

THE HOSTILE MEDIA EFFECT: A STATE OF THE ART REVIEW

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## Abstract

This thesis investigated a new area in communication research—the hostile media effect (HME). HME is the tendency by partisans to perceive hostile bias in news coverage that appears evenhanded and objective to a neutral audience. This thesis argues that media consumers perceive hostile media bias with varied intensity in response to a neutral media report concerning an issue about which they have formed an opinion that is different from other opinions introduced in this report. Media consumers perceive a stronger media bias when the media focus on group conflicts that evoke the consumers' group identity and prompt them to react as group members rather than as individuals. Support for the conclusions of this thesis was strengthened by the findings from social psychology research in group behavior.

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## Introduction

### *Background of the Hostile Media Effect Research*

The hostile media effect (HME) is the tendency by partisans to perceive hostile bias in news coverage that appears evenhanded and objective to a neutral audience (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). According to the HME hypothesis, those who have a position towards a covered issue are likely to see media coverage of this issue as biased against their own point of view (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985; Gunther, 1992; Perloff, 1989; Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994). Anecdotal evidence of HME is commonly observed. Conservatives blame the press for being liberal while liberals think that the media are subordinate to corporate interests (D'Alessio & Allen, 2000). Other common examples of this phenomenon are the letters-to-the-editor from two partisan readers, in which each charges that the news is biased in favor of the opposition (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985; Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chia, 2001). Experimental evidence of HME had its genesis with three classic studies that provide strong support for the existence of this media effect.

In 1985, Vallone, Ross, and Lepper showed samples of network television coverage of the Israeli incursion into Beirut in 1982 to groups of pro-Israeli and pro-Arab partisans. Participants from both groups reported that the coverage was biased against their side. Vallone and colleagues called the observed reaction the “hostile media phenomenon.” The majority of scholars mentioned throughout the present research adopted their term by naming the same type of observations the hostile media phenomenon, or the “hostile media effect.” Vallone, Ross, and Lepper also found that their subjects perceived the viewed material to have a potential to create a bias that is

hostile to their own views in the nonpartisan audience. This finding helped to link HME to the third-person effect (Davison, 1983) in subsequent research (e.g., Perloff, 1989; Gunther & Christen, 2002; Gunther & Schmitt, 2004).

Perloff (1989) duplicated Vallone's and his colleagues' experiment and extended it by examining the breadth, range, and accuracy of partisans' perceptions of HME. Pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian participants watched a videotape assembled from CBS, NBC, and ABC news footage of the 1982 war in Lebanon. The participants from both sides in the war felt that the news coverage favored the enemy's side. In addition, pro-Israelis were convinced that the news coverage would tarnish the image of Israel while pro-Arabs thought that the coverage would smear Arabs in the eyes of neutral viewers. Contrary to the judgments of those partisans, a group of randomly selected neutral students did not change their views and attitudes about Israel and Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) after viewing the news footage.

Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken (1994) conducted another experiment with Mideast partisans who watched television news coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Their findings confirmed the HME hypothesis. However, the second experiment of their study involved showing pro-choice and pro-life participants news material on the abortion issue and did not register consistent patterns of HME.

These three studies established the basis for further HME research that aimed to gather more evidence for this media effect by simulating its occurrence in different experimental contexts with fabricated and real media material, various topics, and audiences. Since then, the HME has been tested and found to be present for a variety of topics such as the newspaper coverage of the 1992 presidential election (Dalton, Beck, &

Huckfeldt, 1998), everyday news coverage of Democrats/Republicans (Gunther, 1992; Eveland & Shah, 2003), radon gas threats, physician-assisted suicide (Gunther & Christen, 2002), genetically modified foods (Schmitt, Gunther, & Liebhart, 2004), primate research (Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chia, 2001), the 1994 events in Bosnia (Matheson & Dursun, 2001), the 1997 UPS labor strike (Christen, Kannaovakun, & Gunther, 2002), sports news (Arpan & Raney, 2003), campus housing overcrowding, parking space shortage on campus, the performance of president George W. Bush (D'Alessio, 2003), and others. Some of these studies registered HME in partisans-members of highly involved groups (Matheson & Dursun, 2001; Christen, Kannaovakun, & Gunther, 2002) while other studies tracked this effect in individuals with moderate levels of involvement (Gunther & Chia, 2001; Gunther & Christen, 2002).

HME research has delved into the psychological mechanisms that underlie the perceptions of the hostile media bias. The classic studies (Vallone, Ross, and Lepper, 1985; Perloff, 1989; Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken, 1994) pointed out a wide range of possible cognitive and perceptual processes. Their observations set the stage for further inquiry into what actually happens in people's minds that leads them to sense neutral media content as biased and hostile to their personal viewpoint on an issue. Among the later HME studies, some findings (Arpan and Raney, 2003; Schmitt, Gunther, & Liebhart, 2004) provided partial support as well as revisions of selected hypotheses suggested by Vallone, Ross, and Lepper, Perloff, and Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken and suggested other original HME-explanatory mechanisms (Matheson & Dursun, 2001).

Overall, by successfully replicating the classic experiments with Middle Eastern partisans and widening the range of tested topics and of the media HME researchers

established that HME exists and provided considerable insights into conditions under which this effect is summoned. The recent growth of interest in the hostile media phenomenon indicated a new direction in HME research. Instead of focusing on discovering further evidence of HME, some scholars now seem to be eager to refute the HME hypothesis or revise its framework (e.g., Peffley, Avery, & Glass, 2001; Gunther & Chia, 2001; Mendez, 2004; Gunther & Schmitt, 2004). Nevertheless, the general direction of HME research has remained the same: how widely the concept of HME could be generalized have constituted the main thrust of investigation in this research area.

#### *Significance of the Hostile Media Effect Research*

This research is primarily important to media, social psychology, political science scholars, politicians, and journalists. For social science scholars, HME is interesting, because its understanding adds to the knowledge of how members of society react to their immediate social surroundings in the information age. Specifically, this effect has the potential to change people's attitudes towards the media and the media's persuasive power over individual media consumers and public opinion. The perception of media bias affects two fundamental features that characterize the relationship between the public and the media: the public's trust and the media's influence. People who are susceptible to HME view media content as unfair and inaccurate (Schmitt, Gunther, & Liebhart, 2004). This perception undermines trust in the media, which, in turn, correlates with a decrease in the media's influence. Tsfaty (2003) found that when people did not trust the media, they tended to reject the notion of public opinion created by the media. By contrast, when people regarded the media as credible, the media exerted a considerable power over the

former's perception of public opinion. People who trusted the media were inclined to "consistently converge with the media's election predictions" (p. 65).

Thus, the question of media influence and consumer trust in the media is not a trivial matter for politicians, lobbyists, and other public affairs practitioners. Media channels can spread their messages and add to the persuasiveness of public campaigns. Citizens, who are skeptical of biased news, rely on it less in their personal decision-making (Baron, 2004). Therefore, these professions can profit from a more complex understanding of a media audience's reactions. Knowledge of HME allows them to predict partisan perceptions of media messages and to skillfully set limits to media's persuasiveness.

Contemporary public outreach efforts that involve collaboration with mass media will also benefit by enriching their media strategies with an understanding of HME and its social implications. Communication research found evidence that people tend to overestimate the influence of the media on others (e.g., Davison, 1983; Peiser & Peter, 2000; Tsfati & Cohen, 2003). HME research contributed to this finding with the discovery that media consumers who form hostile media perceptions are more likely to think that the general public will be persuaded to take a side favored by the media source, i.e. the side of their antagonists (Perloff, 1989; Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chia, 2001). This might lead consumers to perceive themselves as holding a minority view, thereby making them reluctant to share their opinions in public out of a fear of social isolation, as the spiral of silence hypothesis (Glynn & McLeod, 1984; Noelle-Neumann, 1977) suggests. This change in behavior of media consumers might affect public opinion

in a way that potentially interferes with the objectives of a given public outreach campaign.

Research has established that HME occurs in response to the journalism of broadcast television (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985; Perloff, 1989; Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994) and print media (e.g., Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998; Christen, Kannaovakun, & Gunther, 2002). Thus, journalists might find it useful to know what the HME hypothesis proposes and how it might affect them.

The HME hypothesis suggests that different people, issue partisans in particular, perceive the same media content differently. This creates a difficult situation for journalists. Every time they cover a controversial issue they find that their reporting comes under criticism. As Dave D'Alessio (2003) clearly wrote:

. . . to do their jobs ethically, journalists must represent all points of view, but presenting all points of view—giving genuinely balanced coverage—opens them to charges of bias from readers who focus only on those elements of the news report with which they disagree. (p. 292)

Media scholars pointed out that as a theoretical concept HME could be conveniently used by the media against accusations of biased reporting (Karlberg & Hackett, 1996). Criticism of the media's coverage from both sides of a controversial issue essentially cancel each other out, which lets the media claim that the nature of their reporting is objective. HME scholars might helpfully advise journalists not to use the HME evidence—criticism from opposite sides of an issue—as a criterion of journalistic objectivity but rather to practice standards of objective journalism without paying attention to the dissatisfaction of partisan groups. At the same time, as Karlberg and

Hackett demonstrated, it would be a mistake to blindly ignore criticisms of the media by people with opposing views. When the media see these criticisms as “simply self-serving and off-setting mirror opposites” they risk ignoring “the similarities, as well as non-contradictory differences, in their critiques” (p. 6). For example, insufficient coverage of positive stories and explanations about the social implications of economic policies, the negative influences of commercial pressures, and audience-attracting news techniques may similarly be seen by both sides as the roots of media bias against them. Generally speaking, HME seems to be a litmus test of journalistic impartiality, but it should not be used to cover up or excuse the media’s own shortcomings.

#### *Purpose and Scope of the Present Work*

During the last two decades, communication and psychology research was enriched by the discovery of HME and the development of a considerable amount of original research on this effect. However, as this area of study is relatively new, the work that identifies, compares, and analyses all the separate studies has not been done, yet. Keeping in mind that some HME findings were not consistent with others and some researchers had a different agenda while documenting an unexpected HME, this work was needed in order to put the separate items of HME research in a perspective vis-à-vis each other and of existing interdisciplinary research.

Thus, the purpose of the current research was to conduct a state of the art review of the hostile media effect and provide a greater depth of knowledge about previously studied HME phenomena. This included analysis and synthesis of all the extant scholarly literature on this subject through the lens of three basic research questions:

1. What makes an audience susceptible to HME?

2. Are some media messages more likely to provoke HME than others?
3. What are the psychological mechanisms that explain HME?

Based on the results of the present research, this thesis argues that media consumers perceive with varied intensity hostile media bias in response to a neutral media report concerning an issue about which they have formed an opinion that is different from other opinions introduced in this report. Media consumers perceive a stronger hostile media bias when the media coverage focuses on group conflicts that evoke the consumers' group identity and prompt them to react as group members rather than individuals. The visual representation of the argument is found in Appendix A.

## Method

The present research used a purposeful and systematic search of all the relevant social science databases in order to find all the academic work written on the hostile media phenomenon. The list of the databases included Academic Search Premier, Social Sciences Citation Index, Social Sciences Full Text, Communication & Mass Media Complete, Communication studies: a SAGE full text collection, Annual Review of Psychology, PsycARTICLES, PsycINFO, Oxford Journals, Annual Review of Political Science, Annual Review of Sociology, CQ Voting and Elections Collection, ICPSR: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, JSTOR, WilsonWeb, and Wiley Online Journals. In addition to retrieving all the extant sources in this area of research, a comprehensive review of the sources' reference lists was conducted to identify additional sources for the analysis, understand how the knowledge about HME has developed, and stimulate the researcher's personal inquiry into this important media effect. The collected body of research was then classified according the above mentioned research questions and underwent further selection based on the significance of HME evidence. The final sources selected were analyzed and synthesized to establish a clearer scientific picture of HME that can be integrated into the interdisciplinary research.

## Audience Susceptibility to HME

### *The Role of Issue Involvement*

HME research has provided evidence that HME does not affect everybody in the same way. This effect occurs under certain conditions in which specific audience characteristics, namely, personal involvement with an issue, are the main influences. Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985) described an unpublished study they did in 1981 about the media's treatment of Carter versus Reagan that preceded their 1985 groundbreaking findings. In 1981, they surveyed a sample of registered voters three days before the 1980 presidential elections. The researchers found that 66% of the 160 people who responded considered the election media coverage fair. People who expressed disagreement with this view almost always thought that the media were biased against the candidate of their choice. Eighty-three percent of Jimmy Carter's supporters claimed that the media had championed Reagan. Ninety-six percent of Reagan supporters were convinced that the media had tilted towards Carter. The majority of John Anderson's followers (88%) thought that the media had favored either Carter or Reagan. Thus, even though Vallone and colleagues did not see a dominant tendency of the surveyed voters to perceive hostile bias against the media, they discovered it was present in those who claimed that the media were not objective in covering the election. This early experiment also revealed a distinctive type of perceived bias that constitutes HME—bias against one's own point of view.

### *High Involvement Audiences and HME*

These results gave the researchers the idea that if they had focused on people, who were members of groups with specific interests, the findings of HME would have

been stronger. The 1985 study by the same research team experimented with partisans drawn from pro-Israeli and pro-Arab student associations. Each partisan group saw the news about the Beirut massacre as slanted towards the opposite side.

Perloff (1989) and Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken (1994), who replicated the results of the 1985 Vallone, Ross, and Lepper experiment, also chose participants who were far from neutral on the Middle East conflict. Perloff recruited his subjects from partisan Jewish and Arab student groups from six public and private universities in a U.S. mid-western state. Some of his pro-Israeli participants came from a regional Jewish youth organization. A pretest was administered to verify the subjects' level of partisanship. Both sides exhibited extremely positive attitudes towards their own group and extremely negative views about their antagonists.

Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken (1994) did not intentionally look for subjects from affiliated organizations to confirm their supposition of HME. They recruited their participants based on questionnaire responses given by New York University students at a mass testing session. The questions identified the students' positions on Israeli policy in the occupied territories, their partiality towards one side or the other, and the extent to which they thought the media favored Israelis or Palestinians. This allowed the researchers to measure the participants' level of personal involvement in and corresponding attitudes towards the Middle East conflict. Based on calculated attitudinal scores, the researchers then divided the subjects whose opinions showed support either for the Israeli or Palestinian side into two experimental groups.

While the Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985) and Perloff (1989) studies, which identified involvement of their subjects according to their group membership, showed

strong evidence of HME, the Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken study, which relied on establishing involvement through an analysis of attitudinal scores collected from a group of regular students, was associated with weaker evidence of HME. Although Giner-Sorolla's and Chaiken's pretest measures identified pro-Palestinian and pro-Arab oriented subjects, the researchers pointed out that partisans recruited from organizations (as in the Vallone, Ross, and Lepper and Perloff studies) might have exhibited stronger HME.

On the basis of these classic HME experiments, personal involvement in an issue appears to be a pivotal audience characteristic that makes its members susceptible to HME. HME research treats "issue involvement" as a measurable continuum that ranges from having no opinion about an issue to membership in a group that is directly involved in an issue. Issue involvement is used interchangeably with the word, partisanship, and this thesis uses these terms interchangeably as well. Thus, partisanship implies a broader meaning than just being in support of and identifying with either the Republican or Democratic party. In this work partisanship implies support for any issue in which an individual is involved. Additionally, strong partisanship (or high involvement) is associated with a close affiliation with or membership in a group that has a distinctive group identity based on its involvement in an issue or issues. A moderate degree of involvement or partisanship suggests a stable opinion about an issue that can vary in strength and intensity in holding to that point of view. By contrast, low involvement is associated with some interest in an issue that, however, has not matured into the formation of an opinion.

The Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985) and Perloff (1989) studies established that partisans form HME in response to media reports that are focused on partisans' respective issues. The observation made by Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken (1994) added to this finding a correlation between the degree of partisanship and the robustness of HME. Further research confirmed that HME is a partisanship driven effect, and partisans who strongly identify with a distinctive social group are most susceptible to forming a hostile media bias.

For example, the Matheson and Dursun (2001) study included partisans from Muslim and Serb immigrants recruited through immigrant organizations in Canada. All of the recruits emigrated from Bosnia and Herzegovina over the six years prior to the beginning of the study. This fact served as an additional indicator of the participants' involvement in the 1994 war in Bosnia. The researchers found clear evidence of HME. After reading media reports about the 1994 Sarajevo market bombing, Serb participants believed that the press was sympathetic to Muslims, whereas Muslims thought that the press was on the Serbs' side. The control group of neutral participants did not exhibit any particular perceptions of bias, which showed that there was no objective support for the partisans' beliefs in the biased press.

Christen, Kannaovakun, and Gunther (2002) studied the hostile media perceptions in partisan assessments of the press and public during the 1997 United Parcel Service strike. For their study, the researchers recruited a group of Teamsters from the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (that represented drivers, package sorters, and loaders who worked for UPS) and a group of UPS operation managers and other staff personnel from two midwestern metropolitan areas. Both partisan groups found the same

article on the strike to be biased in favor of the opposite side in the conflict while some members of non-partisan control group showed either Teamster or UPS sympathies.

Canadians Karlberg and Hackett (1996) conducted an exploratory research into perceptions of the news by two broad clusters of interest groups in Canada. The first cluster was considered representative of well-established institutions that either held conservative views or were dominant social and economic powers. The second cluster consisted of nonprofit advocacy groups and NGOs, reflecting subordinate interests and/or progressive viewpoints such as the distribution of power and wealth, which entailed a wider range of human concerns than those just about economic growth and private profit. This study dealt with core partisanship—the survey questionnaires were completed by media relations officers or the organizations' executive directors.

Karlberg and Hackett found that a majority of respondents identified Canadian media “blind spots” (important issues that the media tend to ignore) in a highly interest-specific fashion. As the HME hypothesis suggests, subjects expressed unqualified dissatisfaction with news coverage of the issues of greatest concern to the organizations to which they belonged. In other words, representatives of both interest group clusters sensed that the media was hostile to them by neglecting the issues they deem important and favoring and covering the news of the opposition.

Overall, the HME research findings provided reliable proof that an involvement associated with group membership triggers a strong HME (Path 3 in the diagram of Appendix A).

*Audiences With Moderate Involvement and HME*

At the same time, there is evidence that this effect is not confined to high involvement conditions and could be observed in broader parts of the population than just among specific interest groups. This was revealed in the survey studies that identified issue involvement based on attitudinal scores that showed how closely research participants related (or did not relate) to an issue.

*HME in Voters.* A distinctive body of research in the 1990s involved the study of voters' perceptions of the media. Often, researchers who did not specifically search for HME (e.g., Ladd, 2003; Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeld, 1998; Schmitt-Beck, 1994; Beck, 1991), having had other research objectives, nevertheless, still discovered the presence of this effect. This only strengthens the validity of the extant HME findings, because an unintentional discovery of HME shows that it is indeed a powerful effect that promptly reveals itself when certain conditions are met.

It must be pointed out that the audience of the studies discussed below—regular voters—do not constitute a high involvement condition as in case with partisans-group members. Rather, they exemplify moderate involvement (Path 2 in the diagram of Appendix A). Although a certain number of regular voters are registered Republicans or Democrats, and could be strong partisans, the majority of this audience expresses partisanship by forming an opinion in favor of a candidate from either party. This is a condition which this thesis associates with moderate involvement.

In his 1991 study, Beck surveyed the Ohio electorate immediately after the 1988 presidential election. The interviews focused on people's exposure to the media and their perceptions of the 1988 campaign coverage. Beck received data very similar to those of

Vallone, Lepper, and Ross in their 1981 study about the 1980 election. A majority of the people perceived the media as impartial, but those who thought of the media as biased felt that the bias favored the opposite party.

As regards Beck's (1991) study, 64% of the 386 respondents denied the existence of favoritism in the TV campaign coverage while 27% perceived bias in the coverage. In full accordance with the HME hypothesis, the latter respondents reported that the bias was against the candidate of their choice. Only 9% of the people surveyed stated that the media coverage reflected their views.

Regarding newspapers, 60% of the respondents thought that the media was neutral while 23% exhibited HME. That is to say, they reported that the press coverage was tilted towards the candidate they did not favor. Democrats and Republicans perceived a hostile bias even when they read the same newspaper. Only 17% of the respondents said that they felt in agreement with the newspapers they read.

In 1998, Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeld gathered analogous evidence of HME presence among regular voters. As Beck (1991), Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeld were concerned with the nature of media influence. Their study examined how the print media presented the 1992 presidential campaign and how readers perceived this information. Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeld found clear evidence of HME as "a function of party identification" (p. 120):

People with strong attachments to the Republican Party were more likely to see their paper as leaning towards Clinton, independent of the paper's actual coverage. Similarly, people with strong Democratic identifications were more likely to see their newspaper as leaning towards Bush. This holds even when

individuals were judging the same newspaper. . . . Left or Right, partisans see the balanced and objective press as leaning toward their opponent. (p. 121)

These HME results appeared to be even more reliable, because the newspaper content that the participants of this study evaluated underwent rigorous content analysis that showed that the journalists who covered the 1992 election generally adhered to objectivity standards. Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeld found that “. . . although U.S. newspapers differed somewhat in their reporting of the campaign, they also contained multiple messages for each campaign [the Bush, Clinton, and Perot campaigns] for their readers” (p. 117).

Beck (1991) and Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeld (1998) demonstrated HME in American voters. The study conducted by Schmitt-Beck (1994) and Duck, Terry and Hogg (1998) validated their findings even more by registering the same media perception phenomena in West and East German voters and Australian voters accordingly.

Schmitt-Beck’s data gathered during the first all-German election campaign in 1990 indicated that more than 40% of West German voters and almost one-third of East German voters perceived the media they were exposed to was biased. “If they feel that one of the media is biased in partisan terms, both West German and East German voters feel more often that it is biased in favour of a party other than their own preferred party” (p. 402), the researcher concluded. Specifically, the HME in relation to German newspaper content resembled Beck’s (1991) data. German newspaper content was evaluated as neutral by 57.8% of West German respondents. A biased slant was perceived by 25.8%, and only 16.4% of the respondents felt that the media represented

political views that concurred with their own. For East Germans, these numbers were 73.5%, 20.6%, and 5.8% respectively.

Duck, Terry, and Hogg (1998) examined the media coverage of the 1996 Australian federal election. They interviewed a group of psychology students about their political preferences and the news coverage of the election campaign. In Australia, voting is compulsory for persons of 18 years old and older, so all participants were thought of as having some interest in the election. The researchers found that the students who were associated with any of the four political parties perceived the news about election as biased against their camp. Moreover, those who had higher party identification exhibited more hostile bias than those with lower identification. The nonaligned voters thought the media coverage was fair.

Recent studies as, for example, the Mutz and Martin (2001) research on the role of the mass media, also contain data confirming HME. Using data from a national telephone survey immediately before the 1996 election, Mutz and Martin found that American newspapers and television news were the main sources that exposed people to dissimilar political views. Their findings showed the tendency of Democrats and Republicans to see media coverage as disagreeable with their respective political views. In addition, the study registered a significantly higher level of such disagreement for Republicans.

The latter finding might be interpreted as diminishing HME that was exhibited by adherents of both parties, because one might suspect that Republicans might be right in sensing liberal media bias. However, the data of other studies (D'Alessio & Allen, 2000; Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999; Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeld, 1998) showed that

overall there was no evidence that the American media were biased in favor of either party.

Watts, Domke, Shah, and Fan (1999) analyzed randomly selected media content of the 1988, 1992, and 1996 election campaigns in an attempt to learn whether Republicans were correct in claiming that the American media had a liberal leaning. The latter campaign was the same one that Mutz and Martin (2001) focused on in their research. Watts, Domke, Shah, and Fan discovered that in the second half of the 1990s news organizations increasingly focused on the general topic of bias in the news. As the media were discussing whether or not they themselves were biased, conservative elites used this discussion to claim that the bias was a liberal one and that the whole news industry had a liberal bias. Eventually, this led to a situation in which a Republican majority believed there was a liberal media bias. Indeed, Watts, Domke, Shah, and Fan did not find evidence for the real liberal bias in the analyzed elections coverage:

. . . the campaign coverage on the whole was evenly balanced in two of the three elections analyzed. Only 1992 had a potentially meaningful advantage in coverage for the democratic candidate. . . . the advantage of coverage for the Democrat [candidate Bill Clinton] in that election may be due to the fact that the incumbent Bush presided over an economic downturn and suffered from poor public approval ratings tied to his perceived indifference over domestic concerns. (p. 156-157)

These conclusions fully accord with the findings of the 1998 study by Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeldt that has been already discussed above. Moreover, the most recent meta-analysis of media bias in presidential elections (D'Alessio & Allen, 2000), which

was based on 59 quantitative studies that had been produced since 1948, confirmed the absence of any partisan bias in newspapers. Magazines showed a slight, insignificant pro-Republican bias, whereas the television networks indicated a slight, also insignificant liberal bias.

The D'Alessio and Allen (2000), Watts, Domke, Shah, and Fan (1999), and Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeld (1998) studies were used to demonstrate that the Republican voters in the Mutz and Martin (2001) research perceived hostile media bias due to HME and not because there was an objective media bias in favor of Republican opposition. In view of the fact that there are other studies that registered a stronger HME in Republicans than in Democrats (e.g., Eveland & Shah, 2003), it was ever so important to neutralize the suspicion in objective anti-conservative bias and reaffirm the credibility of HME research.

Finally, the finding of HME in regular voters implies that to limit this effect to partisans-group members would be a great underestimation of the pervasiveness of this effect. As Gunther (1992) wrote in regard to his discovery of the pattern that Republicans and Democrats perceive media bias, each in their rival's direction, "one might expect the theoretical principle [of HME] to apply widely" (p. 157).

*HME in Various Audiences.* As Gunther (1992) predicted, the research of voters' perceptions is not the only area of study that revealed HME in audiences with varying degrees of involvement that, however, were lower than high involvement of partisans from membership groups. There are original studies that specifically tested for HME and—as in the case of research done in the election setting—based their findings on broad samples of people whose involvement was identified via attitudinal measures

(versus group membership). These studies supplied more evidence that “partisan-group affiliation is a reliable, although perhaps not necessary, condition for the judgment that media coverage is hostile to one’s own point of view” (Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chia, 2001, p. 297).

For example, Arpan and Raney (2003) registered HME among university students who were asked to read a fictitious sports news article. Using two top-ranked football teams—from the participants’ university (the home-town team) and the team of their major rival—as examples, the article (written in a balanced way) discussed off-the-field problems of students-athletes and athletic programs. The fact that the participants were fans of the hometown team was an indicator of their partisanship. The results showed that the participants perceived that the article was more biased against the home team than against the rival team.

Another example is D’Alessio’s (2003) experimentation with articles read by a group of students at a large, northeastern university that described the shortage of parking spaces on campus, overcrowding in campus housing, and the performance of the president George W. Bush. The topics were identified as important to students in a preliminary survey. Participants who lived on campus were considered against overcrowding (“con”) in the housing story, and participants who owned cars were thought of as being pro-parking (“pro”). For the story about Bush, subjects were “against” if they said that they frequently voted Democrat and “pro” if they voted Republican. D’Alessio used a technique that required participants to mark paragraphs in the articles as being for (“pro”) or against (“con”) their position. To get a final measurement of bias perceptions, the number of “con” paragraphs was subtracted from

the number of “pro” paragraphs nominated as biased. The results displayed clear support for HME: “Students assumed to be “pro” on an issue were more likely to mark “con” paragraphs as biased and vice versa” (p. 288).

However, HME registered by D’Alessio appeared to be weaker than the robust HME documented in the strong partisans (e.g., Matheson & Dursun, 2001; Perloff, 1989; Vallone, Ross, and Lepper, 1985). His findings added to the evidence that moderate involvement produces weaker HME.

Along with other original studies of HME with a broad sample of participants (and less robust HME) the Gunther and Chia (2001) study investigated the use of primates (chimpanzees and other monkeys) in laboratory research. Gunther and Chia collected their data from a national probability sample survey of 402 respondents. Forty five percent of their respondents said that, on the whole, news coverage of the issue of using primates in scientific research was neutral. The number of respondents who felt that the news coverage was unfavorable toward primate research was slightly higher (46%). Only 9% of respondents considered the news coverage to be in favor of the experiments with primates.

Although the majority of the participants thought that the news was biased, respondents on both sides of the issue felt that the media were biased against research on primates. This means that people whose opinions favored such research sensed a hostile media bias, but people who were against using primates in research perceived that the media were on their side. The latter perception is called friendly bias perception. Thus, the Gunther’s and Chia’s (2001) study did not constitute full support of HME as it was originally defined. In compliance with the HME hypothesis, people on both sides of an

issue exhibit hostile media bias perceptions in response to a balanced media coverage of this issue.

Gunther and Chia rendered this one-sided reaction as a manifestation of a relative HME in keeping with Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chia (2001), who first introduced this revised concept to HME research. The concept of the relative HME suggests that when partisans representing different sides of an issue assess the same media coverage of this issue only partisans on one side will evaluate the coverage as hostile to their point of view. The other side will sense a friendly media bias or no bias at all. Obviously, relative HME is not as intriguing as the original HME, which presumes that both sides of an issue evaluate media reports about this issue as biased in favor of the opposite side. At the same time, the researchers justified this revision of the HME framework by pointing out that the relative HME is “an equally significant indicator of the theoretical logic behind the hostile media effect” (p. 298). Moreover, Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, and Chia suggested that relative HME might even be more wide-spread than the original HME:

In theoretical terms, the relative hostile media effect describes the same phenomenon as its more strictly defined cousin, but it likely embraces many more instances of such divergent perceptions and thus offers more ways to examine the causes and consequences of the perceptual bias. (p. 298)

One might agree or disagree with this theoretical broadening of the originally formulated HME concept. Extant HME research makes it clear that, whereas in the case of high involvement HME most likely manifests itself in its original form, in which both sides are hostile to the media, people with lower involvement might experience the effect

in a form of the phenomena described as relative HME (e.g., Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chia, 2001; Gunther & Chia, 2001).

HME is a wide-spread phenomenon, not limited just to high involvement conditions. The analysis of the studies that registered HME in audiences with moderate involvement in comparison with the studies that showed this effect in strong partisans allows one to make this conclusion. Moderate involvement is associated with having an opinion about an issue that can vary in strength and intensity in support of one's point of view. Keeping this in mind, it is logical to conclude that media consumers perceive with varied intensity hostile media bias in response to a neutral media account of an issue about which they have formed an opinion that is different from other opinions introduced in this account. This statement is visually represented by path 2 in the diagram of Appendix A.

#### *Audience Characteristics Other Than Issue Involvement and HME*

Media effects studies often focus on discovering correlations between audience characteristics other than partisan predispositions—such as age, sex, education, income, etc.—and audience susceptibility to these media effects. For example, the studies on the agenda setting effect (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987), the third-person effect (Peiser and Peter 2000), and the cultivation effect (Huston, Donnerstein, Fairchild, Feshbach et al., 1992) inquired into various demographics of the tested audiences in their relation to the proposed effect. HME research has not provided similarly consistent observations regarding the differences in the strength of this effect that presumably might be evident in audiences with different demographics.

However, it needs to be mentioned that the Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985) study found that within both partisan groups subjects who were more knowledgeable about the Middle East conflict were more likely to view the media as biased against them. Peffley, Avery, and Glass (2001), who registered a relative HME in response to slightly slanted (pro-choice and pro-life) articles on the abortion issue, observed that the impact of abortion views on perception of hostile bias was stronger in more knowledgeable individuals. Greater knowledge was correlated with stronger perception of hostile media bias in involved individuals.

These findings suggest that the more knowledge of an issue people who are involved in it have the more susceptible they are to HME. However, these observations, though intriguing, could not be generalized until they could be supported across a distinctive body of similar HME findings, which does not exist at present time.

In a similar fashion, Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeldt (1998) noticed that inattentive voters tend to develop stronger HME:

The most striking pattern is the strengthening of the hostile media effect for partisanship at lower levels of political attentiveness. Less attentive voters are much more likely to project their partisan biases onto the press . . . for them, the media is an advocate for the opposition, and objective media content was not significantly related to their perceptions. (p. 121)

While obviously important, this finding will also have to be replicated before it can be credited with inherency of HME in inattentive audiences.

The extant research makes it clear that even if the influence of certain audience demographics or features were discovered, the extent of involvement in an issue, or the

level of partisanship, would still be a central condition of HME. A stronger involvement appears to possess more predictive power for hostile media bias perceptions.

This chapter answered the first research question about audience susceptibility to HME and supplied evidence for the first part of this thesis's argument that is visually represented in the diagram of Appendix A. Only those media consumers who are at least moderately involved in an issue covered by the media and, therefore, have a firmly formed opinion about this issue are susceptible to HME (that corresponds to path 2 of the diagram). This susceptibility increases with a greater level of issue involvement, membership-associated partisanship being the highest degree of involvement (path 3). People with zero or low involvement in an issue do not sense the hostile media bias (path 1).

### Message Attributes That Provoke the Hostile Media Effect

HME presumes a relationship between a receiver (the audience) and a messenger (the media). As certain characteristics of the audience are influential in defining this relationship, media messages might also possess distinctive features that affect the nature of this relationship. The previous chapter discussed the audience's involvement with subjects of the messages that can predict forming hostile media bias. This chapter will investigate whether the messages themselves hold specific attributes that contribute to producing HME on the receiver's part.

#### *Topics Presented as Controversial Issues*

HME research has demonstrated that the hostile media effect occurs in response to media messages on a variety of topics. HME appears to be especially robust in response to media reports about political and social conflicts such as the Middle East conflict (Vallone, Ross, and Lepper, 1985; Perloff, 1989; Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken, 1994) and the war in Bosnia (Matheson and Dursun, 2001) or a labor strike (Christen, Kannaovakun, Gunther, 2002). The effect also powerfully reveals itself in the election setting and not only in relation to Republicans and Democrats in the United States (e.g., Beck, 1991; Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeldt, 1998, Gunther, 1992), but also in relation to members of foreign political parties (Schmitt-Beck, 1994; Duck, Terry, and Hogg, 1998). Messages that focus on health threats—as in the Gunther and Christen (2002) study that tested HME for the radon gas threat—seem to evoke HME. Sports news (Arpan & Raney, 2003) triggers this effect as well. Media accounts informing audiences about public policy debates and the government—such as those used in the D'Alessio (2003) study on the performance of president George W. Bush and the Gunther and Christen

(2002) research on physician-assisted suicide—could also be considered to provoke HME.

The most obvious commonality in all these studies is that the topics of the messages chosen by the HME researchers are not merely topics, but issues. According to various editions of Webster dictionaries, an issue is a point, matter, or question in dispute that is to be decided. An issue presumes the presence of at least two sides that have different opinions about something. When the news media cover an issue they engage in an exchange of these opinions, weighing in on their merits and shortcomings as well as finding a compromise between these opinions.

HME occurs in response to media messages that convey topical information as issues, in which opposing opinions are clearly identified and explained. The very presentation of differing opinions introduces an element of disagreement, competition, threat, conflict, and overall controversy to the message. Media reports of this kind create an opportunity for receivers to personally relate to the presented issue by taking sides with the reported opinions/positions according to their own degree of involvement with this issue. Consequently, the personal relation to these reports creates an interest in the audience and makes the covered issue particularly salient to it. A media message that presents a subject without clearly conveying differing or disagreeable opinions or positions on this subject will not arouse an audience's feeling of involvement in the issue.

HME studies illustrate this point well. Subjects of the experiments on the Middle East issue (e.g., Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985; Perloff, 1989) were shown media materials that included distinctly impressive and emotionally charged scenes for that period of the battle between the two camps. They included the 1982 massacre of civilians

in the refugee camps at Sabra and Chatilla in Lebanon, the Israeli bombing of Beirut, and a Palestinian attack on a Jewish synagogue in Rome. This two-side portrayal of the issue led to HME that was extremely pronounced.

A media article about the 1997 United Parcel Service strike that was used in the Christen, Kannaovakun, and Gunther (2002) study described the positions of both camps. Both groups, the Teamsters and UPS management, read the article before union members from the International Brotherhood of Teamsters had signed a formal settlement with UPS. This helped to keep their personal involvement with the article's subject high and register a robust HME.

In the Matheson and Dursun (2001) study, Bosnian Serbs and Muslims read real newspaper articles about the 1994 Sarajevo market bombing, one of the most important events in the war in Bosnia. Both articles focused specifically on the UN investigation into which group was responsible for the bombing. The article's focus should have elevated issue salience to its highest level for both sides. As expected, the HME documented in this study was striking.

Some researchers (Christen, Liebhart, & Chia, 2001) think that in addition to presenting multiple sides of an issue, the media should describe it in a way that makes it easier for the audience to relate to the opinions presented. A more straightforward presentation of issue-associated content is more likely to induce HME. Christen, Liebhart, and Chia got a negative HME result for the genetically modified foods (GMF) issue. The reason, the researchers speculated, was that the concept of GMF was presented to the audience in an abstract rather than in a more concrete fashion. The questions in the survey mentioned GMF and not "a specific biotechnology application such as genetically

engineered tomatoes or the use of bovine growth hormone in milk production” (p. 193), thus making it difficult for respondents to relate their personal opinions to the survey questions.

Overall, the messenger would have to exert a certain effort in the way it presents a message in order to provoke perceptions of hostile media bias in the receiver. This effort involves imparting elements of dissension, competition, stakes or risks, interest clashes, frictions, and polarization, or any other forms of controversy to the media content. Traditionally, the media committed to the concept of objective journalism do so by merely presenting all points of views, without taking sides, as this concept demands. As HME research has demonstrated, however, the receiver—the audience—does take sides. Moreover, it seems that the more controversy the message creates the more active is the process of taking sides. This observation is particularly true when the media describe social group conflicts.

#### *Conflict-Focused Messages*

A combination of a conflict-focused news coverage and strong partisanship appears to play a crucial role in triggering a robust HME. As Price (2001) indicated,

The salience of message [media report] recipients’ group membership is (a) increased (cued or triggered) by the presentation of group conflict in the message, (b) dependent upon the extent to which a person possesses a relevant group identification, and (c) magnified by higher personal consequences of the issue, which should increase subjects’ cognitive elaboration of the message. (p. 203)

Media reports that convey different sides of a conflict seem to bring about saliency of group identification in media consumers. This causes them to process information not as

independent individuals, but as members of a group. This view is consistent with the studies by Matheson and Dursun (2001), Duck, Terry, and Hogg (1998), and Price. The latter expressly pointed out: “A message [media report] focusing on conflict between social groups initiates a process of social categorization: recipients of the message are cued to think of themselves and others in relation to the issue primarily as members of those groups rather than as isolated persons” (p. 203). Additionally, “people impute their perception of their group’s opinion to themselves” (p. 201).

The extensive empirical research into psychology of group behavior and intergroup bias and social identity, in particular, (e.g., Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002; Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002; Brewer & Kramer, 1985; Taifel, 1982) has provided valuable insights that support the idea of evoking group identity in people exposed to content that is focused on group conflict and competition. From a psychological perspective, partisan participants of HME studies focusing on media coverage of military and labor conflicts identified with their respective intergroup conflicts that were conditioned on scarcity of goods or resources for which the groups compete. Group members develop an intergroup bias that enhances their self-esteem. Notably, this intergroup bias is formed in various social contexts where media plays a significant if not central role. Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje wrote:

An important property of social contexts for the self is their propensity to induce some form of threat to individuals or to the group, which calls for some (coping) response . . . the consequences of such threat (or its absence) for the self, and hence the resulting responses, may be fundamentally different depending on the level of commitment to the group in question. (p. 166)

As an influential contributor to the social context of group processes, the media has the potential to induce such a threat. When group identity becomes salient in an individual in response to a description of a personally involving conflict, he or she tends to use various defensive strategies to maintain their own group's positive image and identity. HME appears to be one of these strategies that strong group identifiers employ in response to media messages that contain information about the opposite side of the conflict. Projection of the intergroup bias on the media serves as a preservation of self-esteem. One's group identity clashes with an evenhanded depiction of all sides of the conflict, because neutral coverage of the antagonist's side reduces the positive distinctiveness of one's group. Since the media does not take the role of apologist of one group or another in a conflict (i.e., do not support the group's values, goals, or its position in the hierarchy), group partisans feel that media messages are biased against their side.

This explains why media consumers perceive a stronger hostile media bias when the media coverage focuses on group conflicts. Conflict-focused media presentations evoke the consumers' group identity and prompt them to react as group members rather than as individuals. It creates a situation in which objective media cannot satisfy group members' need to preserve the group's distinctiveness. The media are associated with an intergroup threat and, thus, are perceived as particularly hostile.

This reasoning allows one to conclude that media consumers perceive a stronger hostile media bias when the media coverage focuses on group conflicts that evoke the consumers' group identity and prompt them to react as group members rather than as individuals (see path 3 in the diagram in Appendix A).

*Topical Influence in Inciting HME*

Some researchers (D'Alessio, 2003; Gunther & Chia, 2001) seem to believe that high-profile issues from popular news programs have a higher salience to the audience and provide a context more conducive to HME. There is some evidence that the salience of high-profile issues that receive extensive media coverage could increase for certain individuals due to the media's influence. For example, the priming effect (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987) could take place and inflate the importance of certain issues for an individual. There is also a claim that certain high-profile issues are genuinely salient to a majority of the American population and have a higher potential of incurring robust HME. The performance of president George W. Bush (D'Alessio, 2003) during his first presidential term seems to be one of them.

. . . the salience of the topic to the individual is expected to play a role in how the individual processes mediated news reports on the topic. However, this is an inconsistent predictor: this study focused on three topics, two of them [campus overcrowding and lack of parking space on campus] highly salient to the student population participants were drawn from, but it was the political topic [performance of president George W. Bush] that showed greatest hostile media effects. (p. 291)

In the same vein, Gunther and Chia (2001), whose study surveyed a national audience about the use of primates in laboratory research and documented a relative HME argued that:

While almost all of these respondents had heard about and had opinions about the issue of using primates in lab research, high-profile topics like prayer in schools

or the abortion debate might have aroused stronger opinions and might have produced different results. (p. 697)

However, Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken (1994) received such a weak pattern of relative HME concerning the abortion issue that most of the later HME researchers interpreted as nonexistent. Peffley, Avery, and Glass (2001) chose to explore the same issue and did not document HME for a neutral article about abortion. Their data only showed a weak HME in response to slanted articles where one article was pro-choice and another one was pro-life. Gunther and Chia (2001) would be surprised by these results. The absence of strong evidence of HME on the abortion issue reveals that a high profile and well-publicized topic is not alone a sufficient message attribute that evokes strong HME or HME at all.

In the case of abortion, there was less extreme polarization of opinions in the society than one might have thought there would be. Consequently, the insufficiency of issue salience to trigger HME might be the reason for a very mild HME on this topic. Some insights into real American attitudes on the abortion issue are helpful to substantiate this point. Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox (1992), who extensively studied the attitudes about the abortion controversy in the United States, concluded:

In many ways, mass attitudes about abortion do not reflect the debate as conducted at the activist level . . . A minority of Americans takes consistently pro-choice or pro-life positions; most seem willing to consider a variety of restrictions that would still make access to legal abortions available under many circumstances. This characterization of public opinion in the United States stands in stark contrast to elite-level debate about abortion, which has been cast in uncompromising terms. (p. 193)

With this observation in mind, the Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken (1994) and the Peffley, Avery, and Glass (2001) findings seem to correspond to reality as well as current knowledge about HME. These researchers likely tested people who represented a majority of Americans who, as Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox (1992) proved, were most likely to compromise on the issue of abortion and not take sides so rigorously as some would have expected.

Contemporary agenda-setting research also lends some support to the point of view that certain extensively covered national or local high-profile issues are not necessarily the most salient issues on an individual level. In terms of the importance to HME research of this observation, this means that people do not necessarily get personally involved in the issues that receive the most media attention. Mutz and Soss (1997) studied the agenda-setting effect by observing for one year a newspaper that intentionally increased its coverage of low-income housing as an important issue to the community. Their study documented an increased collective salience of this issue by recording that newspaper readers exposed to a steady stream of articles on low-income housing perceived more public support for this issue. But this purposeful news agenda did not affect personal issue salience; the individuals' positions on this issue remained unchanged.

In all, high profile and extensively publicized issues might have a higher potential of provoking HME. For example, it is true with regard to open group conflicts, involving large portions of the population, that are continuously followed by the media, as in case of the Middle East conflict. As this chapter demonstrated, messages that focus on group conflicts affect people who identify with the conflicting groups particularly strongly (path

3 in the diagram of Appendix A). Nevertheless, thinking about HME as a topic-specific effect would significantly underestimate its prevalence in audiences' reactions to media messages. A close analysis of HME research suggests that any topic can evoke this effect if the message on this topic has specific attributes. These attributes reflect the manner with which the message introduces information to the public. Examples of such attributes are dissension, dissimilarity, variance, contradiction, clash, friction, conflict, and polarization of opinions, as well as descriptions of the stakes, risks, or competition between the bearers of such opinions contained in the message.

This chapter answered the second research question of the present thesis that asked whether some media messages are more likely to provoke HME than others. The chapter examined this question by looking at the relationship between the media (the messenger) and audience (the receiver) from the messenger's point of view. The chapter established that, in order to trigger HME, the media messages should present information in a particular way that invites the audience to relate their personal opinions to the content of the message. A typical coverage of the news by journalists practicing the principles of objective journalism easily satisfies this condition by packaging information as controversial issues to media consumers. Moreover, presenting an issue as controversially as possible is a hallmark of market-driven journalism (McManus, 1994). At the same time, a media report with all the attributes of a controversy does not produce HME in an audience if the issue of the report is not salient to that audience. The attributes of controversy exert influence conducive to hostile media bias perceptions only in people who are personally involved in a covered issue at least to the degree of having a stable opinion about it.

## Psychological Mechanisms That Explain HME

The previous chapters established that media consumers perceive with varied intensity hostile media bias in response to a neutral media account of an issue about which they have formed an opinion that is different from other opinions introduced in the report. While the discussion about the documented HME events provided the factual basis for this argument, the question about possible reasons of hostile media bias perceptions has not yet been answered. This chapter attempted to answer this question by investigating psychological mechanisms that underlie HME.

### *Selective Recall, Selective Characterization, and the Different Standards Mechanisms*

Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985) saw HME as resulting from attitude-influenced processing of media content. The researchers noticed that pro-Israeli and pro-Arab participants of an experiment marked the same segments of the news as favorable and unfavorable to their sides. The researchers concluded that, notwithstanding the fact that the same videotape was shown to both groups, Israelis and Arabs “saw” different news programs and these differences could account for perception of hostile bias. Vallone, Ross, and Lepper proposed different standards and selective recall mechanisms as potentially explaining HME.

According to the different standards mechanism, partisans apply different standards to the coverage of their opposition than the standards they use to evaluate the coverage of their own side. Partisans correctly perceive that a balanced story has an equal number of facts and arguments in favor of each side. At the same time, they consider their own position as the only accurate one on an issue, and, thus, perceive as inaccurate

the coverage of the other side's view and, therefore, inappropriate or irrelevant to the issue. Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985) wrote that

. . . the partisan groups could essentially agree about the nature of the stimulus (i.e., its content and valence) but disagree about the appropriateness of the content and valence in light of their differing views about the larger truth that the stimulus was designed to portray. In cases in which both groups believe that actual program content favored neither side, for example, both groups are apt to protest such "unwarranted" objectivity. (p. 579)

The media seem unfairly biased towards the opposition, because partisans of an issue believe that the media report inaccurate points of view as fair equivalents of the partisans' supposed accurate views.

Selective recall was the second mechanism proposed by Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985). The selective recall mechanism suggests that partisans recall content antagonistic towards their own view especially well. Each partisan group is inclined to think that the media devote more time and place a favorable emphasis to the other side. Researchers used the data they collected from a questionnaire to investigate whether the different standards and selective recall mechanisms contributed to hostile media bias perceptions. They established that pro-Arab subjects remembered 42% of the program references as favorable to Israelis and only 26% as favorable to Palestinians. Pro-Israeli subjects reported that 57% of the references were favorable to Palestinians whereas only 16% of the references in the same news were favorable to Israel. Both groups recalled considerably more content that, in their view, discredited their respective sides. Vallone, Ross, and Lepper concluded that the study participants' contradictory charges of bias

were a matter of differing perceptions, or recollections of the program's content, which corresponds to the selective recall mechanism.

At the same time, Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985) discovered that the differences in recollections of the program were not solely responsible for partisans' hostile bias claims. The researchers found that their subjects also evaluated the fairness and objectivity of the program differently. Subjects scrutinized the news content using different standards of evaluation dictated by their partisan views. Vallone, Ross, and Lepper concluded that both the selective recall and the different standards mechanisms contributed to forming hostile media bias. However, they pointed out that the exact mechanism remained unclear. Moreover, their data could also be interpreted as supporting the selective categorization mechanism even though the researchers themselves did not mention this mechanism. Nevertheless, the data showed not only participants' recollections of predominantly unfavorable content, but also evaluation of this content as favorable or unfavorable.

Later studies indicated inconclusive results for both the selective recall and different standards mechanisms. For example, Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken (1994) tested their subjects for free recall and recognition of the news about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Test results indicated that attitude directly affected judgments of bias, but not the judgment of the bias against the opposite side (hostile bias). Therefore, the different standards approach that deems a partisan's attitude the trigger of a different standard of judgment for the pro-rival content was not supported.

At the same time, Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken (1994) recorded that both pro-Israeli and pro-Arab participants remembered more items that were favorable to their own

position. This finding contradicted the earlier findings of Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985) and Perloff (1989) who demonstrated that partisans better remembered unfavorable content and supported the selective recall mechanism.

Perloff (1989) found that partisans selectively evaluate media content. While he did not suggest a specific evaluative mechanism, the results of his experiment suggest with Middle East partisans corroborated the influence of the selective recall mechanism. Participants of his study recalled different elements of the demonstrated content. Pro-Arabs remembered facts that portrayed Arabs as aggressors, and pro-Israelis recalled facts that underscored Israeli cruel and violent behavior. This was precisely the example of the selective recall mechanism that Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken (1994) described echoing the Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985) explanation: “. . . a pro-Arab may end up remembering mostly reports of Arab misdeeds, and a pro-Israeli may end up remembering mostly reports of Israeli misdeeds, from a newscast that indicts both sides equally” (p. 166). Thus, Perloff’s subjects also understood diverse news messages from watching the same news program and form a hostile bias, presumably, because of selective recall.

### *Selective Characterization*

Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken (1994) named a third mechanism, namely, selective characterization as an alternate independent mechanism to different standards and selective recall. The idea of the selective categorization mechanism was a product of an original expansion of the Vallone, Ross, and Lepper study and the social judgment theory (Sherif, Sherif, & Nebergall, 1965) ideas by Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken. Additionally, the influence of the social judgment theory on the explanations of hostile media bias

perceptions could be found in the studies of a number of other HME researchers (e.g., D'Alessio, 2003; Mutz & Martin, 2001; Gunther, 1992, 1988).

According to Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken (1994), the selective categorization mechanism makes “viewers with opposite attitudes recall identical items (e.g., images, facts, or arguments), but classify a predominance of individual items as hostile to their own side” (p. 166). The social judgment theory formulated by Sherif, Sherif, and Nebergall in 1965 helps understand how neutral stimuli that come to partisans’ attention receive a negative evaluation. According to the social judgment theory, an individual assessment of information depends on different levels of involvement regarding this information. Three possible levels associated with high, moderate, and low involvement have corresponding “latitudes” of acceptance, rejection, and noncommitment. Issue partisans who are members of organizations or groups defending a specific point of view fall into the high involvement category. The social judgment theory predicts a wider latitude of rejection for information that does not comply with personal attitudes in the high involvement case. Partisans who develop HME in response to messages that cover their respective issues have a stable position that serves as a criterion for the functioning of their latitude of rejection. By comparison, individuals with lower levels of involvement, that is, those who do not have strong attitudes toward an issue, have a narrower latitude of rejection and a wider latitude of noncommitment that make these people more likely to consider information from both sides of the issue.

Since high involvement presumes a wider latitude of rejection than moderate or low involvement, a larger amount of neutral stimuli would not be able to withstand

partisans' scrutiny, which is dictated by their own position. An image or comment that is in contrast to this position would be perceived as hostile rather than as neutral.

An additional description of the selective categorization process could be found in the Schmitt, Gunther, and Liebhart (2004) study:

. . . partisans on opposing sides might attend to, process, and recall the same content in an article; however, each side tends to categorize the same aspects of a story differently—as contrary to their own position . . . a propartisan engaged in selective categorization would interpret or evaluate relatively more of the content as favorable to the antside of the issue and therefore as excessively hostile. (p. 625)

Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken (1994) did not provide evidence for the selective categorization mechanism. Contrary to this mechanism's schema, the researchers discovered that their subjects tended to categorize more items as favorable rather than unfavorable to their side. This result suggest that if this mechanism were solely at work in the subjects' evaluation process they would see the stimulus program reflecting their own views, which was not the case.

*Differences and Similarities Between the Selective Recall, Selective Categorization and the Different Standards Mechanisms.* An overall comparison between the three mechanisms reveals that the selective recall and selective categorization mechanisms likewise assume that partisans perceive or evaluate media content differently. During selective recall, partisans on both sides of an issue remember disproportionately more content that is unfavorable to their own side. Selective

categorization leads to an unbalanced evaluation of the content as being disproportionately contrary to one's side.

In contrast, the different standards mechanism suggests that partisans see the content identically, but they inversely differ in their judgments about the fairness and relevance of this content. The different standards application results in judging a disproportionately large amount of content as invalid concerning a particular issue under discussion.

The first two mechanisms presuppose that partisans perceive a hostile media bias, because they evaluate and recollect the stimuli in a different way. The last one suggests that disagreement about the content is formed at a later perceptual stage, when the partisans' belief that the presented media content is inappropriate and should not be considered in the dispute dominates the initial perception of balance in media content.

*Test Of the Three Mechanisms at Once.* The 2004 Schmitt, Gunther, and Liebhart study provides a curious example of testing all three mechanisms—the selective recall, selective categorization, and the different standards—at once and deserves to be reviewed in more detail. The researchers studied partisans' perceptions of the media and described HME in response to the genetically modified foods (GMF) controversy. The first group of subjects with high involvement in this issue was solicited from an anti-GMF attendees list of the 2001 North Farm Cooperative meeting of organic foods distributors. The second group was recruited among members of the National Agricultural Biotechnology Council (NABC). NABC includes faculty from 30 universities who work in the biotechnology fields and predominantly support GMF. The researchers underscored that one of the goals of their study was “to develop tests that would more cleanly distinguish

between the various mechanisms that might underlie the hostile media perceptions” (p. 627).

The results revealed that after reading an article on GMF, participants recalled facts and arguments that in their opinion were pro rather than against their side. This finding worked against the selective recall hypothesis. In contrast, the selective categorization was supported. The data showed that only the selective characterization mechanism was actually responsible for perception of bias hostility, and thus can be considered an explanatory mechanism of HME. This finding was possible because the study used two different conditions. The media condition used an article as a stimulus. The non-mediated condition used a student’s essay as a stimulus material. Anti-GMF subjects who read the article claimed more frequently than did pro-GMF participants that excerpts from the article had a hostile bias, which was a relative HME pattern. However, this rating distinction (that is at the basis of the selective categorization process) disappeared in the essay condition. It means that only the article condition engaged the study’s participants in a selective categorization process. HME was not at all registered for non-mediated information. This allowed the researchers to conclude that perception of media bias develops due to the selective categorization process.

At the same time, Schmitt, Gunther, and Liebhart (2004) pointed out that although the selective categorization hypothesis was supported it was supported in a relative sense. Their study registered only a relative HME—the hostile media bias was perceived by one side of the GMF issue, the opponents of genetically modified products. GMF advocates felt that the stimulus article favored such products (a friendly bias). The finding of relative HME led the researchers to stipulate that evidence of the selective

characterization mechanism was also relative. Ultimately, their study demonstrated that selective categorization resulted in hostile media bias perceptions by one side of the GMF issue only.

Finally, Schmitt, Gunther, and Liebhart (2004) tested the different standards mechanism. Judgments about the accuracy of the article content were clearly correlated with partisan attitudes. When partisans considered stimulus content non-contradictory to their own views they were more likely to mark it accurate than when the information did not conform to their opinions, which fit the schema of the different standards mechanism. These phenomena, however, were found in both article and essay conditions. Since the different standards mechanism was part of the essay readers' content processing, but did not result in the perceptions of hostile bias, this mechanism is not likely to be responsible for the article readers' hostility in bias perceptions. Otherwise, the essay readers would fall victim to HME as well. Thus, the different standards mechanism, though present and robust, did not qualify as an explanatory mechanism behind subjects' hostile media bias perceptions.

To sum up the Schmitt, Gunther, and Liebhart (2004) inquiry into psychological underpinnings of hostile media bias, the selective categorization mechanism was identified as the only explanatory mechanism of HME out of the original three. The different standards mechanism appeared to participate in the evaluation of the stimulus. In contrast to the selective categorization process, however, it did not relate to the hostile bias perceptions. The selective recall mechanism was refuted.

*The Prior Beliefs in Media Bias Mechanism*

Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken (1994) pointed out that despite their differences all three mechanisms also have something in common. They all assume that “judgments of hostile media result from the attitude-influenced processing of a program’s actual content” (p. 167). What if “prior beliefs in hostile media bias, rather than partisanship per se, could bring people to prejudge a specific program as biased” (p. 167), asked the researchers. If prior beliefs in media bias could function as an independent mechanism of HME, partisans would be assumed to be oblivious to the actual media material, but still be able to judge it based on their prior perceptions of the media network and the way the it reports news. In this case, the judgment would not be based on the scrutiny and evaluation of a particular media content (what presumably happens during selective recall, selective categorization or applications of different standards). Rather, the judgment would form under the influence of heuristic shortcuts readily available to trigger a hostile media bias perception every time someone encounters a media message on the issue in which he or she is involved. These heuristics would develop as an individual acquires particular beliefs in media bias.

*The Antecedents of the Prior Beliefs in Media Bias.* Where do prior beliefs in media bias come from? In the discussion part of their article, Schmitt, Gunther, and Liebhart (2004) stressed that Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken (1994) did not provide a sufficient explanation to this question:

. . . this explanation does not tell us where or how such preconceived beliefs originate. The processes evident in the current study may, in a cumulative sense, be the genesis of those prior beliefs. Nevertheless, partisans may develop beliefs

about media bias from other sources—from like-minded friends, from politician’s rants, even from the occasional mea culpa of the media itself. Any or all of these occurrences could shape generalized beliefs about media bias, which, in turn, may give rise to the categorization bias evident in these [the 2004 Schmitt, Gunther, and Liebhart study] data. (p. 637-638)

While Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken left it to further research to clarify the origins of the prior beliefs, Eveland and Shah (2003) made an important step in this direction.

Their study identified the effect not only as a process of an individual’s evaluation of information, but also—and even more importantly—as a reflection of all the complexity of this individual’s social life and ideology. Eveland and Shah postulated that people’s perceptions of media bias are partly formed by the influence of personal interactions with others. People who often discuss politics with others, and who have similar views (“safe” discussions), are prone to form distorted standards of what constitutes unbiased news and, thus, are more likely to be affected by social biased sampling. People who talk about politics with discussants, whose views are different (“dangerous” discussions), expose themselves to a greater variety of ideas and perspectives on an issue and are less likely to perceive media bias. As a consequence of their social interactions, both types of people (with “safe” discussion and “dangerous” discussion social environments) develop heuristics “that are easily activated for application to judgments about press content relative to some existing norm” (p. 107). “Thus, the explanation of the hostile-media phenomenon need not be attributed solely to differences in individuals’ information processing, but instead may be at least partially accounted for by the biased sampling that occurs before processing” (p. 107).

The legitimacy of the approach taken by Eveland and Shah (2003) becomes especially vivid in light of findings made by Beck, Dalton, Greene, and Huckfeld (2002). In investigating the social calculus of voting, researchers confirmed that social forces, other than the media, play a role in exposing people to biases.

Organizations and personal discussants serve as more consequential carriers of partisan messages than the media. Although many Americans receive balanced partisan messages from them, for many others organizational and personal messages favor one of the candidates, and our evidence suggests that voters tend to be responsive to this bias. The powerful effect of personal networks is one of the most significant findings of this study. (p. 69)

In their part, Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken (1994) did not exclude the possibility that “partisans’ preconceptions of media bias are mainly learned from their political culture” (p. 177). Thus, they also understood the importance of the social-level variable for predicting media bias. Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken believed, as did Eveland and Shah, that the heuristics that people form based on their prior experience with media bias, affect people’s perception of hostile bias in the news.

*Tests For the Prior Beliefs in Media Bias Mechanism.* The data collected by Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken (1994) confirmed the fact that prior beliefs in media bias indeed were at work in forming HME in their subjects. The subjects were pretested for their beliefs about bias in the media before the experiment. The prior beliefs in media bias measurements were then compared to the measurements of the hostile bias perceptions evoked in subjects by the stimulus. The researchers found that “prior beliefs were most consistently shown to influence bias judgment via the subjects’ estimates of

the valence of content rather than through their actual memory of, or categorization of, items” (p. 175). Most importantly, prior beliefs in media bias appeared to be entirely the source for judgments about which side the coverage favored:

Prior beliefs did not affect the processing of discrete items either through recall or categorization; instead, they appear to have exerted a heuristic influence upon judgments of program content and overall bias. “If the media in general favor the opposite side,” subjects may have implicitly reasoned, “then this newscast had to contain more hostile than congenial references to my side. (p.177)

D’Alessio’s (2003) research documented a higher tendency to describe media content as biased among participants who were told that the article they were about to read was potentially biased. D’Alessio concluded that “ the perception of bias . . . is positively related to the perception of the media being biased generally” (p. 290).

However, this somewhat intriguing finding did not lead to any further investigation that could add more credibility to the prior beliefs in media bias mechanism.

Though Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken (1994) provided evidence that prior beliefs accounted for HME in their study, several other studies that tested for the prior beliefs in media bias mechanism did not return positive results. Arpan and Raney (2003) evaluated prior attitudes about media bias in their study of HME in sports news. Guided by the previous research, they proceeded from a possible influence of prior beliefs in media bias on hostile media perceptions. The study measured participants’ ratings of the general media bias during a six-item pretest given them several days before the main testing session (when they read articles about two competing football teams). For each participant, the ratings of the general media bias were averaged and subjected to

statistical analyses. The collected data did not yield support for the prior beliefs mechanism as an underlying process of HME recorded in this study. The participants' level of prior media bias did not significantly relate to the hostile bias perceptions.

Arpan and Raney (2003) suggested several possible explanations for the lack of correlation between the prior beliefs about media bias and the perception of hostile bias in experimental articles. To begin with, the media bias measure reflected participants' general beliefs about media bias, rather than beliefs in bias against the specific football team that the participants preferred.

Beliefs about general media bias may not carry over to expectations of bias for narrow issues such as the one investigated here. Previous measures of bias [Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994] have been specific to the group or issue at hand. While it seems implausible that beliefs about general media bias against a particular school football program would be prevalent, future studies might investigate such a possibility. (p. 277)

Moreover, Arpan and Raney did not exclude from the realm of possibilities that the power of their analysis was limited by the size of the sample. Only a subsample of their subjects completed the media bias pretest that made possible the prior beliefs in media bias measurements.

The Arpan and Raney (2003) study had an important similarity with the Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken (1994) study. Both research teams recruited their subjects on the basis of attitudinal propensities towards the investigated issue as opposed to group membership. Given that the results for the prior beliefs in media bias hypothesis from the first study contradicted the results of the second study, it was interesting to know whether

this hypothesis holds true for strong partisans, recruited from rival groups. Matheson and Dursun (2001) investigated precisely this condition.

For their HME study, Matheson and Dursun (2001) recruited recently arrived Bosnian Serb and Muslim immigrants from the former Yugoslavia living in Canada. The researchers placed special emphasis on the historical circumstances related to the Bosnian war in the 1990s:

In relating the war, completely different versions of the events were presented to the Yugoslavian public, depending on which national paper was conveying the story. Even scholars, driven by nationalist ardor, invented theories, exaggerated historical claims, and defined the heroes and villains along nationalist lines . . . (p. 119)

Based on these conditions, interpersonal and media environments were, for both Serbs and Muslims, conducive to developing negative beliefs towards the media.

Matheson and Dursun measured these beliefs in an experiment with a neutral article about the 1994 Sarajevo market bombing. The measurements corresponded with Serbs' and Muslims' perceptions that the Western media were biased in favor of the enemy. However, the measurements of the beliefs in Western media bias did not relate to the perceptions of hostile bias in the stimulus material. The prior beliefs in media bias mechanism did not reveal itself as explaining HME in this study.

Overall the prior beliefs in media bias hypothesis proposed and proved by Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken (1994) did not get further support yet. Based on the discussed studies that attempted to investigate the prior beliefs in media bias mechanism, it is still possible to expect that this mechanism might be present in some cases but only as a

subsidiary contributing mechanism. It is likely that there is another, central, mechanism that is responsible for the hostile media bias perceptions. If the prior beliefs in media bias were such a central mechanism HME events would be only possible among people generally predisposed against the media. This logic suggests that if an audience exhibits HME concerning one issue this audience should be sure to develop HME regarding another issue. If prior beliefs in media bias triggered this effect in the first case they should be expected to provoke HME in the second case, perhaps, even HME of the same strength. However, it is not true. For example, Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, and Chia (2001) tested the same audience for HME regarding four different issues. Their audience perceived hostile media bias only in response to two issues out of four. It suggests that the prior beliefs in media bias should be issue-specific in order to directly contribute to HME.

#### *The In-Group Bias Mechanism*

Matheson and Dursun (2001) suggested yet another mechanism of HME that emphasizes the social basis of this phenomenon. Researchers offered evidence that hostile media perceptions reflect group-based processes. In particular, they found evidence of a form of in-group bias that obviously does not occur as a merely situational response to a media message, but rather is a consequence of prior social interactions.

Media coverage of the intergroup conflict evoked a social identity that individuals were motivated to protect, and they did so through a set of cognitive processes that motivated them to reject the validity of media coverage that was not consistent with an in-group bias. (p. 123)

Matheson and Dursun supported their explanation of HME by referring to works of other scholars that studied people's social identity in relation to perception of mass media reports (e.g., Duck, Terry, & Hogg, 1998; Price, 1989). Duck, Terry and Hogg discovered that HME was a function of risk to the group's positive status and hostile media bias was a self-serving bias used to defend the group. Price pointed out that media coverage of controversial issues

(1) cues its recipients to think about the issue through their particular groups perspective, which (2) leads to polarized or exaggerated perceptions of group opinions, and finally (3) leads to expression of personal opinion consistent with these exaggerated perceptions of group norms. (p. 197)

The Price study observed that media accounts of controversial issues prompted audiences to react primarily as group members rather than as individuals. Matheson and Dursun relied on this previous research in conceptualizing their own in-group bias mechanism of HME and providing it with empirical support.

As this chapter already mentioned, the Matheson and Dursun (2001) study did not find evidence for the prior beliefs in media bias mechanism. The two opposing national groups, Serbs and Muslims from former Yugoslavia, had strong general beliefs that there was bias in the Western media, but the measurements of these beliefs did not relate to perceptions of media bias from either side. These measurements, however, were related to so-called cognitive differentiation scores. The scores were calculated based on in-group (perceived similarity of members of the same nationality to one another) and inter-group (perceived similarity between members of one nationality and the other nationality) differences and appeared to mediate the relation between participants'

identification and perceived bias in experimental articles. The identification measure assessed participants' identification with their respective groups. It was measured using a 5-item scale that reflected awareness of group membership and affection participants felt in this regard. For example, one item read, "I identify with the Serb/Muslim nationality", and the other read, "I am glad that I belong to the Serb/Muslim national group" (p. 120). Since only identification directly predicted the extent and direction of perceived hostile bias, these findings provided evidence that the in-group bias process can explain HME. Importantly, these findings also integrated well with recent social identity research (Price, 2001) that documented a powerful influence that social identity exerts in people's evaluation of information. "A social identity, when salient, functions as an interpretive framework, as a cognitive structure or group "schema" that organizes perception and cognition" (p. 202).

Matheson and Dursun (2001) offered another intriguing explanation of HME that relies on an intergroup perception of bias. The work of the in-group bias mechanism described in their study was demonstrated on strong partisans, which immediately raises a question about the applicability of this mechanism to audiences with lower involvement. The researchers themselves argued that if participants were less personally involved in the war in Bosnia, their defensive processes to protect group identity might not have been evoked to the degree needed to trigger HME. Thus, though the in-group bias mechanism could indeed play a role in forming hostile media bias, it might not be universal. Specifically, a mechanism that accounts for HME in attitudinal (versus group membership) partisans could be different.

Most importantly though this mechanism clearly involves a cognitive differentiation process. It is the cognitive differentiation that emphasizes in-group similarities and distinctiveness from the out-group that defines the effects of group identification on perceptions of hostile media bias. The in-group bias mechanism could be just a variety of a more universal cognitive differentiation mechanism. More research needs to be done to clarify whether the in-group bias process functions independently or it is a sort of, for example, the different standards mechanism or other cognitive differentiation mechanism that can explain how partisan attitude directly affects judgments of bias.

*Further Inquiry Required into Mechanisms*

On the whole, HME research that has focused on psychological processes, or the mechanisms underlying the effect, has been limited. The present work identified four mechanisms proposed by scholars in order to explain HME: the different standards, selective recall, selective categorization, and the prior beliefs in media bias. This list does not include the in-group bias mechanism because of suspicion that it is not an independent mechanism. All of the mechanisms were tested in attempts to provide empirical evidence for their hypotheses. All of the listed mechanisms were supported at least in one study though on the whole results remain inconclusive. The table below gives an overall picture of these results.

This table contains references only to those studies that specifically tested for the listed mechanisms. The data in the Supported column implies that a certain mechanism was proven to directly affect the judgment of the hostile media bias. The data in the Refuted column means that a certain mechanism did not directly relate to perceptions of

hostility in media content. For example, Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken (1994) did not dismiss the participating role of the different standards, selective recall and categorization mechanisms in information processing during an HME event. They did refute them as the mechanisms directly responsible for the judgment of the media being against participants' point of view (that is for the judgments of the hostile media bias).

*Table 1. Support for Psychological Mechanisms of HME*

Mechanism	Supported	Refuted
Defferent Standards	Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985)	Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken (1994)
Selective Recall	Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985); Perloff (1989)	Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken (1994); Schmitt, Gunther, and Liebhart (2004)
Selective Categorization	Schmitt, Gunther, and Liebhart (2004)	Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken (1994)
The Prior Beliefs in Media Bias	Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken (1994)	Arpan and Raney (2003); Matheson and Dursun (2001)

Though limited and not conclusive, the presented collective insights into understanding what happens in people's minds during HME events are thought provoking in that all of them seem to have a grain of truth. The stage is well set for further inquiries into the psychological underpinnings of HME. Here are a few possible directions in this regard. It is probable that there could be not one but several mechanisms

at work in producing hostile media bias perceptions. It is also likely that mechanisms that were central to explaining these perceptions in one case could play only a subsidiary role in another. Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken (1994) suggested that heuristics based on the prior beliefs in media bias in their subjects exerted a stronger influence than the personal issue involvement and associated attitudes over the judgments of the hostile media bias. Since their subjects were only moderately involved in the Middle East conflict, it could be, the researchers reasoned, that in case of high involvement the influence of the prior beliefs in media bias would not be as strong. Depending on the audience's partisanship and group identity salience another mechanism, such as the different standards or selective categorization, might play a dominant role and explain the hostile media bias perceptions.

This chapter answered the third research question of the present thesis about the psychological mechanisms that explain HME. It strengthened this thesis's argument by providing possible explanations of the argument statements from psychological and social perspectives. Media consumers might perceive hostile media bias because they tend to selectively recall, or categorize media content, or apply to this content different standards of evaluation. The degree of involvement in the issues discussed in the media affects this tendency. Consumers' prior beliefs in media bias that develop from the overall experience with the media and interpersonal social networks might also play a role in forming hostile media bias.

## Conclusion

The present research supported the argument that media consumers perceive with varied intensity a hostile media bias in response to neutral media coverage. It demonstrated that HME occurs when people have formed an opinion about a covered issue that is different from other opinions introduced in the coverage. The strength of an opinion reflects one's personal involvement with the issue and affects the strength of HME perceived by media consumers. Issue involvement appeared to be a crucial audience characteristic that made one susceptible to HME. The greater level of involvement there was (with membership-associated partisanship being the highest degree of involvement) the more predictably the participants of the studies discussed in this research formed a hostile media bias.

Moreover, the synthesis of HME findings with the findings from social psychology research in group behavior turned out to be effective in demonstrating that media consumers experience a stronger HME when the media coverage focuses on group conflicts. The explanation for this phenomenon is found in a distinctive tendency of people with strong group affiliation to react as group members rather than as individuals in response to a message that evenhandedly describes the opposite side of a conflict. The sense of group identity in such individuals, stimulated by the message, induced them to form a hostile media bias to protect their self-esteem by defending their group's positive image.

The visual representation of this argument is found in Appendix A. Since the present research essentially confirmed the argument, the diagram from Appendix A reflects the overall findings and their meaning. The diagram shows three possible paths

that a media consumer might take as a result of exposure to a neutral media message. As discussed in chapter 2, this message is supposed to be about a controversial issue described through an introduction of at least two differing opinions or positions on this issue. Path 1 represents a person who is personally not involved in the message's issue or his or her involvement is so low that it did not mature into an opinion about the issue. Because there is a lack of involvement, this issue does not pose enough salience to this person who will process the message without sensing a media bias. A person will take path 2 if he or she is involved in the issue to the degree of having a firm opinion about it. This degree of involvement is sufficient enough to make him or her susceptible to HME. This person senses that the media coverage favors the side representing an opinion disagreeable with his or her own and perceives a hostile media bias.

HME research has demonstrated that when a broad sample of participants was tested a majority of them found media coverage to be neutral, but those who perceived bias thought that the media was biased in favor of the opposing view. To further clarify how paths 1 and 2 reflect reality it needs to be pointed out that whereas path 1 corresponds to this majority, path 2 applies to those who perceive bias. For example, in the presidential election setting, 57.8% (in Schmitt-Beck, 1994), 60% percent (in Beck, 1991), and 66% of regular voters (in Vallone, Ross, and Lepper, 1985) perceived the newspaper coverage of presidential campaigns as fair and objective, which gives a real life illustration of the prevalence of path 1. However, 23% (in Beck) and 25.8% (in Schmitt-Beck) of voters took path 2, sensing a hostile media bias. It is not possible to generalize the same percentages of HME occurrences in response to media coverage of issues other than presidential elections. However, it is clear that for any issue there will

always be a minority for whom this issue is evocative enough to bring out their attitudes and develop a hostile media bias.

Even though path 2 allows a wide range of hostile media bias perceptions, the strongest HME is associated with another path. Path 3 represents a perception of a person whose strong group identity is evoked by media coverage of a salient intergroup conflict. As chapter 2 argued, people, whose group identity dominates in making a judgment about bias in a conflict-focused media message, are particularly prone to forming a very robust HME. It should be expected that the overwhelming majority of strong group identifiers would take path 3 when exposed to a media depiction of a conflict in which their group is involved.

All in all, the current research findings suggest that media consumers consistently skew their judgments of media messages towards their positions to various degrees. In the case of a local newspaper discussing new legislation, the number of people who will charge the paper with a bias against their point of view might not seem significant. But the number of people perceiving a hostile media bias in media with a national reach is more difficult to ignore. Besides, there are plenty of hot-button issues that are inherently salient to media consumers of all types and all media sources. By belonging to different sexes, races, religions, and ideologies, people constitute large naturally occurring groups and are likely to hold opinions that reflect some of these groups' normative attitudes to various degrees. From this perspective, HME seems to have an unlimited source of conditions in which to manifest its influence. Indeed, the pervasiveness of this media effect should not be underestimated. Notwithstanding the media's impartiality, there will

always be mistrust and hostility by a significant minority of the population towards the media.

Additionally, this thesis examination of HME research showed that HME has a number of distinguishing features that uniquely position this effect in the family of other known media effects. First, HME is a specific media content effect. It is not diffuse like, for example, the cultivation effect (Huston, Donnerstein, Fairchild, Feshbach et al., 1992). Secondly, HME is not homogenizing and occurs only under a condition of personal involvement with a covered issue. On the audience's part, this effect entails attitudinal, cognitive, and behavioral processes. Even though HME has nothing to do with attitude change like some other media effects, e.g., priming (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987), HME occurs when media content induces content-associated attitudes in people. Cognitive processes are enabled in order to produce a judgment about media bias that is a form of behavior.

It is not entirely clear whether HME is a cumulative or non-cumulative effect. If the prior beliefs in media bias mechanism were proven to be a consistently present HME mechanism, HME would be classified as a cumulative effect (to the degree that people need to accumulate some previous media experience in order to develop such beliefs) like, for example, the framing effect (Iyengar, 1991). At the same time, it might be true that HME events of varied intensity employ different mechanisms (and further research should clarify that). In this case, HME appears to be even more complex and is classified as both cumulative and non-cumulative.

Moreover, though people form a bias judgment, the HME-provoking media do not act as an agent of change, but, rather, as a stabilizer of the existing opinions. Quite

uniquely, HME indicates a personal judgment about how the media reflect reality and not about how a person sees this reality mirrored by the media. Other media effects relate exclusively to the latter condition—e.g., the third person effect (Davison, 1983; Peiser & Peter, 2000). To put it in a larger perspective, HME demonstrates that in consuming media messages the audience is active and capable of message interpretation. In this regard, Becker and Kosicki (1995) succinctly wrote: “Audience members bring much to the communication situation, and what they bring alters what they take away” (p. 33), which undoubtedly applies to HME.

Finally, HME research has earned credibility. Approaching its conclusions with a healthy dose of skepticism, one might find some shortcomings in both the experimental and survey designs of HME-related studies. However, in most cases, what was lacking in the experiments has been compensated for in surveys and the other way around. For example, the videotapes that Perloff (1989) and Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985) shown to Middle East partisans lasted too long (36 and 13:30 minutes accordingly) to resemble short news stories of real television programs. Moreover, even though real TV networks produced the news segments viewed by the participants, a researcher’s subjective choice and compilation of these segments might have created an effect of a magnified, or artificial juxtaposition of sides in the conflict. These possible shortcomings are mitigated in the survey research. For example, the Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeldt (1998) and Beck (1991) studies dealt with consumers of actual and unaltered media content.

On the other hand, the surveys could not guarantee that their respondents actually had read or watched the content about which they were questioned. Moreover, some of the survey studies (e.g., Gunther & Christen, 2002; Gunther & Chia, 2001) could not

confirm whether the news coverage about which they questioned their subjects was indeed neutral. The experiments compensated for these disadvantages by controlling the participants' exposure to the investigated content and making sure that the selected media stimulus satisfied the requirements of neutral media coverage.

Besides, most of the HME-related research reflected the noticeable care with which samples that were representative of the national audience were selected (e.g., Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeld, 1998; Gunther & Chia, 2001). At the same time, some samples suffered from slight overrepresentations of women, whites, and people with levels of education above high school (e.g., Matheson & Dursun, 2001; Eveland & Shah, 2003). An important part of the original HME research used students of a comparatively young age as subjects (e.g., Arpan & Raney, 2003; D'Alessio, 2003). These limitations, however, do not seem to exceed those commonly seen in the area of communication research.

HME research is a relatively new area of scientific inquiry. Whereas the interest in this phenomenon seems to have peaked (which becomes obvious, if one looks at the dates of the majority of the studies consulted for this thesis), more research should be done to collect additional empirical evidence of this effect and understand its nature more fully. In the process, it would be interesting to continue experimenting with high profile and largely publicized issues such as abortion. New HME experiments on the abortion issue could shed light on whether people's attitudes towards abortion are changing due to a heightened political interest to this issue under the presidency of George W. Bush and whether these changes affect the perceptions of hostile media bias concerning abortion coverage among the American public.

While many intriguing conjectures into psychological mechanisms of HME have been proposed, empirical evidence of such mechanisms remains inconclusive. Conducting more studies that specifically test for any of the possible mechanisms will help identify those that unequivocally underlie perceptions of hostile media bias. Moreover, the question about where in the sequence of involvement conditions the shift to perceptions of hostile media bias occurs still appears to be one of the most outstanding aspects of HME that remains unknown and calls for further investigation as well. Resolving this mystery could be one of the challenges of future HME researchers.

Additionally, since the synthesis of HME and social psychology research seemed to be effective in deepening the knowledge about the hostile media phenomenon, new and elaborate studies could be proposed to document how different group processes correlate with HME events. For example, psychologists know that actual intergroup relations develop between groups of unequal power (Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002). Members of high- and equal power groups tend to exhibit more intergroup bias than members of low-power groups. Besides, members of numerical minorities with high power are particularly prone to strongly discriminate against out-groups. These findings can facilitate in designing a series of HME studies that investigate how group status affects the intensity of the hostile media bias and from which social groups this bias could be expected the most.

Another possible direction for future HME research lies in exploring the connection between HME and the estimates of public opinion from people who perceive a hostile media bias. After discovering—as with the third person effect (Davison, 1983)—that issue partisans believed that negative media content would persuade neutral

persons to favor the opposition rather than the partisans' own side, HME research started to contradict some of the existing hypotheses and, most importantly, the projection, or the false consensus effect (Ross, Greene, House, 1977). According to the latter, people tend to overestimate the commonness of their own opinions and assume that other individuals think or behave the same way no matter the reality. Conversely, it has been observed that people perceiving hostile media bias assume that others will not share the same opinion on the issue-subject of media coverage (e.g., Matheson & Dursun, 2001; Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chia, 2001; Christen & Gunther, 2003). The question that future HME researchers might ask is whether perceptions of hostile media bias offset the power of personal opinions to project these opinions onto the public. Christen, Kannaovakun, and Gunther (2002) made a distinctive first step in this direction, but more research is needed to establish the validity and/or limitations of both the HME-influence on public opinion and the false consensus hypotheses.

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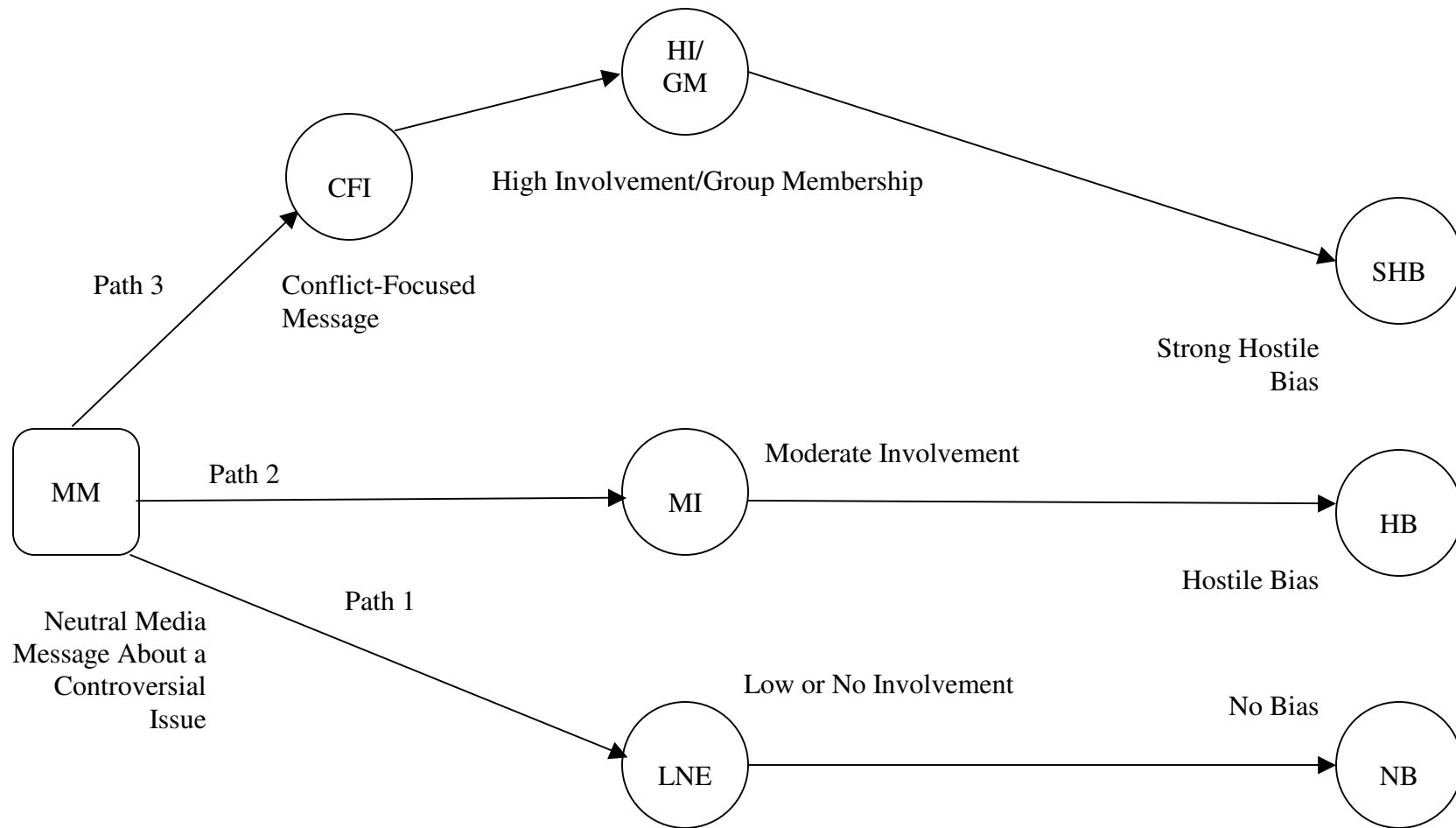
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Appendix A. Visual Representation of Hostile Media Bias Perceptions



Vita

Olga A. Doty holds an Honors Diploma in social and political journalism from Moscow State University. She has worked for mass media publications in Moscow, Russia, and marketing and communications firms in the Washington, DC area in the United States. She enrolled in the Communication in Contemporary Society graduate program of Johns Hopkins' Zanvyl Krieger School of Arts and Sciences, to study political communications and public relations. During her studies, Olga developed an interest in media theory that lead her, in particular, to investigate the hostile media effect in the present thesis.