favored by Actual Lean of Troop Article
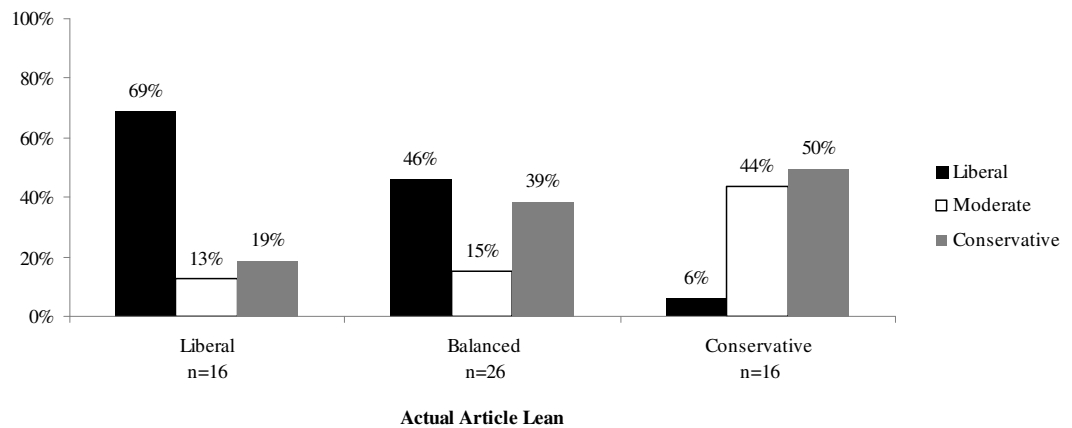
The content bias in the articles about universal health care was found to be much more subtle than the troop reduction article. Each political lean version of the article was found to favor the liberal viewpoint with even 60 percent of those reading the "conservative" version saying it favored the liberal political viewpoint (79 percent reading the liberal version and 75 percent reading the balanced version said it favored the liberal viewpoint).

The other question asked on the study instrument to gauge this perception of political bias was "which way do you think the story leaned?" For both articles, there was a seven point response question (re-coded the same as detailed earlier) that asked whether participants felt the story leaned "for" or "against" a particular political outcome (troop reductions for the first article and universal health care for the second article). For both articles, the effect was not even as strong in the hypothesized direction as the first question about political viewpoint favored. In part, this may be because this requires a second step in mental processing beyond simply, for example, that "Fox favors conservatives" but rather "Fox favors conservatives, conservatives are against troop reductions, therefore Fox leans against troop reductions." Still, with the troop reductions article, this effect is seen (at a much less statistical significance level). Those reading the articles appearing to be from Fox found them to be "against troop reductions" at the highest percentage (38.1 percent compared to 31.6 percent for CNN and 19.0 percent for control) and "for troop reductions" at the lowest percentage (47.6 percent compared to 57.9 percent for CNN and 66.7 percent for control) (see Figure 7).

Figure 7
Story Lean by Troop Article "Source"

Look of Article

Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding
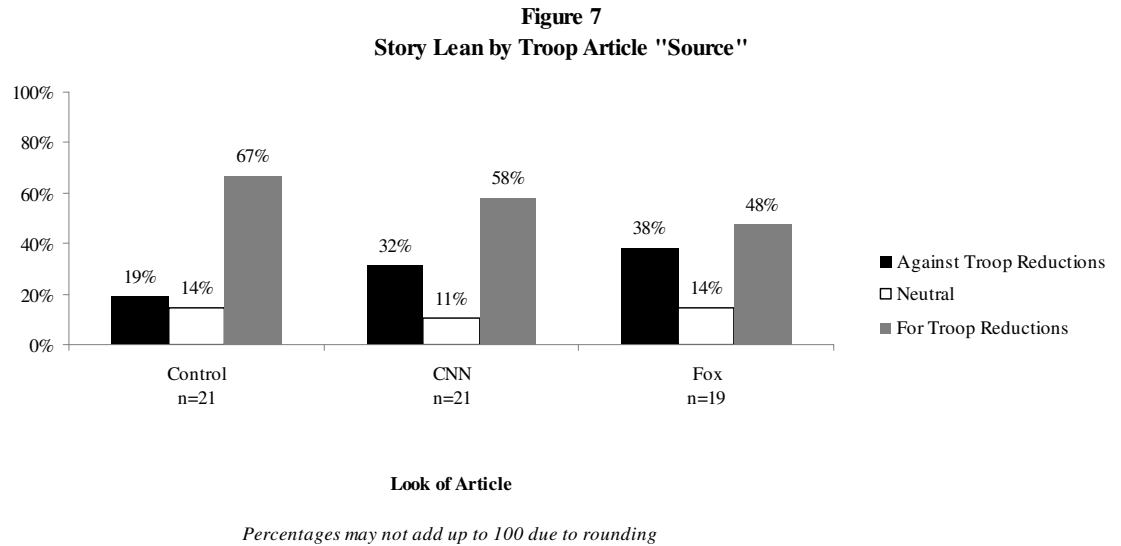
For the universal health care article, though, the effect of source did not go in the direction anticipated. Fox articles had the highest percentage of participants saying the article leaned "for universal healthcare" at 85 percent (compared to 81.8 percent for CNN and 84.2 percent for control). It is hard to really draw much from the breakdown here since overwhelmingly participants felt the articles were for universal healthcare no matter the source.

Again, there was a stronger effect based on the actual content of the article than the "source" of the articles. For the troop article, the relationship was significant at less than the .05 level. Even though half of those who read the conservative-leaning version still felt the article was for troop reductions, this was much lower than those who read the liberal-leaning version (76.5 percent) (see Figure 8).

Figure 8
Perceived Story Lean by Actual Article Lean

Actual Article Lean
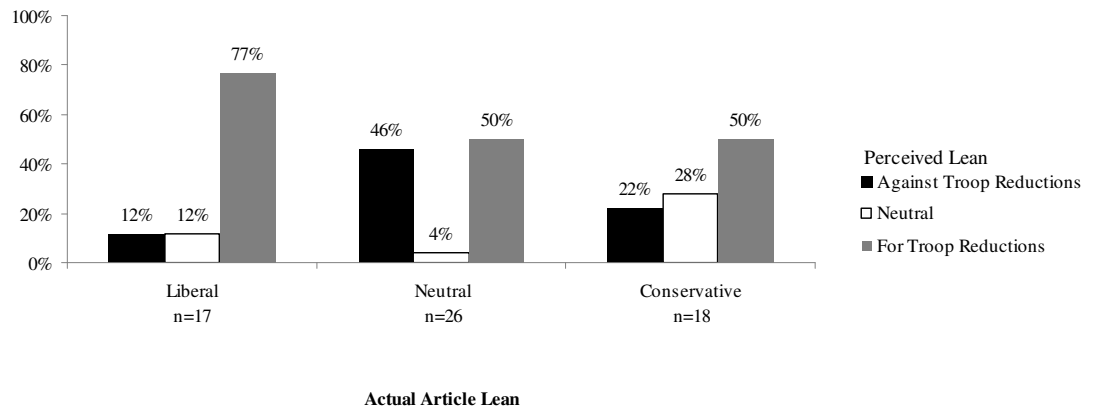
Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

For the universal healthcare article, the relationship based on actual article lean was closer to being in the expected direction than it was based on source: 94.7 percent of those reading the liberal-leaning version said the story leaned toward "for universal health care" while 84.6 percent reading the conservative version said the same. Similar to the troop reduction article, though, the neutral (or balanced) version had results out of step with the other two. In this case, 68.8 percent of those reading the neutral version said it was for universal healthcare. This is lower than for both the liberal and conservative leaning versions.

Hypothesis two, that liberal respondents would be more likely to perceive the news stories as conservatively biased and conservative respondents would be more likely to perceive the news stories as being liberally biased, was not supported by the results. In fact, with both political measurements (political party and liberal or conservative scale) the different viewpoints were more likely to find the articles favoring their own side than the opposite viewpoint. The one exception was with party identification and the universal health care article. In

this case, 88 percent of Republicans found the article to favor liberals while 73

percent of Democrats felt the same way (relationship significant at .05 level).

However, regardless this hypothesis is hard to definitively prove one way or the

other because of a low number of Republican (8) or Conservative (9) participants.

Because of this small sample size, it is not feasible to test hypothesis three with

any hope of representativeness.

Source Perceptions

The results discussed earlier assumed that each participant had the same

perception of Fox News' and CNN's lean. However, this is of course not the

case. The majority of participants classified Fox News as being conservative

leaning (48.3 percent) but there were still a substantial number who felt it is

moderate (18.3 percent), liberal leaning (16.7 percent), or did not know which

way it leaned (16.7 percent). Participants were much more split over which way

CNN leans with a similar percent classifying them as liberal leaning (31.1

percent), moderate (29.5 percent), and conservative leaning (29.5 percent).

Again, 9.8 percent of participants responded that they did not know which way

CNN leaned which is surprisingly smaller than those who gave the same response

for Fox News.

Given that there is obviously some disagreement in which way the

participants perceive the news outlets to lean, it is important to consider what

impact this perception has on the types of results previously discussed. Figure 9

shows the difference in the perceived lean of an article in the Fox News visual

context by which way the participant feels Fox News leans. There are very small

sample sizes for this chart which could possibly account for the high conservative lean perceived by those classifying Fox News as liberal. However, for the moderate and conservative classifications, those calling Fox News conservative were 20 percentage points more likely to perceive the article to favor the conservative viewpoint (these differences were not found to be statistically significant).

Figure 9
Political Viewpoint Favored for Troop Reduction Article (in Fox Context) by Perceived Lean of Fox News

Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding
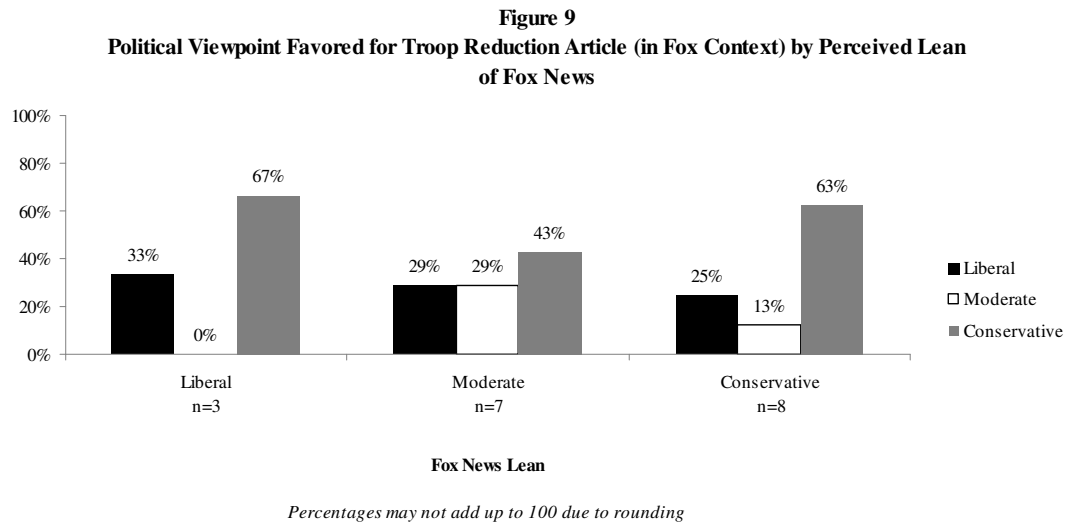
Figure 10 is looking at those with a similar perception of Fox News as being conservative and how that influences the perception of political lean across sources. This may more closely get at testing the hypotheses since it is examining differences among "like-minded" (or having similar perceptions of Fox News) participants but again it suffers from a small sample size. This is partially why this narrowing down of results was not used for the primary analysis discussed earlier. Still, as shown in the chart, those reading the troop article in the Fox News visual context were much more likely to feel it favored the conservative viewpoint.

Figure 10
Political Viewpoint Favored for Troop Reduction Article by Article Context for Those
Classifying Fox News as Conservative
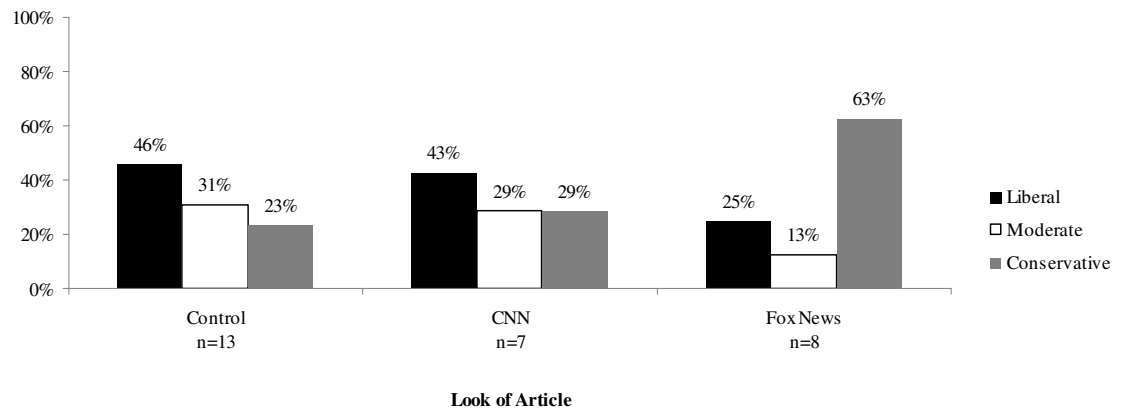
Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

A similar result is seen based on participant's perception of CNN's political lean if not quite as strong as for Fox News. As shown in Figure 11, those classifying CNN as conservative were more likely to feel the articles favored the conservative viewpoint. The breakdown was not quite the same for those classifying CNN as liberal or moderate with moderate classifiers having by far the highest liberal-leaning perception at 80 percent. Sample size may be part of the problem; however, it could also be an indication of the hostile media bias discussed in the introduction. Since an overwhelming majority of respondents classify themselves as liberal, it could be that perceiving a source as being against your political viewpoint makes you much more likely to perceive information as being for that political viewpoint than if the source is perceived to be for your viewpoint.

Figure 11
**Political Viewpoint Favored for Troop Reduction Article (in CNN Context) by Perceived
Lean of CNN**
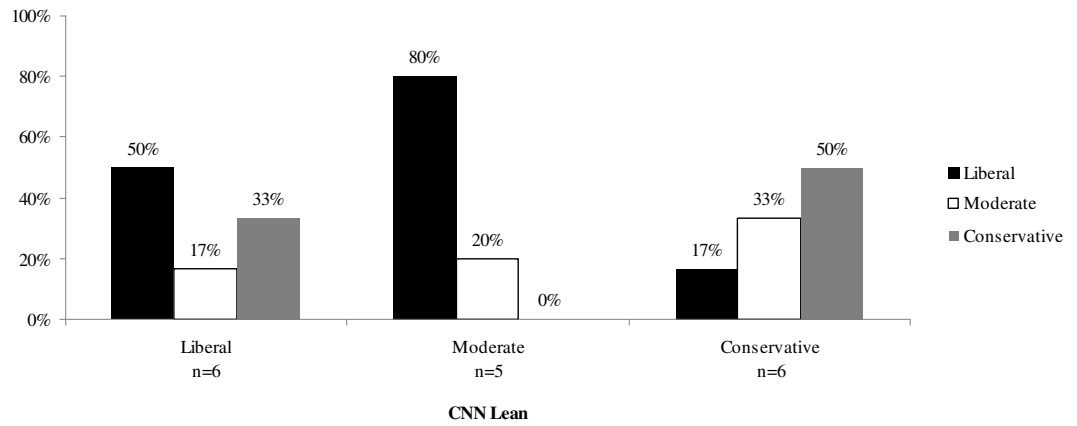
With the universal health care articles, a similar trend is seen if again it is

not a strong as that for the troop reduction articles. Figure 12 shows participants'

perceived lean of the stories for each visual context for those who classified Fox

News as conservative. Again, those reading the Fox News version were the most

likely to classify it as favoring conservatives (25 percent) and least likely to

classify it as favoring liberals. These differences are not significant.

Figure 12
**Political Viewpoint Favored for Universal Health Article by Visual Context for Those
Classifying Fox News as Conservative**
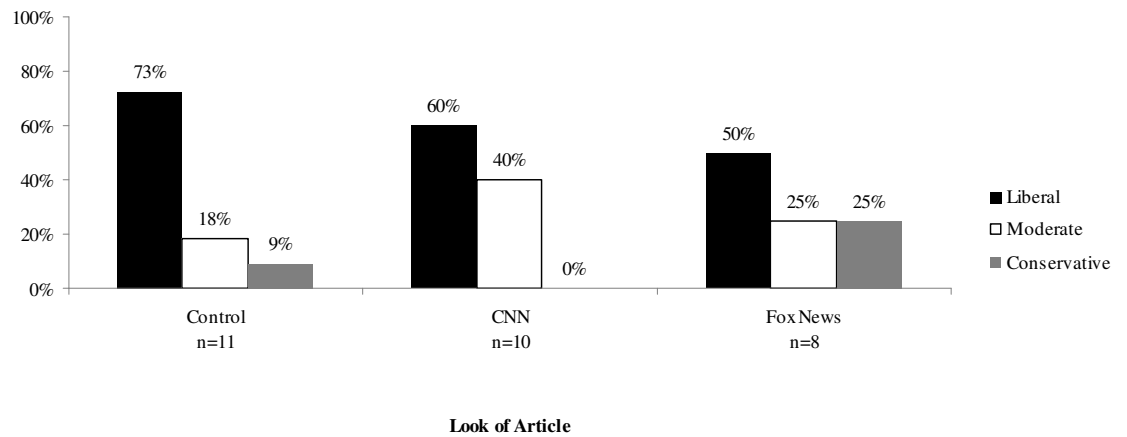
Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

Somewhat surprisingly, though, the same effect based on perceived lean of CNN is not seen as it was with the troop reductions articles. In fact, those who classify CNN as liberal have the lowest percentage of perceiving the article to favor the liberal viewpoint. It must be pointed again that these differences are not statistically significant and due to the small sample sizes, these results could be easily skewed by a variety of factors that cannot be controlled.

Figure 13
Political Viewpoint Favored for Universal Health Article (in CNN Context) by Perceived Lean of CNN
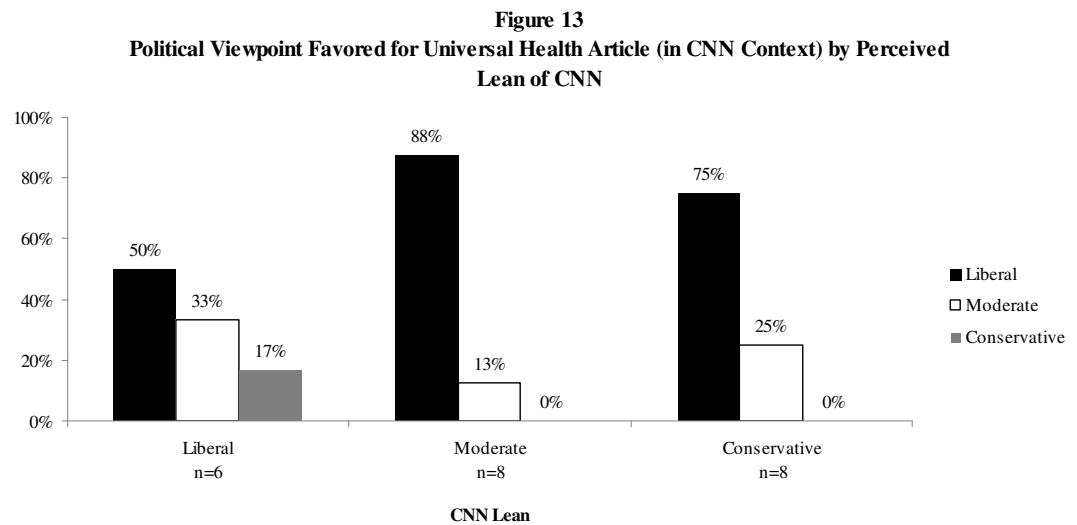
Overall, it does appear that there is interplay between the perception of the lean of a source and which way the story is perceived to lean.

Impact of Trust in the Media

As mentioned in the introduction, the level of trust in the media can have a substantial impact on how news consumers process information. The main concept in this case is that the more someone distrusts the media, the more likely they are to perceive bias in all news articles. Because of this, it is also important to consider the role of trust in the results of this study. First, Figure 14 shows the average level of perceived bias by the amount of trust in the mainstream media. Perceived bias is on a scale of one to seven with one being "not biased" and seven

being "completely biased." As the graph shows, trust in this instance does not seem to have the expected effect of people who distrust the media more perceiving higher levels of bias. In fact, in this case the result is the opposite with the highest levels of bias being found by those who completely trust and somewhat trust the mainstream media.

Figure 14
Level of Bias for Troop Reduction Article by Trust in Mainstream Media

	Completely Distrust n=1	Somewhat Distrust n=12	Neutral n=4	Somewhat Trust n=38	Completely Trust n=5
	4.0	4.8	4.5	4.9	5.0

Trust in Mainstream Media
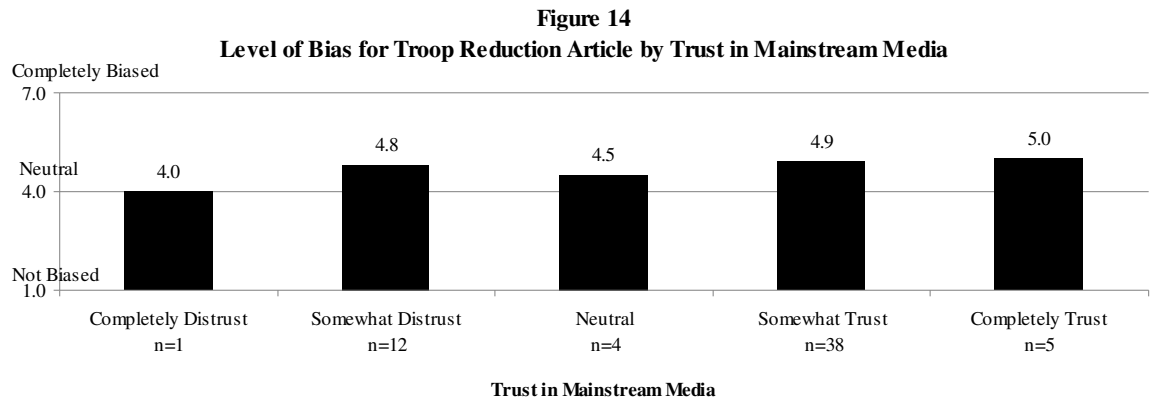
For the universal health care article, shown in Figure 15, the effect shown is slightly closer to what would be expected with the highest average level of perceived bias for those who somewhat distrust the mainstream media, the results still do not quite follow the linear pattern that would be expected.

Figure 15
Level of Bias for Universal Health Article by Trust in Mainstream Media

	Completely Distrust n=1	Somewhat Distrust n=12	Neutral n=4	Somewhat Trust n=38	Completely Trust n=5
	1.0	5.1	4.5	4.6	5.0

Trust in Mainstream Media
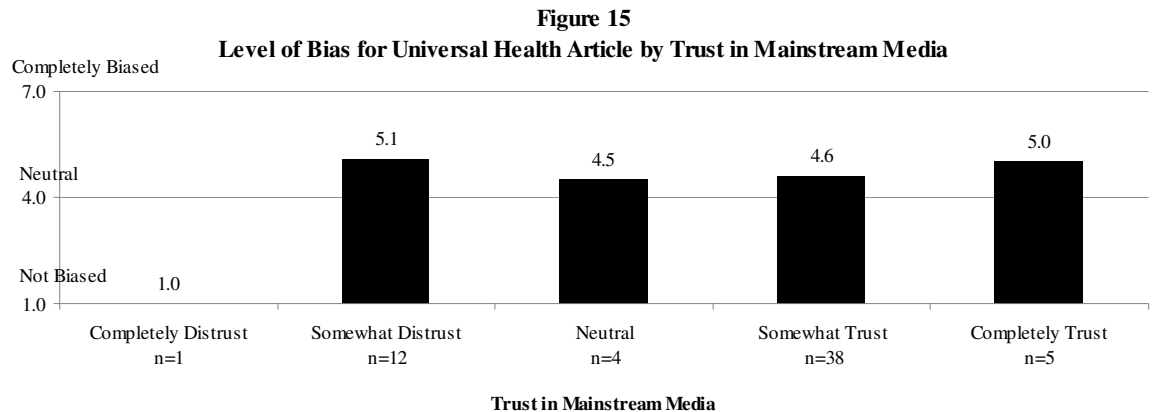
These findings do not seem to support the idea that general distrust in the media will cause people to perceive more bias, at least in the context of this study.

However, the amount of trust in the actual medium the content is from does appear to impact the amount of bias perceived in this way. As shown in Figures 16 and 17, the highest average levels of perceived bias for both articles were found by those who either completely distrust or somewhat distrust cable news.

Figure 16
Level of Bias for Troop Reduction Article by Trust in Cable News

Figure 17
Level of Bias for Universal Health Article by Trust in Cable News
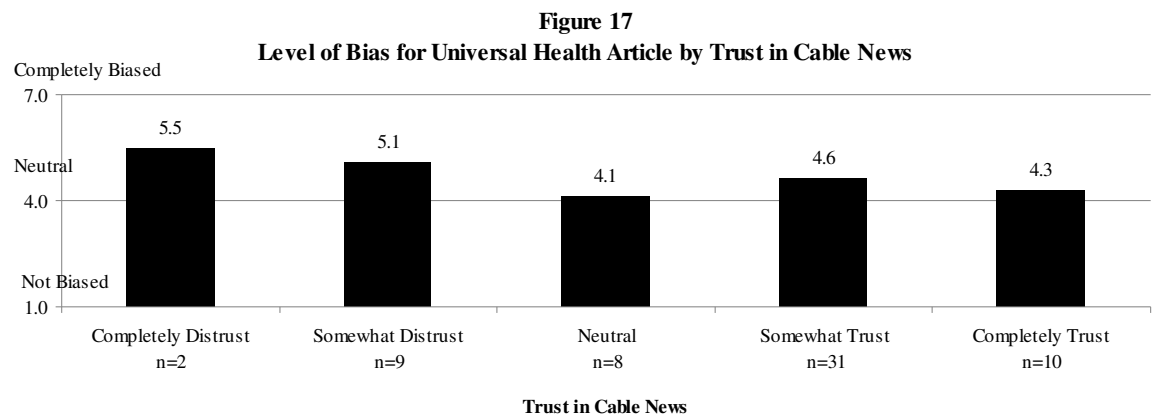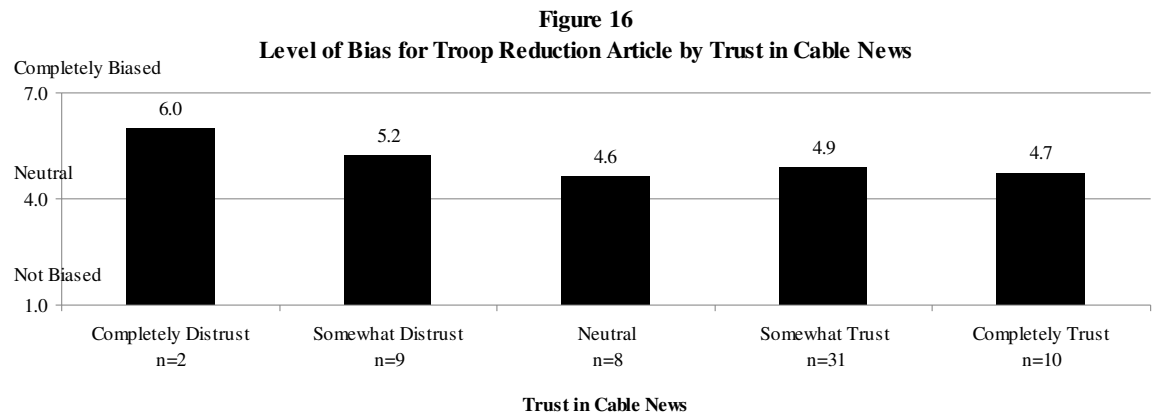
These results tend to suggest that perhaps characterizations of the media as a whole as being untrustworthy may not be as useful as considering the trust levels for the different media. It also hints at the idea that expecting a certain type of source to not be credible can lead to higher perceptions of bias. Looking at this same concept another way is that people who believe stories are more often biased are more likely to perceive stories as being biased than those who

generally feel news stories are unbiased. Figure 18 shows the effect of this

concept on perceptions of bias for the stories in this study. Participants were

asked how often they felt news stories were biased and given the choices of

rarely, sometimes, usually, and always. The categories "sometimes" and

"usually" are the only ones included because "rarely" and "always" had sample

sizes of one and two respectively making their results unreliable. As shown in

Figure 18, those who said news stories are usually biased had a slightly higher

average level of perception of bias for each story.

Figure 18
Level of Bias for Articles by How Often Feel News Stories are Biased
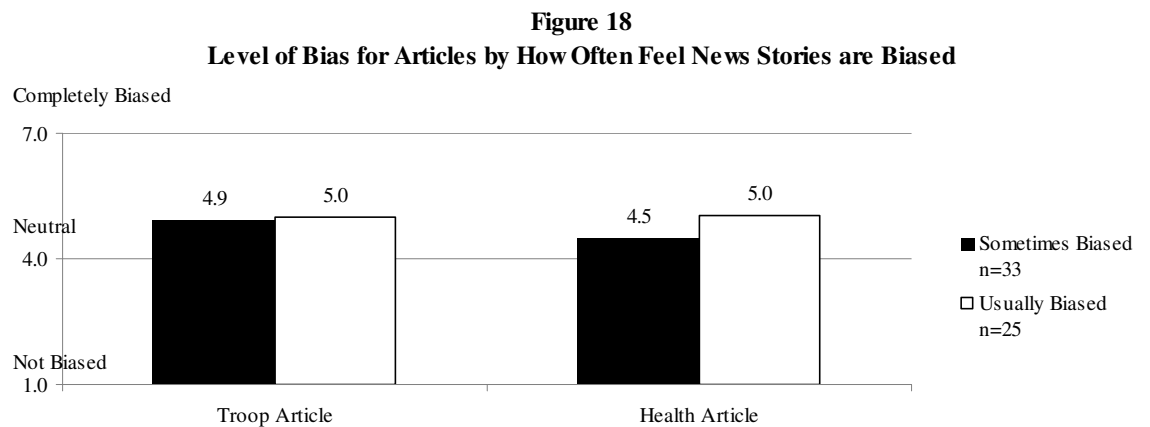
The lack of trust in a particular medium can also be somewhat transferred to

perceiving "journalists" in that medium to be more biased or less objective.

However, the results of this study show that the participants were more willing to

say that journalists let their views slip into the story than that they did not

effectively do their job of covering the story objectively. Still, for both questions,

there does appear to be an effect based on participant trust of cable. For example,

as Figure 19 shows, those who distrust cable were much less likely to agree that

the reporter covered the troop reduction story objectively (18.2%) compared to those who trust cable.

Figure 19
Reporter Covered Troop Reduction Story Objectively by Trust in Cable
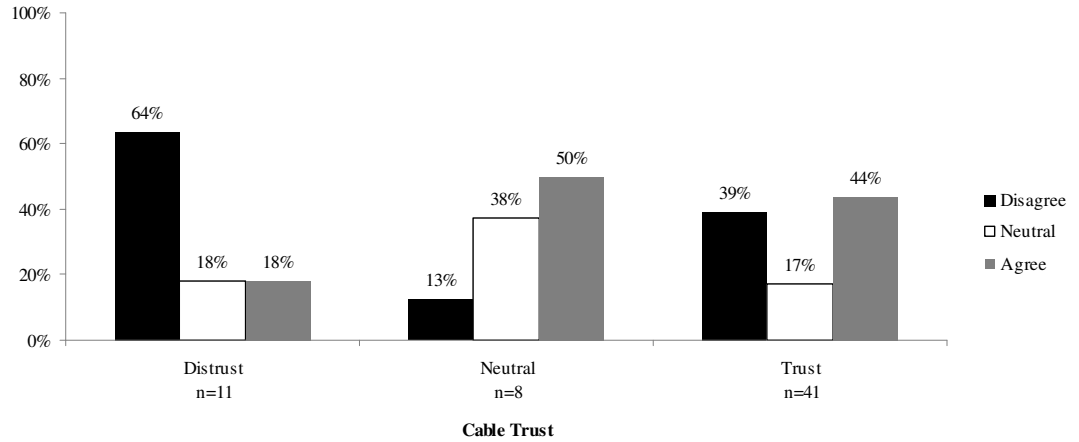
Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

The other question asks whether participants feel the reporter let his/her views slip into the story. As shown in Figure 20, there was not a strong relationship based on trust since most agreed that the reporter did so. Neither of these relationships is statistically significant.

Figure 20
Reporter Let Views Slip into Troop Reduction Article by Trust in Cable
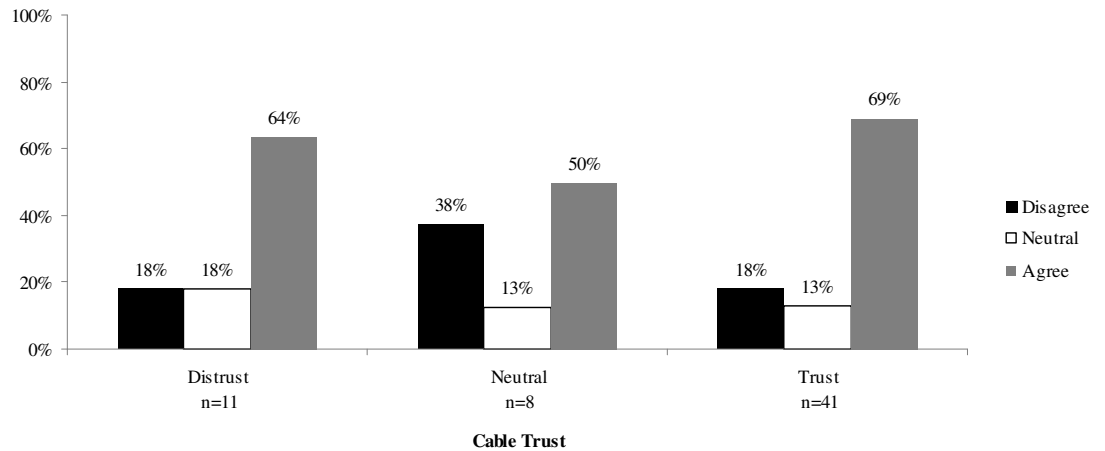
Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

For the universal health care article set, there was a similar trend seen. However, with these articles, participants who distrusted cable were less likely to believe the reporter covered the story objectively and more likely to believe the reporter let his/her views slip into the story than those who trust cable (see Figures 21 and 22).

Figure 21
Reporter Covered Universal Health Story Objectively by Trust in Cable
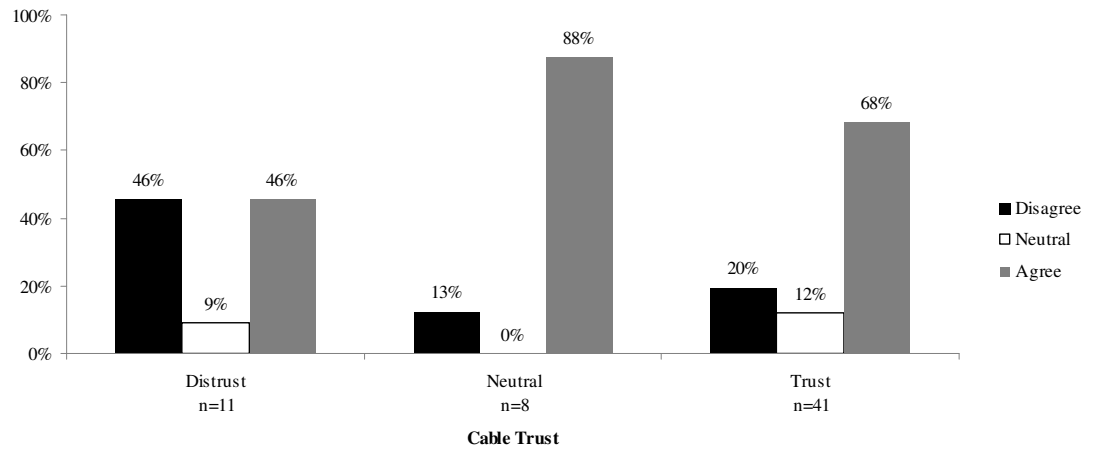
Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

Figure 22
Reporter Let Views Slip into Universal Health Article by Trust in Cable
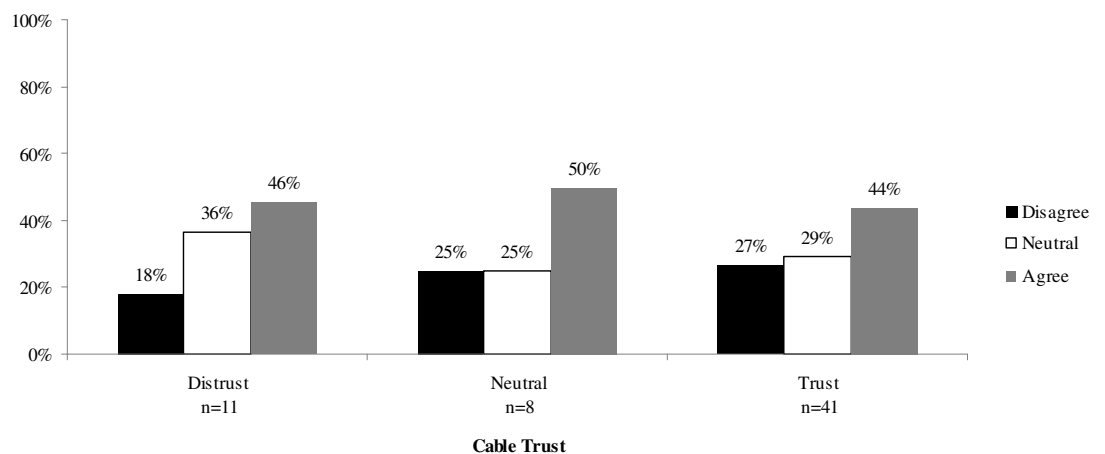
Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

Hostile Media Effect

The hostile media effect, as discussed in the introduction, is the phenomenon in which partisans from both sides will see certain content as being biased against them. However, this phenomenon did not seem to ring true in this study. First, for the troop article, those who agreed that the US should reduce the number of troops in Iraq (80 percent of respondents) also were more likely to feel that the story affirmed their belief and leaned toward troop reductions (see Figure 23). On the other hand, those who felt the US should not reduce the number troops were split on which way the story "leaned."
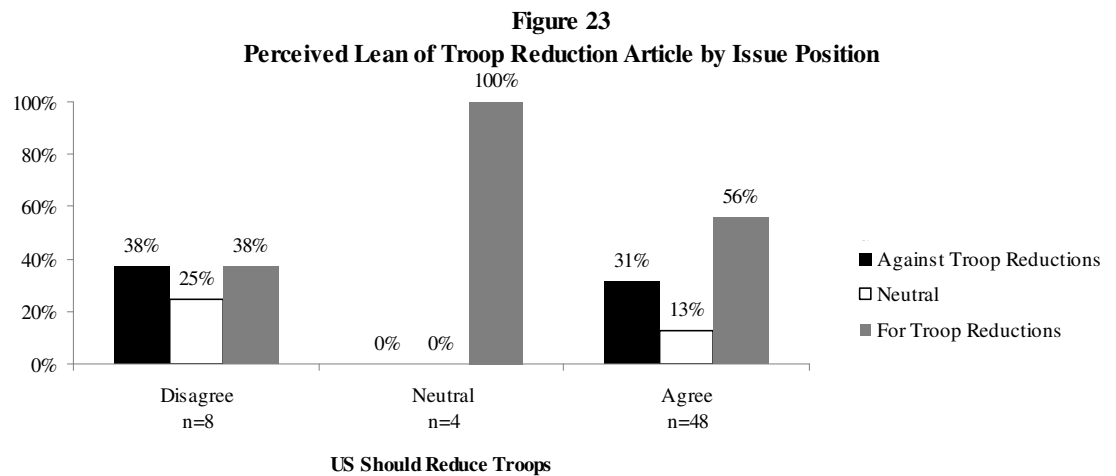
Figure 23
Perceived Lean of Troop Reduction Article by Issue Position

Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

For the universal health care article set, the affirmative relationship was even stronger and was close to being statistically significant (at .063). As shown in Figure 24, those who agreed the US should establish a universal health care system similar to Canada (79.3% of respondents) overwhelmingly felt the stories favored their viewpoint. Those who did not feel the US should move to a

universal health care system were more likely to say the story was neutral but none of them said it favored their own side.

Figure 24
Perceived Lean of Universal Health Article by Issue Position
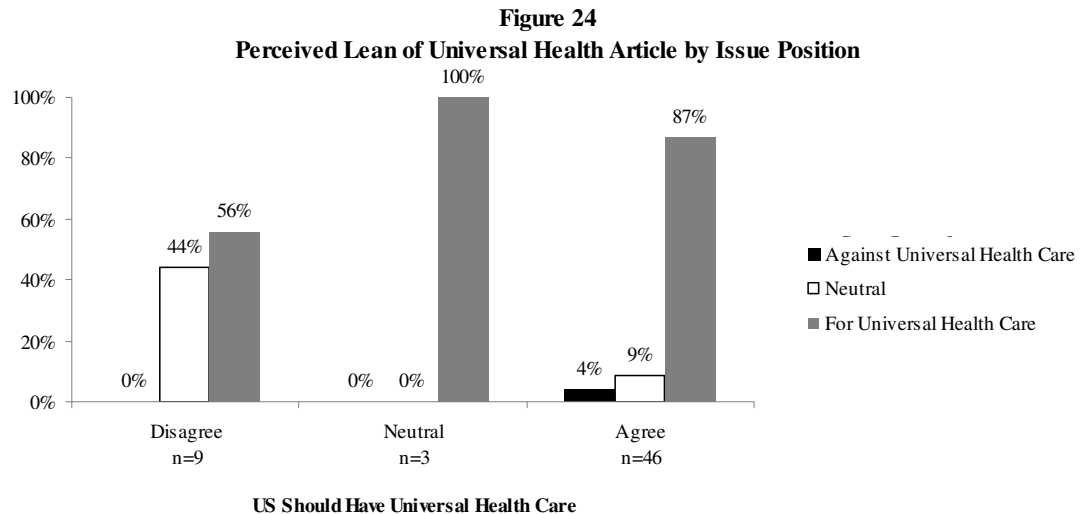
Another aspect of the hostile media effect discussed in the introduction was the uniqueness of the effect to content presented as being from the media. The Gunther and Liebhart study showed that bias was perceived more from sources that were presented as being mass distributed.[33] For this study, the participants only could tell where the stories came from (as in the overall news organization) and it was not specified who wrote the stories. Because of this, it was ambiguous as to the context of the control versions because the participants were not told at all where the text came from and whether or not it was a mass distributed news article. The only clues to this were the questions that asked about how well the "reporter" did in covering the story objectively and whether or not the participant felt the "reporter" let his/her views slip into the story. With this in mind, the results of this study failed to support the Gunther and Liebhart

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[33] Gunther, A.C., and Liebhart, J.L. (2006). Broad reach or biased source? Decomposing the hostile media effect. Journal of Communication, 56, 449-466.

results because no clear pattern of bias was found in the two article sets based on source. Participants on average felt troop reduction stories presented as being from CNN were more "biased" than Fox and the control version whereas for the universal health care articles the control version received the highest average "biased" score (see Figure 25). If these results were to align with the Gunther and Liebhart study, it would be expected that the Fox News and CNN versions would have been seen as more biased for both articles.

Figure 25
Level of Bias for Articles by Source

Completely Biased

7.0

| | 4.8 | 4.9 | 5.0 | 5.4 | 4.2 | 4.5 |

Neutral
4.0

Not Biased

1.0

Control	Fox	CNN	Control	Fox	CNN
n=21	n=21	n=19	n=19	n=20	n=22
	Troop Reduction			Universal Health Care	

Source of Articles
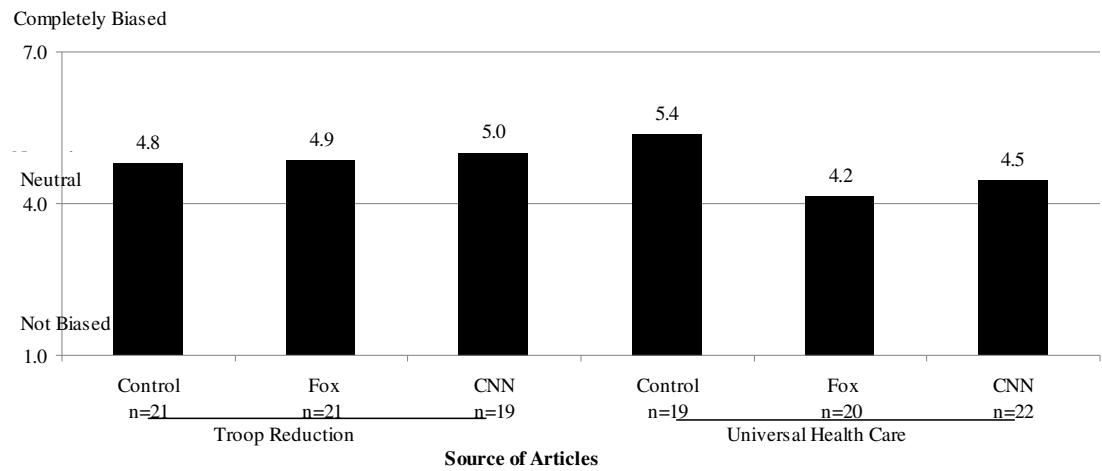
The source also impacts the perception of the job the reporter has done (through the same questions discussed in the trust section). For the troop reduction article, those reading the control version were much less likely to disagree and more likely to either agree or stay neutral that the reporter let his/her views slip into the story than those reading Fox News or CNN versions (Figure 26).

Figure 26
Reporter Let Views Slip into Universal Health Article by Source
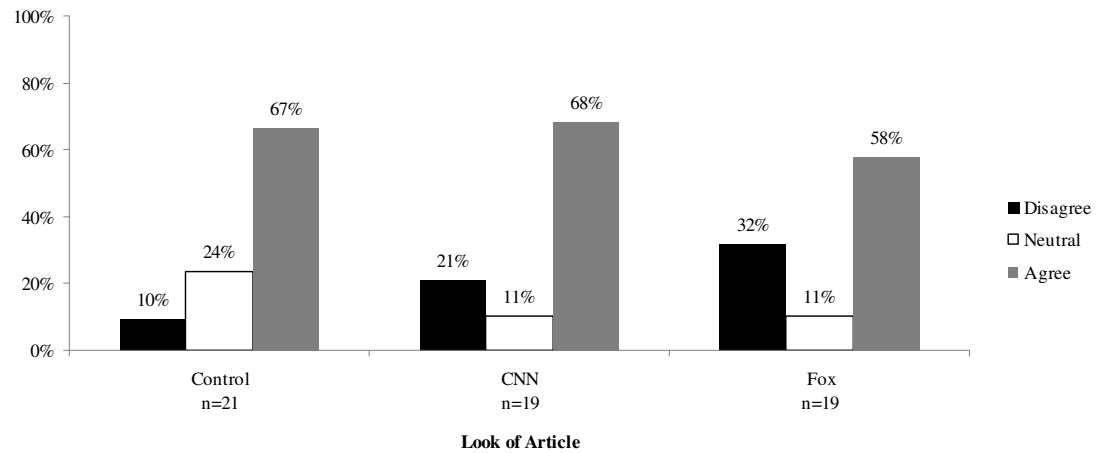
Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

Similarly, those reading the control version of the troop reduction article were more likely to believe that the reporter did not do a good job of covering the story objectively as well at 47.6 percent compared to 33.3 percent for Fox and 36.8 percent for CNN.

The universal health care articles had similar results for these two questions. However, in this case the more significant results came from the objectivity question at a level of .07. Participants reading the Fox News and CNN versions were by far more likely to believe the reporter covered the story objectively than those who read the control version (see Figure 27).

Figure 27
Reporter Covered Universal Health Story Objectively by Source
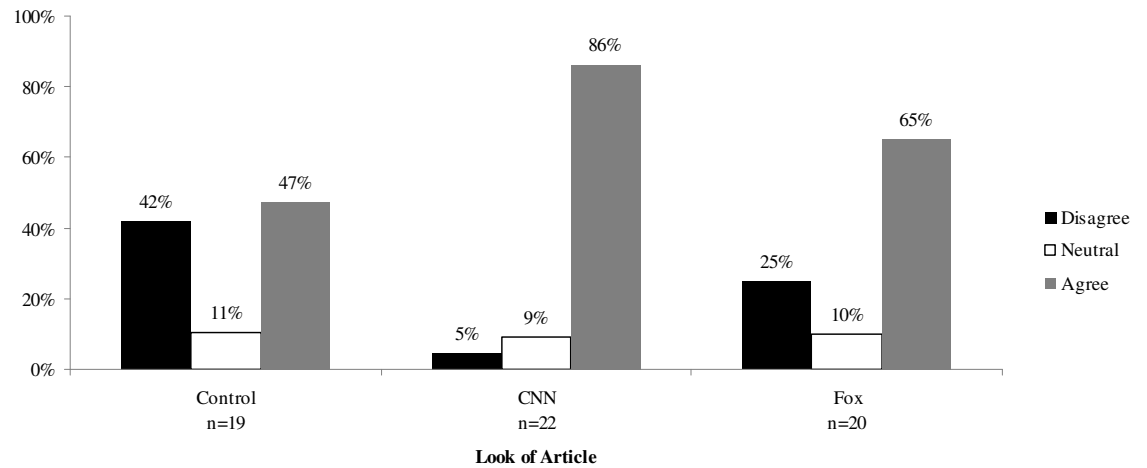
Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

These results tend to suggest the opposite of the Gunther and Liebhart findings. Part of the reason for this may be that there is more of an expectation of objectivity and credibility for the articles presented as being from the two news organizations than for content simply presented in a Word document form. This concept will be discussed further in the next section.

DISCUSSION

There does appear to be some sort of effect on perception of bias caused by the source of the material. Though the results for this test were not statistically significant, there did appear to be a certain trend. This in part does suggest the first hypothesis may be true, which was that news consumers would find a certain news story to be more biased toward the corresponding associated political viewpoint. However, this finding is not without many qualifiers. There are many other factors that were found to have a stronger influence on the perception of bias, including the actual content, which were not anticipated.

First, the true problem that plagued this study was a lack of participants, particularly with so few having a conservative or Republican political viewpoint. Future study might open up to a larger population of participants, even if it only meant using students from other schools besides communications. A larger sample size might allow for more valid results based on source. It could also allow for comparisons based on political viewpoint as was outlined in hypotheses two and three.

Another thing that needs to be considered about this study is the use of introductory communications students for the sample. The students in the sample most likely do not have as much experience consuming news material and may not have as many examples of "bias" to draw from. In the sample, 70 percent said they watched cable news less than twice a week (34 percent said never). They may have less exposure to the concept of news outlets having certain ideologies (such as Fox News being conservative) as well. Also, since most of the students

are considering careers in the media, they may be more trusting of the media than the general population.

The limitations mentioned make it difficult to compare the results to the general population. Still, the results of this study do suggest some things about the population studied (introductory level communications students) that could be valid. Also, considering that the samples from both the pilot test and the full study were able to pick out the content bias in the troop reduction article set and not the universal health care article set does tend to lend further credence to the study.

First, while overall participants were more likely to view content presented from Fox News as leaning towards Conservatives (see Figures 4 and 5), this effect was much stronger among participants who perceived Fox as being Conservative (see Figure 10). The reasoning for this is somewhat obvious: those who consciously understand Fox News as being conservative are more likely to perceive content from it to favor the conservative viewpoint. This could mean that in some way being able to determine the lean of a news outlet when asked influences subconsciously the perception of bias for content presented from that source. It was hard to test from the data gathered whether subconscious impressions from "word on the street" or otherwise had an impact on perception of bias. In the study, the question asked participants which way they thought the certain news outlets leaned. To perhaps better gauge whether popular opinion could subconsciously impact perceptions in the same way, the question could have asked, "which way do you feel most people think the following news outlets

lean?" This would have eliminated the possibility of people who have heard that Fox News is conservative but personally do not consciously feel that way necessarily.

Another interesting finding was that in a similar manner the perception of CNN's lean impacted which way participants felt the articles leaned (particularly the troop reduction article, as shown in Figure 11). With both CNN and Fox, those who classified them as conservative seemed to be more likely to feel the articles leaned toward the conservative viewpoint than those who classified them as liberal found them to favor liberals. This may be an extension of the hostile media bias from being that partisans will find information to be against their viewpoint[34] to include what could be called a "hostile source." In other words, since most of the participants in this study classified themselves as liberal or Democratic (75 percent Democrats), it could be that they are more apt to feel that content leans toward the corresponding viewpoint of a news outlet that disagrees with their political viewpoint than for those that agree with it.

However, while the results may suggest an extension of the traditional concept of hostile media bias, the traditional concept was not shown in this study. In fact, for both articles, partisans were more likely to perceive the story as leaning toward their viewpoint rather than the opposing viewpoint (see Figures 23 and 24). It is hard to determine why this is the case for this study. Perhaps participants have gained some sort of general feeling that the media is leaning toward a certain political position outside of the way the news outlets "typically"

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[34] Tsfati, Y., and Cohen, J. (2005). Democratic consequences of hostile media perceptions. *Press/Politics, 10(4),* 30.

lean. It was also found that the effect of source was not as great on the question concerning which issue position the articles favored as opposed to simply which political viewpoint. Participants seem to be more able to make the connection that Fox News is conservative and thus this article must have favored conservatives than to extend that to what would be a conservative position such as being against troop reductions in Iraq. This could be based on a lack of information or political savvy from the participants, however, it more likely is simply that issue positions take a little more mental processing than the typical reader is willing to do while reading the story. Most people are not likely to determine which side of the issue the source is going to favor before reading the story.

Another aspect of hostile media bias that was not shown in this study was that the phenomenon only applied to mass mediated sources.[35] In the troop reduction articles, a higher average amount of bias was found for the Fox and CNN versions versus the control version whereas for the universal health articles the control version had the highest rate (see Figure 25). The control version should have had the lowest rate for both article sets if the hostile media effect only applied to mass mediated content. However, there could have been other factors that influenced this difference. In the Gunther and Liebhart study (that made this finding of hostile media bias's uniqueness to the media), participants were made clearly aware of the context of content. Some of the content was presented as being simply an essay. However, in this study, the control version

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[35] Gunther, A.C., and Liebhart, J.L. (2006). Broad reach or biased source? Decomposing the hostile media effect. Journal of Communication, 56, 449-466.

was never presented as being in any specific context and was presented in a way that certainly suggested "media article" rather than "student essay." Because of this, more bias may have been applied to the control version because of the lack of a definitive source. Participants may have felt the control versions were less credible because they were unable to determine where the content came from. So, all of the visual contexts may have been experiencing some type of hostile media bias but the difference was based more on credibility and trust perhaps.

Trust also had an impact on perceptions of bias in the articles in that the more the participants distrusted cable news the greater average amount of bias they perceived (see Figures 16 and 17). However, this effect was only seen with the amount of distrust for cable news and not for the media in general. There was a slightly lower amount of trust for cable news than for mass media (72 percent at least "somewhat trust" the media while 68 percent feel the same way for cable news). This finding could suggest that an overall measure of the media as being un-trusted may not be as useful as determining the public's trust of each medium. Part of this is that the media encompasses so many types of sources, such as entertainment programming, talk shows (such as the O'Reilly Factor, and Rush Limbaugh), and others so as to be almost too encompassing. It's understandable that people may not trust the "media" but perhaps they trust certain sections of the media.

This study also found that a lack of trust in a given medium can be transferred in some ways to the reporters or journalists in that medium: those who trusted cable news were more likely to say that the reporter did a good job

covering the story objectively. It was also found that those who felt news stories were "usually biased" found the stories to be slightly more biased on average than those who felt news stories are only "sometimes biased" (see Figure 18). Overall, what the findings involving trust show is that those who distrust the medium the content is from or believe stories to be more biased generally are more likely to perceive news stories to be biased. This gets into the framing done by the individual reading the content and suggests that the source of the content could definitely be a part of this consideration set. What still needs to be determined, though, is what place the source holds in determining bias.

What this study found was that though source does seem to have an effect on perceptions of bias, it appears that the actual content of the stories was a better predictor of bias perception. This partially rejects the second part of hypothesis one, which stated that the effect of the source would exist regardless of the actual content. It seems that the more correct relationship between source and content is that the effect of source exists within the actual content. Participants were surprisingly adept at picking out the different leans of the article that were machinated by the researcher, particularly for the troop reduction article (see Figure 6). The participants correctly selected the lean of the troop reduction articles at what was a statistically significant level of less than .01. This same content effect was seen in the universal health care articles but in a slightly different manner. Most participants felt that each version of the article favored the liberal viewpoint; however, the conservative leaning article had a slightly

lower percentage (60 percent compared to 79 percent for the liberal-leaning version).

The difference between the perception of lean between the troop reduction articles and the universal health care articles points out what is perhaps the most complicated part of the issue of bias: determining what constitutes it for the audience. The results of this study (as well as other sources discussed in the introduction) suggest that story balance is most easily recognized by news audiences. This is despite journalists' feelings that balance is not the most fair or accurate way to avoid bias in news content. However, the results do show that the participants in this study were more adept at noticing changes in the story balance. This is because they were able to discern the different leans for the troop reduction articles, which utilized an addition and subtraction method for "biasing" (changing the balance) while they were not able to do the same for the universal health care articles which used more subtle ways of "biasing" such as word choice. The universal health care articles were found to mostly favor the liberal viewpoint, most likely because the story only included Democratic sources. However, this was a legitimate news story covering the different Democratic candidates for president on the primary trail. The fact that there is no "opposing" voice in the story (from the Republicans) does not mean that the story is biased or not objective. This does appear to be the way that the participants of this study determined bias, though. Particularly concerning about this is that the more subtle word choice method used for the universal health care stories is a much more realistic scenario for actual bias in the news media. It is somewhat impressive

that the participants were able to pick out the blatant bias as well as they did, however, it's the subtle, sometimes subconscious, bias which really poses a threat.

While there is this disconnect between journalists and audience on what makes a story biased, which could be leading to distrust of the media, it is interesting that much of the "audience" in this case is comprised of students hoping to become media practitioners. This suggests that the concept of journalistic objectivity is certainly a learned perspective and not something that journalist students come in with innately. It would be interesting to see how communications upperclassmen would approach similar questions of bias.

For future study, what constitutes bias to the audience would need to be determined before evaluating the effect of other variables. While the dichotomy between journalists' definition of bias and the audience's is worthy of discussion, the audience's definition is really the important one for determining the effect of other factors. So, to truly test the effect of source on the perception of bias, it would be necessary to establish what best represents bias to the average member of the participant pool and then design the study materials around this finding. This would eliminate part of the problem of this study which was that there were too many factors involved with having two different types of story bias. By focusing on one clear way of "biasing" articles for the audience, a study could more easily look solely at the effect of the source. From the results of this study, it does appear that story balance is most effectively picked up by the audience but more questions and tests would need to be conducted to accurately gauge this.

Further study could also look at testing the relationship of source within the cable news format, not simply in an online format. To do this, many variables would need to be controlled such as the video used, the voice over, and others to really get at how the source impacts the perception of bias. However, once this could be done viably, many other studies could follow testing the other variables such as the video used since this can be a source of "bias" in television news as well.

Overall, this study does tend to show that perceived biases for news outlets can impact the perception of bias by the audience for individual news items from those outlets. While 82 percent of the participants of the study did agree that bias is a problem in the news, only 64 percent were at least somewhat concerned about bias. Preventing story bias should be of concern to journalists. A journalist can lose credibility if his or her stories are found to be biased. That being said, it is not just important how biased the story actually is, but rather, how biased the audience perceives the story to be. If the news audience believes a story is biased, no matter how the journalist feels, it can cause the journalist or the news organization to lose trust from the public. This is why studying the perception of bias could be paramount to the press fulfilling its role in the United States' democracy. While journalists may disagree on what bias means, journalism's first loyalty is to the citizens.[36] So, in some ways journalists should adhere to their audience's perception of bias (but still not sacrifice their journalistic integrity) in order to produce content that is "free" of bias.

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[36] Kovach, B. and Rosenstiel, T. (2007). <u>The Elements of Journalism</u>. Random House: New York.

With an increase in partisan sources that have an established viewpoint, there has been some discussion that perhaps television news will move to having niche stations that cater to one viewpoint. Most of the participants in this study said they were against this type of arrangement at 72 percent with only 18 percent saying they would be for it (10 percent were neutral). Still, as Guy Reel, a professor of communications at Winthrop University, wrote, "A partisan press is not necessarily a bad thing - as long as all viewpoints are reflected honestly. The danger comes when a particular worldview dominates or when viewers or readers are deceived about the agenda of a news vehicle."[37] This suggests that news outlets being more upfront about their partisanship, instead of insisting their coverage is "fair and balanced", might actually be good for the press. Knowing where someone (or the organization) is coming from can help news consumers to process the information effectively. However, this structure could be dangerous because painting an outlet as conservative restricts that outlet from ever accurately portraying the other side in the eyes of the news consumer. This study has shown that perceptions of the lean of sources can impact legitimate news stories that are either neutral or even lean toward the opposite viewpoint from the source. This allows people to possible discount information that they dislike or disagree with by chalking it up to the "bias" of the source. People of different viewpoints need to have a common set of facts they can rely on to possibly reach consensus, which means there needs to be some source of information that both sides agree presents facts in a manner relatively free of bias.

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[37] Reel, G. (2003, December 17). The New Partisan Press. *Common Dreams.* Retrieved May 19, 2008 from http://www.commondreams.org/views03/1217-09.htm

In conclusion, further study would be needed to determine the strength of the effect of source on bias perception. This study did suggest that this relationship does exist in the manner hypothesized but was not statistically significant. The actual content of the stories was found to be a more significant predictor of bias perception; however, only in the story balance context. Still, source does appear to influence the perception of lean within the content bias particularly for those who have an established belief for the lean of the source. It may be that if popular perception of certain sources as being "partisan" increases, it could lead to a greater effect on the perception of bias in the news media.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX I - Full Text of Article Versions Used in Study

TROOP REDUCTION ARTICLE SET

Balanced

Cheney: Democrats will back down

Vice President Dick Cheney says Democrats will back down on demands for troop reductions in Iraq and approve a bill that will continue funding the War on Terror without cutting down the number of troops.

"They will not leave the troops in the field without the resources they need," Cheney said of the Democrats.

Four bombs in predominantly Shiite sections of Baghdad killed 37 people Sunday. This was three days after a suicide bomber attacked a cafeteria at the Iraqi parliament, inside Baghdad's U.S. guarded green zone. Cheney says, though that the U.S continues to make progress.

"I do believe we can win in Iraq," he said. "I think it is a worthy cause. I think it's absolutely essential that we prevail."

Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Carl Levin, D-Mich. says Democrats will not pull back demands for a timetable in Iraq. Levin says Cheney is understating the conditions in Iraq.

"He has misled the people consistently on Iraq," Levin said. "He has misstated. He has exaggerated. And I don't think he has any credibility left with the American people."

Most Republicans stand with Bush on grounds that a timetable is a dangerous war policy.

Right

"Democrats will back down"

Vice President Dick Cheney says Democrats will back down on demands for troop reductions in Iraq and approve a bill that will continue funding the War on Terror without cutting down the number of troops.

"They will not leave the troops in the field without the resources they need," Cheney said of the Democrats.

Cheney says the number of troops is needed to ensure U.S. victory. Cheney says the U.S continues to make progress.

"I do believe we can win in Iraq," he said. "I think it is a worthy cause. I think it's absolutely essential that we prevail."

Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Carl Levin, D-Mich. says Democrats will not pull back demands for a timetable in Iraq. Levin says Cheney is understating the conditions in Iraq.

However, most Republicans stand with Bush on grounds that a timetable is a dangerous war policy. President Bush has already said he will veto any legislation that calls for troop reductions.

"Now is the time to pour it on politically, economically and militarily, and build on this momentum," said Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., who recently visited Iraq. "We're not going to let car bombers define the fate of Iraq."

Left

Cheney "bets" Democrats will back down from troop reductions

Vice President Dick Cheney says he bets Democrats will back down on demands for troop reductions in Iraq and approve a bill that will continue funding the War on Terror without cutting down the number of troops. This comes despite Democratic leaders in both the House and the Senate saying they will not relent in calling to wind down the war.

Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Carl Levin, D-Mich. says Democrats will not pull back demands for a timetable in Iraq. Levin says Cheney is understating the conditions in Iraq.

"He has misled the people consistently on Iraq," Levin said. "He has misstated. He has exaggerated. And I don't think he has any credibility left with the American people."

Four bombs in predominantly Shiite sections of Baghdad killed 37 people Sunday. This was three days after a suicide bomber attacked a cafeteria at the Iraqi parliament, inside Baghdad's U.S. guarded green zone. Cheney says, though that the U.S continues to make progress.

"I do believe we can win in Iraq," he said. "I think it is a worthy cause. I think it's absolutely essential that we prevail."

Cheney believes Democrats will see the writing on the wall with President Bush planning to veto any legislation that includes troop reductions or a time table for Iraq. He claims Democrats will see the need to stay the course in Iraq.

"They will not leave the troops in the field without the resources they need," Cheney said of the Democrats.

Levin disagrees. "We are very, very serious about what the American people said in November," Levin said, referring to the election that put Democrats in charge of Congress. "They want a change of course."

Levin says if Bush vetoes a bill calling for troop reductions, lawmakers would likely come back with a second try that requires the Iraqi government to meet performance benchmarks or face consequences. Democrats say it is a matter of time before they get their way, with Republicans jumping aboard or being replaced by Democrats through elections.

UNIVERSAL HEALTH CARE ARTICLE SET

Balanced

Clinton tries universal health care again

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) - Health care promises to be a hot issue for the 2008 election, especially with one candidate already vowing to create universal health care coverage if elected.

"We're going to have universal health care when I'm president - there's no doubt about that. We're going to get it done," Democratic presidential contender Hillary Rodham Clinton said this morning on ABC's Good Morning America.

The current New York Senator has said she learned a lot from failed health care efforts during her husband's presidency and said conditions have gotten worse since that time.

"The number of uninsured has grown," said Clinton. "It's hard to ignore the fact that nearly 47 million people don't have health insurance, but also because so many people with insurance have found it's difficult to get health care because the insurance companies deny you what you need."

Universal health care already exists in Canada. Democratic candidates Barack Obama and John Edwards have also provided proposals for Universal health care coverage, but Clinton disagrees with Edwards assessment that the plan will require raising taxes.

"We've got to get the costs under control," she said. "Why would we put more money into a dysfunctional system?"

Left

Clinton Tries Universal Health Care Again

Health care promises to be a hot issue for the 2008 election, especially with one candidate vowing to create universal health care coverage when elected.

"We're going to have universal health care when I'm president - there's no doubt about that. We're going to get it done," Democratic presidential frontrunner Hillary Rodham Clinton said this morning on ABC's Good Morning America.

The current New York Senator has said she learned a lot from health care efforts during her husband's presidency that were not realized and said that conditions have gotten worse since that time.

"The number of uninsured has grown," said Clinton. "It's hard to ignore the fact that nearly 47 million people don't have health insurance, but also because so many people with insurance have found it's difficult to get health care because the insurance companies deny you what you need."

Universal health care already exists in Canada which could show such a system might be possible in the U.S. Democratic candidates Barack Obama and John Edwards have also provided proposals for Universal health care coverage as well.

"We've got to get the costs under control," she said. "Why would we put more money into a dysfunctional system?"

Right

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Socialized health care already exists in Canada. Democratic candidates Barack Obama and John Edwards have also provided proposals for Universal health care coverage. Edwards has said, though, that the plan most likely would involve raising taxes.

"We've got to get the costs under control," she said. "Why would we put more money into a dysfunctional system?"

APPENDIX II – Visual Templates of Web Articles

On the following two pages, there are examples of the Fox News and CNN web

templates. These templates were used for each version of the articles from

Appendix I. The control version was in the same format as Appendix I, except

for the "lean" was not included at the top (for example, the word "right" was

removed).

Clinton tries universal health care again

Monday, March 26, 2007

FOX NEWS

DES MOINES, Iowa —

Health care promises to be a hot issue for the 2008 election, especially with one candidate vowing to create universal health care coverage when elected.

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Universal health care already exists in Canada which could show such a system might be possible in the U.S. Democratic candidates Barack Obama and John Edwards have also provided proposals for universal health care coverage as well.

"We've got to get the costs under control," she said. "Why would we put more money into a dysfunctional system?"

CNN.com

Clinton tries universal health care again

DES MOINES, Iowa (CNN) -- Health care promises to be a hot issue for the 2008 election, especially with one candidate vowing to create universal health care coverage when elected.

"We're going to have universal health care when I'm president - there's no doubt about that. We're going to get it done," Democratic presidential frontrunner Hillary Rodham Clinton said this morning on ABC's Good Morning America.

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Universal health care already exists in Canada which could show such a system might be possible in the U.S. Democratic candidates Barack Obama and John Edwards have also provided proposals for universal health care coverage as well.

"We've got to get the costs under control," she said. "Why would we put more money into a dysfunctional system?"

Find this article at:
http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/04/15/clinton.health/index.html?iref=mpstoryview

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

APPENDIX III – Research for Universal Health Care Articles

FOX News

WASHINGTON (AP) _ Democratic presidential front-runner Hillary Rodham Clinton offered a plan on Wednesday aimed at expanding the children's health care program to cover all children who are currently uninsured.

The New York senator joined with Rep. John Dingell, D-Mich., to outline the plan, part of Democrats' five-year, $50 billion attempt to boost the number of poor children provided health care by the State Children's Health Insurance Program.

"A lot of parents are in such a bind because they cannot afford to get the health care that their children need and deserve," Clinton said.

Clinton, who helped mold an unsuccessful plan to overhaul the health care insurance system when she was first lady, said the children's proposal "is the kind of congressional action that is a step toward universal coverage for everyone."

The measure will likely be part of Clinton's agenda as she pursues the 2008 nomination. Democratic rivals Barack Obama of Illinois and John Edwards of North Carolina have both favored providing universal health care coverage by 2012.

Clinton's proposal would expand the children's health program, which provides health insurance to six million children in families who earn too much to qualify for Medicaid, but cannot afford to buy private insurance. An estimated 9 million children are uninsured.

The plan seeks to give all uninsured children access to coverage by offering states financial incentives to cover children with family incomes of up to four times the poverty level.

Dingell noted that children are typically cheaper to insure than older people.

"It costs less than $3.50 a day _ that's less than the cost of a Starbucks Frappuccino," Dingell said.

http://www.foxnews.com/wires/2007Mar14/0,4670,Onthe2008Trail,00.html

CHAPEL HILL, N.C. (AP) _ Democratic presidential contender John Edwards is mailing Iowa caucus voters some 70,000 DVDs that argue he is the only candidate with a health care plan for all Americans.

The Edwards campaign hoped to reach a significant number of Iowa's Democratic caucus voters with the DVD. Slightly more than 100,000 participated in the 2004 caucus.

"What America really wants in their next president is to be able to trust their president," Edwards says in the six-minute video. "In order for that to be true, they want to feel like ... the president is a good and decent and honest human being who's trying to do what's right."

The video and pamphlet specifically address health care problems and statistics in Iowa, where the state's leadoff caucuses will begin the nomination process.

Sen. John Kerry won Iowa in 2004 and went on to earn the party's nomination. Edwards placed second in Iowa and later earned a spot as Kerry's vice presidential nominee.

Edwards has proposed a tax increase to fund a universal health care plan that would cover the estimated 47 million Americans who do not have insurance. The plan would create "health markets," including a government-run plan like Medicare, to create competitive prices. It would also subsidize insurance for low-income Americans and require businesses to help cover the insurance costs of their employees.

http://www.foxnews.com/wires/2007Mar05/0,4670,Onthe2008Trail,00.html

Clinton promises universal health care

Wire reports
Monday, March 26, 2007

http://www.abqtrib.com/news/2007/mar/26/clinton-promises-universal-health-care/

DES MOINES, Iowa — Saying she "learned a lot" during the failed health care effort of her husband's presidency, Democratic presidential hopeful Hillary Rodham Clinton vowed today to create a universal health care system if elected.

"We're going to have universal health care when I'm president - there's no doubt about that. We're going to get it done," the New York senator and front-runner for the 2008 nomination said.

Clinton argued that health coverage has deteriorated over the last decade, and that's increased public pressure to act.

"The number of uninsured has grown," said Clinton. "It's hard to ignore the fact that nearly 47 million people don't have health insurance, but also because so many people with insurance have found it's difficult to get health care because the insurance companies deny you what you need."

APPENDIX IV – Research Instrument (spacing is not exact do to margin requirements)

Please read the two news articles you have been given carefully and in the order assigned. You will be asked questions pertaining to the articles after you have read them. While answering the questions, please do **<u>not</u>** refer back to the articles, so be sure to have fully read the articles before moving on to the questions. Thank you for participating in this study.
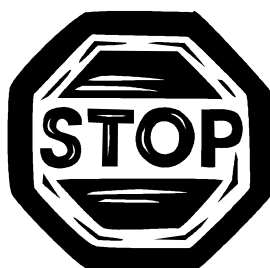
Proceed to the questions ONLY if you have finished reading the articles.

Please answer the following questions about the FIRST article you read. *(Circle your answers)*

Which of the following do you feel describes the first news story?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK
Not Biased			Neutral			Completely Biased	

On the following scale, which way do you think the story leaned? *(circle the number that corresponds to your choice).*

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK
Against Troop Reductions			Neutral			For Troop Reductions	

Which political viewpoint do you think the story favored? *(circle the number that corresponds to your choice).*

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK
Extremely Liberal			Moderate			Extremely Conservative	

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

The reporter let his/her views slip into the story. *(circle one)*:

Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	DK

The reporter did a good job of covering this story objectively. *(circle one)*:

Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	DK

Please answer the following questions about the SECOND article you read. *(Circle your answers)*

Which of the following do you feel describes the second news story?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK
Not Biased			Neutral			Completely Biased	

On the following scale, which way do you think the story leaned? *(circle the number that corresponds to your choice).*

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK
Against Universal Health Care			Neutral			For Universal Health Care	

Which political viewpoint do you think the story favored? *(circle the number that corresponds to your choice).*

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK
Extremely Liberal			Moderate			Extremely Conservative	

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

The reporter let his/her views slip into the story. *(circle one)*:

Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	DK

The reporter did a good job of covering this story objectively. *(circle one)*:

Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	DK

The following questions pertain to your political viewpoint. *(Circle your answers)*

Which political party do you *most closely* identify with?
Republican   Democratic   Other   DK

On the following scale, how liberal or conservative would you say you are politically? *(circle the number that corresponds to your choice).*

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK
Extremely Liberal			Moderate			Extremely Conservative	

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? *(circle one)*:
The US should reduce the number of troops in Iraq.

Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	DK

Which political party do you *generally* associate with being for troop reductions in Iraq?
Republican   Democratic   Other   DK

Which political party do you *generally* associate with being against troop reductions in Iraq?
Republican   Democratic   Other   DK

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? *(circle one)*:
The US should move to a universal health care system similar to Canada.

Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	DK

Which political party do you *generally* associate with being for universal health care?
Republican   Democratic   Other   DK

Which political party do you *generally* associate with being for the privatization of health care?
Republican   Democratic   Other   DK

The next questions are about your news consumption. *(Circle your answers)*

Which is your preferred medium for news content?
Newspaper   Television   Radio   Internet   Magazine   Other

In a typical week, how often do you watch broadcast network news?
Never   1-2 Days   3-4 Days   5-6 Days   Everyday   DK

In a typical week, how often do you watch cable news?
Never   1-2 Days   3-4 Days   5-6 Days   Everyday   DK

In a typical week, how often do you read the newspaper?
Never   1-2 Days   3-4 Days   5-6 Days   Everyday   DK

In a typical week, how often do you use the Internet to get news information?
Never   1-2 Days   3-4 Days   5-6 Days   Everyday   DK

When you use the Internet for news information, which form do you generally use?
News Organization Website   Blog   Other   Don't Use   DK

If given a choice between the following, which would you prefer to use for news information?
New York Times   USA Today   Blog   None   DK

Given the choice, which cable news channel would you choose?
Fox News   CNN   MSNBC   None

How often do you feel news stories are biased?
Never   Rarely   Sometimes   Usually   Always   DK

In general, how much do you trust information you get through the mainstream media?

| Completely Distrust | Somewhat Distrust | Neutral | Somewhat Trust | Completely Trust | DK |

How much do you trust the following forms of media?

Outlet	Trust Rating					
Network TV News	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK
Cable TV News	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK
Local TV News	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK
The Associated Press	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK
Nationally Minded Newspaper (i.e. NY Times, USA Today	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK
Local Newspaper	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK
National Radio News	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK
Local Radio News	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK

How much do you trust the following forms of Internet media?

Internet Outlet	Trust Rating					
General Internet News	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK
Network TV News Website	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK
Cable TV News Website	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK
Local TV News Website	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK
Nationally Minded Newspaper Website	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK
Local Newspaper Website	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK
National Radio News Website	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK
Local Radio News Website	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK
Blogs	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK
Google News	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK
Yahoo News	Completely	Somewhat	Neutral	Somewhat	Completely	DK

	Distrust	Distrust		Trust	Trust	
YouTube	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK

In general, which way do you think the media lean? *(circle the number that corresponds to your choice).*

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK
Extremely Liberal			Moderate			Extremely Conservative	

Which way do you think the following news sources generally lean? *(circle the number that corresponds to your choice).*

News Outlet	Extremely Liberal			Moderate			Extremely Conservative	
FOX News	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK
CNN	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK
MSNBC	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK
ABC	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK
CBS	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK
NBC	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK
NPR	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK
New York Times	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK
USA Today	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK
Associated Press	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK

Do you agree or disagree bias is a problem in the news?

Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	DK

Overall, how concerned are you about bias in the news?

Very Unconcerned	Somewhat Unconcerned	Neutral	Somewhat Concerned	Very Concerned	DK

Some have suggested that the future of news is having niche stations that cater toward one viewpoint.

Would you be for or against this type of organization of the news media?

Strongly Against	Somewhat Against	Neutral	Somewhat For	Strongly For	DK

The following are for study purposes only and will NOT be used to personally identify you or your responses in any way.

Home College: **Major(s):**

_____   _____

Year in School (i.e. First, Second,   **Gender:** M or F
etc.):_____
Home State: _____
Hometown: Urban, Suburban, or Rural: _____
Are you a member of the College Democrats?   Y or N
Are you a member of the College Republicans? Y or N
Have you worked for a politician?   Y or N
Have you worked/interned in the communications field? Y or N

Please list any relevant courses you have taken in communications:

Please list any relevant courses you have taken in political science:

APPENDIX V – Variable Frequencies

Numbers in parentheses and bold are the frequencies for each variable. The "Don't Know" categories were counted as missing variables and thus were not included in percentage calculations used in the study.

Frequencies of articles read:

Troop Reduction Article Slant (Content)

Liberal	**(17)**
Neutral	**(26)**
Conservative	**(18)**

Troop Reduction Article Visual Context

Control	**(21)**
Fox News	**(21)**
CNN	**(19)**

Troop Reduction Overall Conditions (Combination of Content and Visual Context)

Control – Liberal	**(5)**
Control – Neutral	**(9)**
Control – Conservative	**(7)**
Fox – Liberal	**(6)**
Fox – Neutral	**(9)**
Fox – Right	**(6)**
CNN – Liberal	**(6)**
CNN – Neutral	**(8)**
CNN – Conservative	**(5)**

Universal Health Care Article Slant (Content)

Liberal	**(19)**
Neutral	**(16)**
Conservative	**(26)**

Universal Health Care Article Visual Context

Control	**(19)**
Fox News	**(20)**
CNN	**(22)**

Universal Health Care Overall Conditions (Combination of Content and Visual Context)

Control – Liberal	**(6)**
Control – Neutral	**(5)**
Control – Conservative	**(8)**

Fox – Liberal	**(6)**
Fox – Neutral	**(5)**
Fox – Right	**(9)**
CNN – Liberal	**(7)**
CNN – Neutral	**(6)**
CNN – Conservative	**(9)**

Question Frequencies

Please answer the following questions about the FIRST article you read. *(Circle your answers)*

Which of the following do you feel describes the first news story?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK
(0)	**(1)**	**(2)**	**(16)**	**(28)**	**(12)**	**(2)**	**(0)**
Not			Neutral			Completely	
Biased						Biased	

On the following scale, which way do you think the story leaned? *(circle the number that corresponds to your choice).*

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK
(5)	**(4)**	**(9)**	**(8)**	**(15)**	**(16)**	**(4)**	**(0)**
Against			Neutral			For	
Troop						Troop	
Reductions						Reductions	

Which political viewpoint do you think the story favored? *(circle the number that corresponds to your choice).*

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK
(2)	**(4)**	**(18)**	**(13)**	**(15)**	**(5)**	**(1)**	**(3)**
Extremely			Moderate			Extremely	
Liberal						Conservative	

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

The reporter let his/her views slip into the story. *(circle one)*:

Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	DK
(4)	**(8)**	**(9)**	**(34)**	**(4)**	**(2)**

The reporter did a good job of covering this story objectively. *(circle one)*:

Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	DK
(3)	**(21)**	**(12)**	**(19)**	**(6)**	**(0)**

Please answer the following questions about the SECOND article you read. *(Circle your answers)*

Which of the following do you feel describes the second news story?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK
(3)	**(3)**	**(2)**	**(21)**	**(14)**	**(12)**	**(6)**	**(0)**
Not Biased			Neutral			Completely Biased	

On the following scale, which way do you think the story leaned? *(circle the number that corresponds to your choice).*

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK
(1)	**(1)**	**(0)**	**(8)**	**(12)**	**(9)**	**(30)**	**(0)**
Against Universal Health Care			Neutral			For Universal Health Care	

Which political viewpoint do you think the story favored? *(circle the number that corresponds to your choice).*

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK
(3)	**(16)**	**(23)**	**(13)**	**(2)**	**(3)**	**(0)**	**(1)**
Extremely Liberal			Moderate			Extremely Conservative	

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

The reporter let his/her views slip into the story. *(circle one)*:

Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	DK
(9)	**(6)**	**(18)**	**(24)**	**(3)**	**(1)**

The reporter did a good job of covering this story objectively. *(circle one)*:

Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	DK
(3)	**(11)**	**(6)**	**(31)**	**(10)**	**(0)**

The following questions pertain to your political viewpoint. *(Circle your answers)*

Which political party do you _most closely_ identify with?

Republican	Democratic	Other	DK
(8)	**(41)**	**(6)**	**(6)**

On the following scale, how liberal or conservative would you say you are politically? *(circle the number that corresponds to your choice).*

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK	Unable to code
(3)	**(13)**	**(19)**	**(16)**	**(7)**	**(2)**	**(0)**	**(0)**	**(1)**
Extremely Liberal			Moderate			Extremely Conservative		Missing

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? *(circle one)*:

The US should reduce the number of troops in Iraq.

Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	DK
(2)	**(6)**	**(4)**	**(19)**	**(29)**	**(1)**

Which political party do you _generally_ associate with being for troop reductions in Iraq?

Republican	Democratic	Other	DK
(4)	**(54)**	**(1)**	**(2)**

Which political party do you _generally_ associate with being against troop reductions in Iraq?

Republican	Democratic	Other	DK
(53)	**(7)**	**(0)**	**(1)**

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? *(circle one)*:

The US should move to a universal health care system similar to Canada.

Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	DK
(3)	**(6)**	**(3)**	**(25)**	**(21)**	**(3)**

Which political party do you _generally_ associate with being for universal health care?

Republican	Democratic	Other	DK
(0)	**(53)**	**(2)**	**(6)**

Which political party do you _generally_ associate with being for the privatization of health care?

Republican	Democratic	Other	DK
(47)	**(2)**	**(2)**	**(10)**

The next questions are about your news consumption. *(Circle your answers)*

Which is your preferred medium for news content?

Newspaper	Television	Radio	Internet	Magazine	Other	Multiple Ans.
(8)	**(13)**	**(0)**	**(35)**	**(1)**	**(0)**	**(4)** - Missing

In a typical week, how often do you watch broadcast network news?

Never	1-2 Days	3-4 Days	5-6 Days	Everyday	DK
(12)	**(30)**	**(16)**	**(2)**	**(1)**	**(0)**

In a typical week, how often do you watch cable news?

Never	1-2 Days	3-4 Days	5-6 Days	Everyday	DK
(20)	**(21)**	**(16)**	**(1)**	**(1)**	**(2)**

In a typical week, how often do you read the newspaper?

Never	1-2 Days	3-4 Days	5-6 Days	Everyday	DK
(4)	**(10)**	**(25)**	**(11)**	**(11)**	**(0)**

In a typical week, how often do you use the Internet to get news information?

Never	1-2 Days	3-4 Days	5-6 Days	Everyday	DK
(3)	**(5)**	**(13)**	**(11)**	**(29)**	**(0)**

When you use the Internet for news information, which form do you generally use?

News Organization Website	Blog	Other	Don't Use	DK
(51)	**(1)**	**(7)**	**(2)**	**(0)**

If given a choice between the following, which would you prefer to use for news information?

New York Times	USA Today	Blog	None	DK
(51)	**(8)**	**(1)**	**(1)**	**(0)**

Given the choice, which cable news channel would you choose?

Fox News	CNN	MSNBC	None
(8)	**(37)**	**(15)**	**(1)**

How often do you feel news stories are biased?

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Usually	Always	DK
(0)	**(1)**	**(33)**	**(25)**	**(2)**	**(0)**

In general, how much do you trust information you get through the mainstream media?

Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK	Unable to code
(1)	**(12)**	**(4)**	**(38)**	**(5)**	**(0)**	**(1)** - Missing

How much do you trust the following forms of media?

Outlet	Trust Rating					
Network TV News	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK
	(1)	(6)	(12)	(28)	(14)	(0)
Cable TV News	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK
	(2)	(9)	(8)	(31)	(10)	(1)
Local TV News	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK
	(0)	(6)	(13)	(29)	(13)	(0)
The Associated Press	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK
	(0)	(2)	(10)	(28)	(15)	(6)
Nationally Minded Newspaper (i.e. NY Times, USA Today	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK
	(0)	(0)	(4)	(27)	(30)	(0)
Local Newspaper	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK
	(1)	(6)	(17)	(28)	(7)	(2)
National Radio News	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK
	(1)	(6)	(9)	(24)	(15)	(6)
Local Radio News	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK
	(1)	(7)	(22)	(18)	(6)	(7)

How much do you trust the following forms of Internet media?

Internet Outlet	Trust Rating						Missing
General Internet News	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK	
	(1)	(15)	(20)	(23)	(2)	(0)	
Network TV News Website	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK	Unable to code
	(0)	(3)	(13)	(32)	(10)	(2)	(1)
Cable TV News Website	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK	
	(1)	(6)	(11)	(34)	(8)	(1)	

	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK	
Local TV News Website	**(1)**	**(8)**	**(16)**	**(24)**	**(7)**	**(5)**	
Nationally Minded Newspaper Website	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK	
	(0)	**(1)**	**(9)**	**(23)**	**(28)**	**(0)**	
Local Newspaper Website	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK	
	(1)	**(4)**	**(17)**	**(28)**	**(8)**	**(3)**	
National Radio News Website	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK	
	(0)	**(3)**	**(18)**	**(20)**	**(11)**	**(9)**	
Local Radio News Website	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK	
	(1)	**(7)**	**(23)**	**(16)**	**(5)**	**(9)**	
Blogs	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK	Unable to code
	(19)	**(32)**	**(7)**	**(0)**	**(0)**	**(2)**	**(1)**
Google News	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK	
	(3)	**(15)**	**(20)**	**(18)**	**(4)**	**(1)**	
Yahoo News	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK	Unable to code
	(1)	**(14)**	**(17)**	**(20)**	**(7)**	**(1)**	**(1)**
YouTube	Completely Distrust	Somewhat Distrust	Neutral	Somewhat Trust	Completely Trust	DK	No Response
	(14)	**(28)**	**(12)**	**(2)**	**(3)**	**(1)**	**(1)**

In general, which way do you think the media lean? *(circle the number that corresponds to your choice).*

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK
(1)	**(2)**	**(21)**	**(20)**	**(10)**	**(4)**	**(0)**	**(3)**
Extremely Liberal			Moderate			Extremely Conservative	

Which way do you think the following news sources generally lean? *(circle the number that corresponds to your choice).*

News Outlet	Extremely Liberal			Moderate			Extremely Conservative		
FOX News	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK	Unable to code
	(1)	(2)	(7)	(11)	(7)	(9)	(13)	(10)	(1)
CNN	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK	
	(1)	(2)	(16)	(18)	(12)	(4)	(2)	(6)	
MSNBC	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK	No Response
	(0)	(3)	(12)	(18)	(17)	(0)	(0)	(10)	(1)
ABC	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK	
	(0)	(4)	(21)	(12)	(12)	(1)	(2)	(9)	
CBS	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK	
	(1)	(2)	(15)	(19)	(7)	(2)	(0)	(15)	
NBC	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK	No Response
	(0)	(3)	(16)	(16)	(11)	(1)	(1)	(12)	(1)
NPR	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK	
	(1)	(1)	(9)	(16)	(9)	(3)	(2)	(20)	
New York Times	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK	
	(0)	(7)	(16)	(21)	(9)	(6)	(0)	(2)	
USA Today	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK	
	(0)	(5)	(8)	(30)	(4)	(4)	(0)	(10)	
Associated Press	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	DK	Unable to code
	(1)	(3)	(5)	(27)	(6)	(3)	(0)	(15)	(1)

Do you agree or disagree bias is a problem in the news?

Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	DK
(0)	**(4)**	**(7)**	**(30)**	**(20)**	**(0)**

Overall, how concerned are you about bias in the news?

Very Unconcerned	Somewhat Unconcerned	Neutral	Somewhat Concerned	Very Concerned	DK
(3)	**(11)**	**(8)**	**(31)**	**(8)**	**(0)**

Some have suggested that the future of news is having niche stations that cater toward one viewpoint.

Would you be for or against this type of organization of the news media?

Strongly Against	Somewhat Against	Neutral	Somewhat For	Strongly For	DK
(20)	**(23)**	**(6)**	**(9)**	**(2)**	**(1)**

The following are for study purposes only and will NOT be used to personally identify you or your responses in any way.

Home College:
Newhouse – 12
Arts and Sciences – 24
Management – 8
VPA – 8
IST – 3
Unable to code - 6

Major(s):
Advertising – 1
Broadcast Journalism – 2
Magazine – 1
Public Relations – 11
TRF – 1
Undeclared – 15
Other – 20
Public Communications – 1
CRS – 6
Unable to code – 2
No Response - 1

Year in School
First – 41
Second – 15
Third – 2
Fourth – 2
No Response - 1

Gender: M or F
Male – 19
Female – 40
No Response – 2

Home State: Not Coded
Hometown: Urban, Suburban, or Rural:
Urban – 8
Suburban – 45
Rural – 7
Unable to code – 1
Are you a member of the College Democrats? Yes **(5)** or No **(56)**
Are you a member of the College Republicans? Yes **(0)** or No **(61)**
Have you worked for a politician? Yes **(6)** or No **(55)**
Have you worked/interned in the communications field? Yes **(13)** or No **(48)**

Please list any relevant courses you have taken in communications:
Coded as Number of Courses (included COM 107):
Zero – 1
One – 39
Two – 12
Three – 3
Four – 4
Five – 1
Eleven – 1

Please list any relevant courses you have taken in political science:
Coded as Number of Courses:
Zero – 43   Five - 1
One – 12   Six - 1
Two – 3   Eight - 1

THESIS SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Bias has become a buzzword in the news profession. Certain media outlets (such as Fox News) as well as reporters have been cloaked as biased. However, the actual definition of bias in the news profession remains unclear. Different theories of avoiding bias in the journalistic method include remaining independent, being objective, and also balancing the sources of the story. There are still no concrete outlines for what makes something biased, though. The argument many make is that they know bias when they see it. The overall question for this study was whether this perception of bias is based mainly on the actual content of the story or if the source of the story (Fox News) predisposes someone to perceiving a bias in a certain ideological direction.

METHODS

This study was designed to test this concept that the source of an article can influence the perception of bias. Particularly, the study attempted to show that the framing caused by source had a stronger influence on the perception of bias than the actual content of an article. The following three hypotheses were tested:

> *Hypothesis 1:* News consumers will find a news story to be more biased
> toward the corresponding associated political viewpoint of its source
> regardless of the actual content of the story.

Hypothesis 2: Liberal respondents will be more likely to perceive the news stories as conservatively biased and conservative respondents will be more likely to perceive the new stories as being liberally biased.

Hypothesis 3: Liberal respondents will be more likely to view content presented as being from Fox News as more conservatively biased than conservative respondents and conservatives will be more likely to view content presented as being from CNN or MSNBC as more liberally biased.

Participants

The 61 participants were recruited from intro-level communications courses during spring semester 2008. As such, 93 percent of the students (56) were in either their first or second year. The participants' home colleges were predominantly Arts and Sciences (44 percent) and S.I. Newhouse School of Communications (22 percent). Students were encouraged to attend outside research study days for extra credit. There were difficulties in attracting students to participate in the study which accounts for the low sample size. The number of participants makes it possible to see trends in the data but difficult to realistically generalize the results to a larger population.

Procedure

The three hypotheses mentioned above were tested in the context of online news articles. First, two different articles were written about separate topics: the Iraq War and the possibility of universal health care (as being promoted by Democratic Presidential Candidates). Both of the articles included accurate information from actual stories and wire reports from the spring of 2007. From

these two articles, three different versions were made of each: liberal, balanced, and conservative. The liberal and conservative versions were created by either omitting or including pertinent information that was more or less damaging to one side, and also by using certain code words such as "socialized" as opposed to "universal" health care for the conservative version. No false information was included in the articles. Each set of these articles was placed in three different visual contexts: a plain word document, a CNN.com printout, and a FoxNews.com printout.

At the research study itself, participants were given one version of each article in one visual context (two articles total). They were instructed to read each article and then to turn the articles over before proceeding to the questions. The participants were not able to reference the articles while answering the questions. This was intended to get a more accurate measure of the participants' initial perception of the articles as typical readers would not go back searching for hints of bias in articles. The questions asked participants whether or not they perceived bias in each article and which political side and viewpoint the article seemed to favor or lean towards. Other more general questions were asked concerning the participants' political viewpoints, news consumption habits, level of trust in certain media, and perception of political lean of news outlets.

RESULTS

None of the hypotheses were proven with statistical significance; however, the data do tend to suggest that they may be provable with a larger sample size.

The first hypothesis was that participants would find a certain news story to be more biased toward the corresponding associated political viewpoint of its source regardless of the actual content of the story. This hypothesis is partially supported by the data available although it is not statistically significant. In the first article (see Figure 1) those reading the possibility of a troop reduction article in the FoxNews.com visual context found the story to favor the conservative viewpoint 55 percent of the time compared to 27.8 percent for CNN.com and 25 percent for the control version.

Figure 1
**Political Viewpoint Favored by Troop Article "Source"**
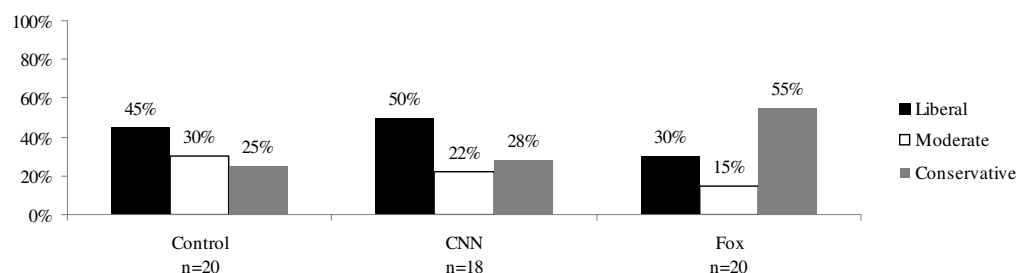
However, as shown in Figure 2, this effect was not stronger than the actual content of the stories. Readers of the conservative-leaning troop article version (regardless of "source") found the article to favor the conservative viewpoint 50 percent of the time compared to 19 percent for those reading the liberal-leaning version. On the other side, those reading the liberal version found it to be favoring liberals 69 percent of the time compared to six percent for those reading the conservative version. These differences are statistically significant at less than a .01 level according to the Pearson Chi-Square test.

Figure 2
Political Viewpoint Favored by Actual Lean of Troop Article
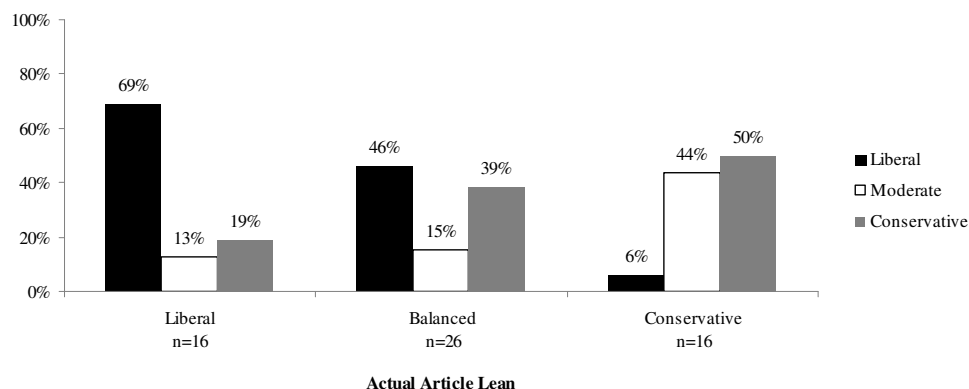
The content bias in the articles about universal health care was found to be much more subtle than the troop reduction article. Each political lean version of the article was found to favor the liberal viewpoint with even 60 percent of those reading the "conservative" version saying it favored the liberal political viewpoint (79 percent reading the liberal version and 75 percent reading the balanced version said it favored the liberal viewpoint). As for by the visual representation of the articles (see Figure 3), most participants said the articles still favored the liberals. However, the rate was much lower for the Fox versions (57 percent) compared to CNN (83 percent).

Figure 3
Political Viewpoint Favored by Health Article "Source"
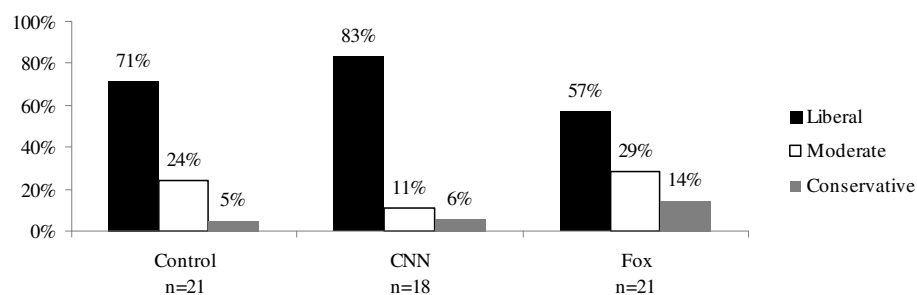
Hypothesis two, that liberal respondents would be more likely to perceive the news stories as conservatively biased and conservative respondents would be more likely to perceive the new stories as being liberally biased, was not supported by the results. In fact, with both political measurements (political party identification and how liberal or conservative the participants were) the different viewpoints were more likely to find the articles favoring their own side than the opposite viewpoint. The one exception was with party identification and the universal health care article. In this case, 88 percent of Republicans found the article to favor liberals while 73 percent of Democrats felt the same way (relationship significant at .05 level). However, regardless this hypothesis is hard to definitively prove one way or the other because of a low number of Republican (8) and Conservative (9) participants. Because of this small sample size, it is not feasible to test hypothesis three with any hope of representativeness.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study show that the source of an article most likely does have an effect on the perception of bias regardless of the actual content. However, unlike what was hypothesized, it appears that this relationship is not stronger than the actual content itself. Further, it appears the participants in this study viewed the issue of bias as more of a matter of providing balance to the coverage rather than objectively (or fairly) treating the "sides" of a story. For example, the universal health care article was found overwhelmingly to lean towards the left no matter which version of the article the participants read. On the other hand, participants were able to for the most part determine the different

leans of the troop reduction articles. The reason for this may partially be that since the universal health care article was about Democratic candidates announcing support for universal health care, there was no real journalistic necessity to include the "other" side of Republicans. However, it seems that most participants found this to be favoring the liberal viewpoint.

Overall, further study would need to be done on the effect of source on the perception of bias. Any further study would need to incorporate questions about what participants feel "determines" bias. Since the concept of what actually is bias is hard to define, it makes it even more difficult to determine whether or not people have perceived it.