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Abstract

This study builds on theories of “relative hostile media perceptions” to assess how audience characteristics and the ideological content of programming interact to shape media perceptions across different news genres. It uses a field experiment in which participants were randomly assigned to watch coverage of the 2012 Iowa Republican caucuses on broadcast network evening news (*ABC World News*), a conservative-oriented political talk show (Fox News Channel’s *Hannity*), or a political satire show (Comedy Central’s *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*). Partisanship and age shaped evaluations of coverage across these different genres: Partisans held more favorable views of news aligned with their own views, older participants favored network news, and younger participants favored political comedy. Additionally, viewing network news or political satire—but not conservative opinion talk—fostered more positive evaluations of the news media in general. The results illuminate how viewers form media perceptions in an increasingly fragmented media landscape.

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How the public perceives the media—as informative, fair (or biased), entertaining, and so on—has a range of important implications. Most obviously, perhaps, such perceptions influence the extent to which people choose to consume different forms of media (e.g., Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). Audience members' perceptions of the media can also moderate many well-documented media effects, including agenda setting (Tsfati, 2003) and priming (Miller & Krosnick, 2000).

Given these results, it is not surprising that a sizable body of research has focused on measuring and explaining perceptions of the media in general as well as perceptions of specific news outlets, including not only traditional news sources (e.g., broadcast network evening news programs) but also opinion-oriented cable talk programs (e.g., *The O'Reilly Factor*) and political satire programs (e.g., *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*). Much of this research has drawn on cross-sectional survey data to examine trends and patterns in perceptions of the news media in general and/or specific outlets (e.g., Arpan, Bae, Chen, & Greene, 2011; Pew Research Center, 2012). Studies have also used such data to examine the extent to which audience characteristics—including partisanship and demographics—predict media perceptions (e.g., Bennett, Rhine, & Flickinger, 2001; Eveland & Shah, 2003).

This approach, however, is limited in some significant regards. The use of cross-sectional survey data makes it difficult to assess whether respondents' perceptions are based on their experiences of consuming the actual coverage in question. For example, individuals could perceive the news media as politically biased based on arguments from political elites rather than their own experiences (Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999). Furthermore, cross-sectional data do not allow researchers to ascertain whether relationships between media exposure and media perceptions reflect the influence of the former on the latter or vice versa (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003).

Another approach is to use laboratory experiments to examine how audience members perceive specific coverage of political events. Much of this research has focused on whether individuals perceive media coverage as hostile to their own political perspectives (Vallone, Ross, & Leeper, 1985). Indeed, experimental evidence points to the existence of "hostile media perceptions" (Schmitt, Gunther, & Liebhart, 2004). Still, this body of research is limited in potentially important ways as well. In particular, the use of laboratory settings and convenience samples raises issues of generalizability to real-world settings and broader populations.

The present study uses a different approach, field experimentation, to examine how audience members perceive political coverage across different types of television programs and whether exposure to these different types of coverage influences more general media perceptions. It builds on Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, and Chia's (2001) concept of "relative hostile media perceptions" to assess how audience characteristics and the ideological slant of programming interact to shape perceptions of the media. In

doing so, the project focuses on a critical event in the 2012 presidential campaign: the Iowa Republican caucuses. Some participants in the study were randomly assigned to watch coverage of the caucuses on a broadcast network evening news program (*ABC World News*), others watched a conservative-oriented cable political talk program (*Hannity*), a third group watched a political satire program (*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*), and a final group was not asked to watch any coverage. Given that the study asked members of a nonstudent sample to watch coverage in a naturalistic setting as the event was actually unfolding, it champions ecological validity and provides a causal assessment of how viewers form perceptions of specific coverage as well as the news media overall.

Coverage of the 2012 Iowa Republican Presidential Caucuses

The programs selected for the present study represent three different genres of political programming: traditional broadcast network evening news (*ABC World News*, hereafter *ABC*), opinion-based political cable talk shows (*Hannity*), and satirical news (*The Daily Show*, hereafter *TDS*). These programs tend to vary in the ideological perspectives of their political content, with *ABC* adhering to traditional journalistic standards of objectivity through “game framing” (Kerbel, Apee, & Ross, 2000), *Hannity* presenting conservative punditry characteristic of Fox News Channel (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008), and *TDS* featuring satire that tends to challenge conservative politicians and positions more than liberal ones (Baym, 2009; Morris, 2009).

A brief examination of how the three programs covered the Iowa caucuses from Tuesday, January 3 through Thursday, January 5, 2012, reveals that each followed its own typical pattern of coverage in doing so. Consistent with the emphasis on “game framing” within traditional campaign news coverage in general and broadcast network evening news coverage in particular (Kerbel et al., 2000), *ABC* focused on candidate strategy and the horse race rather than policies and issues. The program’s broadcasts covered all of the main contenders for the nomination, interpreting their actions as strategic reactions to what host Diane Sawyer described as “an emotional photo finish” in Iowa. News items highlighted the upcoming contests in New Hampshire and South Carolina, discussing fundraising figures, polling data, high-profile endorsements, and commercial airtime purchases to assess which campaign was best positioned to survive the rapid sequence of primaries.

In contrast, Fox News’ *Hannity* framed the contest from its characteristically conservative perspective (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008), leaving little ambiguity about the stances of its host and guests. The night after the caucuses, ostensible winner Mitt Romney appeared on the show with 2008 Republican presidential nominee John McCain, who had just endorsed him. Host Sean Hannity’s questions focused on the ideological beliefs of his guests, allowing Romney to frame his candidacy and tenure as governor of Massachusetts as a “pretty darn conservative Republican” one. Throughout, *Hannity* emphasized Republican voters’ desire for “somebody to fight and to explain conservative solutions to Barack Obama because they feel that the

government is out of control.” In addition to the interview of Romney and McCain, the programming included opinionated commentary from conservative pundits Bill Kristol, Dick Morris, Sarah Palin, Ed Rollins, and Karl Rove, among others.

TDS's Jon Stewart also stayed true to form, satirizing the Republican contest as a depressing selection from a Whitman's Chocolate Sampler box (reabeled a “White Man's” sampler). Stewart mocked each of the contenders, deriding Romney in particular as a boring and unelectable choice that Republicans would eventually accept after trying other “nutty” options. Stewart also took aim at the media, mocking various outlets for their visuals depicting the caucus process and their coverage of New Year's Eve parties rather than the detention of American citizens accused of terrorism. Thus, viewers tuning in to *TDS* those nights were presented with its typical barrage of jokes about politicians—particularly Republican ones—and the media covering them (see Brewer & Marquardt, 2007; Morris, 2009).

Hypotheses and Research Question

Given the ideological perspectives of these programs, perceptions of their campaign coverage should be driven by individual viewers' own partisan leanings—particularly for the conservative-leaning *Hannity* and the Republican-satirizing *TDS*. Previous research has shown that party identification predicts perceptions of coverage that explicitly advances an ideological perspective (Feldman, 2011). For example, Coe et al. (2008) found that conservative viewers were less likely than liberal viewers to perceive Fox News coverage as biased, as well as less likely to see *TDS* coverage as informative and more likely to see it as biased (in contrast, liberals and conservatives exposed to traditional coverage on CNN did not differ in their perceptions). Similarly, Arpan, Bae, Chen, and Greene (2011) found that Republicans were more likely than Democrats to view political humor shows, including *TDS*, as biased. All of this suggests the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Compared to Democratic viewers, Republican viewers will (A) perceive campaign coverage on conservative-oriented cable opinion talk programs more favorably and (B) perceive campaign coverage on liberal-oriented political satire programs less favorably.

There is reason to believe, however, that such effects of party identification may not be symmetrical. For example, Brady and Sniderman (1985) observed that though conservatives and liberals evaluate the “other side” more negatively than their “own side,” conservatives evaluate liberals *more* negatively than liberals evaluate conservatives. Moreover, recent work on the personality and psychology of liberals versus conservatives (Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009) suggests that Republicans may engage in more motivated reasoning than Democrats, a proposition supported by Feldman's (2011) finding that conservatives are more tolerant of conservative bias in news coverage than are liberals of a left-leaning bias in news.

Demographic characteristics may also influence media perceptions. Building on the finding that political humor programs are more popular with younger people than older ones (Young & Tisinger, 2006), Arpan et al. (2011) speculated that age might be positively associated with perceptions of bias in these programs. They found no evidence of such a relationship; the present study, however, conducts a new test across a broader range of perceptions:

Hypothesis 2: Compared to younger viewers, older viewers will (A) perceive campaign coverage on broadcast network evening news programming more favorably and (B) perceive campaign coverage on political satire programs less favorably.

Turning from coverage-specific perceptions to broader media perceptions, previous research reaches conflicting findings regarding the effects of exposure to different news genres on perceptions of the media in general. Some suggest that the authoritative trappings of network evening news coverage could create a halo effect, fostering more favorable perceptions of the media (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987), whereas others suggest that the strategy-framed coverage common to this genre should foster cynicism and, thus, unfavorable perceptions (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Regarding satire programs, one study concluded that viewing *TDS*'s satirical critiques of postmodern news practices fostered more negative opinions of the media (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006); a subsequent study, however, found otherwise (Guggenheim, Kwak, & Campbell, 2011). Similarly, watching conservative-oriented cable opinion talk shows that feature regular criticism of the "mainstream media" may foster more negative opinions of the media in general (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008), but some research suggests that this may not always be the case (Guggenheim et al., 2011). Given the conflicting findings here, the present study addresses the following research question:

Research Question 1: How will viewing campaign coverage on broadcast network evening news, cable opinion talk, and political satire programs influence general media perceptions?

Consistent with theories of relative hostile media perception (Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chia, 2001) and motivated reasoning among partisans, any effects of exposure to these distinct forms of coverage on individual viewers' general media perceptions should depend on their partisanship:

Hypothesis 3: (A) The impact of viewing conservative-oriented cable opinion talk coverage on general media perceptions will be stronger among Republicans than among Democrats, whereas (B) the impact of viewing political satire coverage on general media perceptions will be stronger among Democrats than among Republicans.

Moreover, the age differences between network evening news and political satire programming's *target* audiences suggest that age should moderate the effects of their

coverage on general media perceptions. Network evening news programs should resonate more with their relatively old target audience than with younger viewers. Conversely, political satire programs such as *TDS* should resonate more with younger viewers than older ones (see Cao, 2008).

Hypothesis 4: (A) The impact of viewing broadcast network evening news coverage on general media perceptions will be stronger among older viewers than among younger viewers, whereas (B) the impact of viewing political satire programs on general media perceptions will be stronger among younger viewers than among older viewers.

Method

The present study draws on data from a field experiment in which participants were randomly assigned to view coverage of the Iowa caucuses on the three programs in question as they aired on television. Thus, the method used addresses a key limitation of laboratory experimentation (external validity) and a key limitation of cross-sectional survey data analysis (internal validity). Of course, field experiments can have their own limitations. The use of a real-world setting affords less control over conditions than a laboratory setting would provide; additionally, it may be more difficult to obtain a representative sample for a field experiment than for a cross-sectional survey. Even with these limitations, however, field experimentation offers a powerful tool for drawing *ecologically valid* inferences about media effects.

Participants were drawn from a panel of 1,060 Delaware residents who had previously agreed to participate in research projects. Though the panel was not selected through probability sampling and, thus, was not fully representative of the population, it was diverse in terms of demographic and partisanship composition (see subsequently). The first phase, the pre-caucus survey, was a telephone survey of panelists conducted from December 22, 2011, to January 2, 2012. Of the panelists, 506 (or 47.7%) completed this survey, which included questions measuring participants' general media evaluations and background characteristics. At the end of the survey, participants were randomly assigned to one of the four groups.

Each group received a different set of instructions. Participants in the control condition were merely told that they would be called back in a few days to answer more questions. In contrast, participants in the three treatment conditions received the following instructions:

We are studying what people think about different news shows and will be calling you back to capture your opinions. To help us, we need you to watch [*ABC World News/Hannity/The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*] three nights next week, Tuesday January 3rd through Thursday January 5th.

Participants in each treatment condition were given details about when and where they could watch the show to which they were assigned (as *Hannity*, unlike *ABC* and *TDS*,

runs for a full hour rather than half an hour, participants in this condition were only instructed to watch the first half hour of each night's broadcast). Participants in the treatment conditions received one interactive voice response call on January 2, 2012 (the day before the Iowa caucuses) and another on January 4, 2012, to remind them of their viewing instructions. In addition, participants for whom an email address was available received an email reminder with a link to a website where they could view their show. The randomized design of the experiment allows one to interpret any postviewing differences across groups as causal effects of the coverage viewed.

The post-caucus survey took place from January 6 to January 10, 2012. A total of 306 participants (60.4% of those who completed the pre-caucus survey and 28.9% of the full panel) completed the survey. Of the participants who completed the postcaucus survey, 90 were assigned to the control condition, 66 were told to watch *ABC*, 88 were told to watch *Hannity*, and 62 were told to watch *TDS*. The posttest survey asked participants in the treatment conditions whether they had a chance to watch coverage of the Iowa caucuses on the show they were instructed to watch and, if so, how many nights of coverage they watched. There were no significant differences across the groups in the mean number of nights of coverage participants reported watching (2.70 for *ABC*, 2.61 for *Hannity*, and 2.69 for *TDS*).

Both the pre-caucus and post-caucus surveys included two 5-point Likert-type items measuring *general media perceptions*, with response options ranging from *strongly disagree* (coded as 0) to *strongly agree* (coded as 4). The first was "Generally speaking, I trust the media to report the news fairly." The second was "In general, the news media are politically biased." Given that responses to these items were strongly correlated with one another in each survey (pretest: $r = -.57$; posttest: $r = -.53$; $p < .01$ for each), they were averaged into indices (after reverse coding the second item) for which 0 indicated the *least favorable perceptions* and 4 indicated the *most favorable* (pretest: $M = 1.20$, standard deviation [SD] = 1.12; posttest: $M = 1.21$, $SD = 1.07$).

To measure *coverage-specific perceptions*, the posttest included 5 items asking participants in the three treatment conditions how well—*very well* (coded as 3), *somewhat well*, *not very well*, or *not at all well* (coded as 0)—each of the following words described the coverage of the program they were instructed to watch: informative ($M = 2.06$, $SD = .83$), fair ($M = 1.83$, $SD = .96$), biased ($M = 1.88$, $SD = 1.00$), entertaining ($M = 1.83$, $SD = 1.03$), and enjoyable ($M = 1.82$, $SD = 1.06$).

The pretest also included measures for a set of background characteristics. Party identification was assessed using a standard branching format measure that yielded a 7-category scale ($M = 2.45$, $SD = 2.21$) ranging from *strong Democrat* (coded as 0) to *strong Republican* (coded as 6). Additional dichotomous variables (0 if no, 1 if yes) captured whether the participant was a Democrat (40% of participants) and whether the participant was a Republican (22%). The median age among participants was 67. Education was captured by a standard scale coded to range from 0 to 6 ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.41$). Gender was coded as 0 for *male* (49%) and 1 for *female* (51%). The sample was more Democratic, older, and more educated than the general public, but nonetheless diverse (particularly compared to the typical student sample).

Table 1. Participants' Perceptions of Coverage They Were Assigned to Watch, by Condition.

	<i>ABC News</i>	<i>Hannity</i>	<i>Daily Show</i>	<i>F</i>
Informative	2.02 ^a (.75)	2.18 ^a (.82)	1.96 ^a (.95)	1.17 <i>p</i> = .31
Fair	2.09 ^a (.77)	1.58 ^b (1.07)	1.87 ^{a,b} (.93)	15.32 <i>p</i> < .01
Biased	1.35 ^b (1.03)	2.18 ^a (.88)	2.09 ^a (.87)	17.87 <i>p</i> < .01
Entertaining	1.56 ^b (.86)	1.58 ^b (1.02)	2.48 ^a (.92)	5.15 <i>p</i> < .01
Enjoyable	1.75 ^b (.86)	1.41 ^c (1.08)	2.48 ^a (.91)	19.68 <i>p</i> < .01
<i>N</i>	(64)	(74)	(54)	

Note. Table entries are means; standard deviations are in parentheses. Differing superscripts indicate means that differed at $p < .05$ (two-tailed tests) in post-hoc tests. *F* tests are for one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) testing for differences across the three conditions.

Results

The first set of analyses examined how viewers' perceptions of the three programs' coverage differed. Table 1 reports the extent to which participants in each condition rated the coverage they watched as informative, fair, biased, entertaining, and enjoyable. Perceptions of the coverage as informative did not differ significantly across the conditions. In other words, participants did not perceive *ABC* as more (or less) informative than *Hannity* or *TDS*. Participants did, however, perceive *ABC* as more fair ($t = 3.18$; $p < .01$) and less biased ($t = 5.05$; $p < .01$) than *Hannity*, as well as less biased than *TDS* ($t = 4.16$; $p < .01$). At the same time, participants perceived *TDS* as being more entertaining and enjoyable than either *ABC* (for entertaining, $t = 5.52$; $p < .01$; for enjoyable, $t = 4.50$; $p < .01$) or *Hannity* (for entertaining, $t = 5.12$; $p < .01$; for enjoyable, $t = 5.94$; $p < .01$). In addition, participants perceived *ABC* as more enjoyable than *Hannity* ($t = 2.01$; $p < .05$).

As anticipated, perceptions of the programs differed across partisanship and age in a number of ways. To capture such differences within each treatment condition, Table 2 presents partial correlations between the perceptions and four variables—the 7-point party identification scale, the dichotomous variables indicating Republican and Democratic participants, and age—controlling for other key factors (age, education, and gender for party; Democrat, age, education, and gender for Republican; Republican, age, education, and gender for Democrat; party, education, and gender for age). Among those assigned to watch *ABC*, Republicans were less likely than democrats to see its coverage as fair, entertaining, and enjoyable and more likely to see it as biased (Table 2, column 1). Consistent with Hypothesis 1A, Republicans told to watch *Hannity* were more likely than Democrats to see its coverage as informative,

Table 2. Relationships Between Background Characteristics and Perceptions of Coverage Watched, by Condition.

	ABC News						Hannity						Daily Show							
	Party		Democrat		Age		Party		Democrat		Age		Party		Republican		Democrat		Age	
Informative	-.22	-.08	.15	.21	.42**	.19	.21	.42**	-.16	.19	.19	-.58**	-.37*	.26	-.33*					
Fair	-.43**	-.07	.39**	.30*	.53**	.23	.28*	.28*	-.24	.23	.23	-.49**	-.43**	.09	.01					
Biased	.29*	.08	-.11	.04	-.18	-.03	-.35**	-.17	-.17	-.03	-.03	.31*	.05	-.26	-.01					
Entertaining	-.36**	-.28*	.14	.20	.51**	.05	.29*	-.16	-.16	.05	.05	-.45**	-.35*	.11	-.26					
Enjoyable	-.33*	-.16	.19	.31*	.52**	.08	.38**	-.09	-.09	.08	.08	-.52**	-.30*	.19	-.22					
N	(52)	(52)	(52)	(52)	(62)	(62)	(62)	(62)	(62)	(62)	(62)	(46)	(46)	(46)	(46)					

Note. Table entries are partial correlations (controlling for age, education, and gender for party; controlling for Democrat, age, education, and gender for Republican; controlling for Republican, age, education, and gender for Democrat; controlling for party, education, and gender for age).

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 3. Predicting General Media Perceptions Among Experimental Participants.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Pretest evaluation	.68** (.04)	.58** (.04)	.69** (.04)
Watched <i>ABC World News</i>	.27* (.12)	.24 (.19)	.55 (.69)
Watched <i>Hannity</i>	-.10 (.11)	-.18 (.16)	-.65 (.60)
Watched <i>The Daily Show</i>	.26* (.12)	.17 (.17)	1.70 (.70)
Party identification	—	-.13** (.04)	—
Watched <i>ABC</i> × Party	—	.02 (.06)	—
Watched <i>Hannity</i> × Party	—	.03 (.05)	—
Watched <i>The Daily Show</i> × Party	—	.02 (.06)	—
Age (years/100)	—	—	-.44 (.60)
Watched <i>ABC</i> × Age	—	—	-.48 (1.02)
Watched <i>Hannity</i> × Age	—	—	.77 (.91)
Watched <i>The Daily Show</i> × Age	—	—	-2.19* (1.04)
Constant	.33 (.09)	.77 (.14)	.63 (.40)
R ²	.52	.56	.55
N	(302)	(302)	(277)

Note. Table entries are ordinary least squares (OLS) regression coefficients; standard errors are in parentheses.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

fair, entertaining, and enjoyable (Table 2, column 5). Consistent with Hypothesis 1B, Republicans assigned to watch *TDS* were less likely than Democrats to see this program's coverage as informative, fair, entertaining, and enjoyable, as well as more likely to see it as biased (Table 2, column 9).

The results for the dichotomous party variables suggest that responses to *Hannity* and *TDS* were more polarized among Republicans than among Democrats. Being a Republican (as opposed to an independent) was significantly associated with four of the five perceptions about *Hannity* (Table 2, column 6), whereas being a Democrat (as opposed to an independent) was not significantly associated with any of the five perceptions for this program (Table 2, column 7). Similarly, being a Republican (vs. independent) was significantly associated with four of the five perceptions for *TDS* (Table 2, column 10), whereas being a Democrat (vs. independent) was not significantly associated with any of the perceptions for the same show (Table 2, column 11).

The differences across age in perceptions of the coverage viewed were relatively modest. Compared to younger participants, older ones were more likely to see *ABC* coverage as fair and enjoyable (Table 2, column 4). In addition, older respondents were less likely than younger ones to see *TDS* coverage as informative (Table 2, column 12). No other associations between age and coverage-specific perceptions emerged. Thus, Hypotheses 2A and 2B each received partial support.

The final set of analyses tested whether the treatments influenced general, as opposed to coverage-specific, media perceptions (Research Question 1). Table 3

presents the result of a series of lagged dependent variable ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analyses (see Finkel, 1995) in which the 2-item index for posttest general media perceptions was the dependent variable. Each model included dichotomous variables for exposure to the three treatments (*ABC*, *Hannity*, and *TDS*), with the control condition serving as the baseline. Each model also controlled for pretest general media perceptions; thus, the coefficients for the treatment variables can be interpreted as treatment effects on change in general media perceptions from the pretest to the posttest (Finkel, 1995).

The first model (Table 3, column 1) included only the treatment variables and the pretest measure. Not surprisingly, pretest perceptions strongly predicted posttest perceptions ($b = .68$; $p < .01$). More importantly, the results here indicate that watching either *ABC* ($b = .27$; $p < .05$) or *TDS* ($b = .26$; $p < .05$) led to more favorable perceptions of the media in general. In contrast, watching *Hannity* did not significantly affect such perceptions. To illustrate these results, first differences in general media perceptions were calculated between the control group and each of the news conditions. Those asked to watch *ABC* viewed the media more favorably than those not asked to watch any coverage (the difference is .27 [.07, .47] on the 5-point index). Likewise, watching *TDS* is estimated to result in an increase of .25 [.05, .46] on the media favorability measure. Watching *Hannity* is estimated to have a negative effect on perceptions of the media of $-.11$ [$-.28$, .08], but the confidence intervals that overlap zero do not allow one to place significant weight on this estimate.

Model 2 (Table 3, column 2) tested whether the effects of the shows' coverage depended on participants' partisanship (Hypothesis 3) by adding the 7-point scale for party identification and its interactions with the three treatments. The results indicate that party identification was significantly related to general media perceptions ($b = -.13$; $p < .01$), with Republicans exhibiting less favorable perceptions than Democrats. The effects of the treatments, however, did not vary across party identification (as indicated by the nonsignificant coefficients for the three interaction terms). Thus, the results supported neither Hypothesis 3A (for *Hannity*) nor Hypothesis 3B (for *TDS*).

Finally, Model 3 (Table 3, column 3) tested whether the effects of the treatments varied across age (Hypothesis 4) by adding this variable and its interactions with the treatments. By itself, age was not related to general media perceptions. Nor did the effects of watching *ABC* or *Hannity* vary across age, with the latter result contradicting Hypothesis 4A. Consistent with Hypothesis 4B, however, the impact of watching *TDS* varied significantly across age ($b = -2.19$; $p < .05$). Among the youngest participants, watching *TDS* had a positive and relatively strong impact on media perceptions (for 35-year-olds, watching *TDS* resulted in an increase in positive perceptions of .96 [.37, 1.55]). The effect size declined at higher levels, becoming negative (although not significantly so) among the oldest participants (the estimated effect for 90-year-olds is $-.25$ [$-.72$, .19]).

Conclusion

The present study offers a novel methodological approach to the study of media perceptions, illuminating how exposure to ideologically distinct campaign news genres shapes such perceptions as well as how audience characteristics moderate these effects. Using a study that randomly assigned respondents to watch three nights of campaign coverage on one of the three specific programs, the project maximized ecological validity by exposing individuals to actual content aired in real time that dealt with real-world events (the Iowa caucuses). The results show how viewers perceive campaign coverage in a changing and fragmented media environment, where the audience for traditional broadcast network evening news has declined precipitously and where sizable audiences now turn to less traditional sources such as opinion-oriented political talk and political satire programming (Pew Research Center, 2012).

Viewers perceived coverage in all three news genres as equally *informative*. However, they perceived traditional network news as the least biased of the three, and as fairer than *Hannity*. Thus, network news has retained its status in the minds of viewers as a relatively even-handed source. Yet perceptions of network news were *not* uniform across all viewers, as older viewers were more likely than younger ones to perceive *ABC* coverage as fair and enjoyable. Younger viewers, on the other hand, were more likely than older ones to rate *TDS* as informative—further evidence of the changing media landscape and the evolving expectations about what constitutes journalism and public affairs content (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2012).

The results here offer confirmatory evidence of relative hostile media effects, with partisans exhibiting more positive perceptions of content that favored their own ideological viewpoint. These effects, however, occurred largely among Republicans, not Democrats, a finding that echoes previous research on the asymmetry of motivated reasoning among liberals and conservatives (Brady & Sniderman, 1985; Feldman, 2011).

The results also shed light on how exposure to specific news genres can differentially affect viewers' broader perceptions of media. Contrary to past research, the present study found that exposure to political satire actually led to more positive generalized media perceptions. This effect was significantly stronger among younger viewers. Exposure to network news also engendered more positive overall media perceptions, whereas exposure to conservative opinion talk programming did not.

As is common with field experiments, the emphasis on ecological validity has the consequence of introducing other methodological limitations. First, the fact that respondents were asked to view programming on their own over the course of 3 days limits the degree of researcher control over the respondent's viewing experience. Although self-reported viewing rates did not vary by condition, the effects of the "treatments" were likely diluted as a result of our participants' free will. Additionally, the project focuses on media perceptions resulting from exposure to news coverage about a specific political event, the 2012 Iowa caucuses. Some of the findings may be attributable to this particular moment in election history, and not necessarily indicative of broader phenomena. Similarly, the selection of specific programs

complicates the ability to generalize to broader news genres, although these programs did follow patterns of coverage typical of their genre.

As our media environment becomes increasingly fragmented and diverse, with potentially infinite permutations of politically relevant programming and content, capturing users' perceptions of these different genres becomes crucial. Since perceptions of informativeness, fairness, bias, entertainment value, and enjoyability can affect both user engagement *with* and future use *of* political programming, understanding how these perceptions operate will help scholars develop more nuanced models of message processing and effects. If different news genres are associated with different perceived strengths and weaknesses—and if these perceptions vary with features of the audience—then perhaps users will turn, and respond, to such genres not only as a function of their individual characteristics but also in terms of the changing needs and gratifications they seek in specific real-world contexts. Future scholarship will need to address these issues across time and across historical events to illuminate the processes in action.

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