

Perceptions of Media and Media Effects

The Third-Person Effect, Trust in Media, and Hostile Media Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

Research about the way people perceive news media has made progress in three parallel avenues. The first used the concept of credibility and trust; the second used the concept of hostile media perceptions; and the third – focusing on perceptions of media impact – used the concept of the third-person perception. In this chapter, we argue that these three avenues are empirically and conceptually connected and that they are related to media effects in three ways. First, people's mistrust of media has been found to moderate the influence of media on the audience in an array of studies. Second, people's perceptions regarding media impact matter, albeit indirectly, because people react to these perceptions as if they were real. Third, the effects of perceptions of media influence are amplified when they are coupled with perceptions of media hostility, especially among audiences that are personally and emotionally involved in the issues on which media texts report.

People are exposed to information about the world by the news media. While this information shapes one's opinions about the world, attitudes toward the media themselves are also developed in the course of news consumption. Opinions about media may be generalized (e.g., the media are liberal; Lee, 2005), or targeted to the way specific topics are covered by news media (e.g., media are against genetically modified

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foods; Gunther & Liebhart, 2007). Three important types of attitudes toward media have been identified by previous research; they relate to trust in media (Kohring & Matthes, 2007), perceptions as to whether media favor or are hostile toward specific topics or groups (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985), and beliefs about how powerful media are and how they affect the self, other individuals, and society (Davison, 1983).

Though social psychologists researching attitude formation and change may be interested in attitudes toward media simply as a way to study attitudes, media scholars have found them to be interesting for other reasons. Attitudes toward media have been shown to be important because they affect a host of social and political behaviors and thus they have received a fair amount of attention in recent years. In this chapter we review recent work on trust in media, which has been at record lows in recent years (Gallup, 2010). We then review work on the hostile media phenomenon and on the influence of perceived media influence, and end by examining how these disparate literatures are connected in order to suggest new theoretical insights.

Audience Trust in Media

The notion of audience trust in media applies the concept of trust, originating from interpersonal interactions, to audience interactions with media. In a general sense, “Trust is a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another” (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998, p. 395). In trust relations, there are two sides: the trustor, the side that places trust, and the trustee, the side being trusted. The trustor and the trustee interact in *an uncertain situation* in which the trustor stands to gain or lose. Trust is a *voluntary expectation* on the side of the trustor that the interaction with the trustee will lead to gains rather than to losses (Coleman, 1990). However, trust is not only about predictability and uncertainty reduction (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000, p. 577). We can reliably predict that someone else will be dishonest or self-serving and thus distrust him or her. Since the trustor cannot be certain about the intentions of the trustee, for trust to take place the trustee must be considered at least somewhat believable or credible. This is why some definitions of trust stress the credibility (Rotter, 1967) and honesty (Fukuyama, 1995) of the trustee. Oftentimes, when one is dependent on others, believing in the other’s good intentions is not enough and some trust in the other’s ability to perform may be required for trust. Thus, several definitions of trust invoke the notion of competence.

Can We *Trust* the Media?

Does the concept of trust, as defined above, apply to the interactions of audiences with media? As we have seen, trust implies uncertainty on the side of the trustor. In

the context of the news media, given that the media deal with the impersonal world (Mutz, 1998), audiences are always at least somewhat uncertain about news media content, in the sense that it is usually hard for them to verify media reports with non-media sources (even for those who still believe in the possibility of objectively valid information despite postmodern conceptions of reality as socially constructed). Not only is it hard for us to verify the validity of the *information* that appears in the media, it is even harder to verify the *character* and *intentions* of those working in the media. Hence, it is often hard to evaluate the fairness of media *interpretations* of reality (Kohring & Matthes, 2007).

As mentioned, trust implies potential gains and losses for the trustors. Admittedly, in mass media audience contexts, the risks on the side of the audience may not necessarily be as grave as in other scenarios. People might be wasting their time watching the news only to find out that the information they received is wrong. Moreover, they might be misled by inaccurate or unfair news portrayals that have potential attitudinal or behavioral consequences. Such consequences may include supporting the “wrong” candidate or policy based on media information that later turned out to be wrong or even deceptive, or not having an H1N1 vaccine based on an inaccurate media report on safety problems.

Why Do People Trust or Mistrust Media?

General Social Survey data show that the rate of US citizens having hardly any trust in the press grew from a low of 14.6% in 1973 to a high of 41% in 2006. As media scholar James Carey (1995, p. 393) put it, “above all, the press lost credibility and respect; it was no longer believed. As poll after poll showed, journalists have earned the distrust of the public.” Some put the blame for the decline in audience trust on politicians, who increasingly slam the media (Domke, Watts, Shah, & Fan, 1999). Others argued that audience mistrust is the product of mounting coverage of the media by the media that results in heightened audience awareness of journalistic blunders and scandals (Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999). According to other explanations (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), people are cynical about the media because the media themselves are cynical. In line with this explanation, journalists’ “strategic framing” of politics leads to political cynicism which in turn feeds back on journalists (see also D’Angelo & Lombard, 2008).

Regardless of the decrease in audience trust in media in the United States in recent decades, additional research has tried to decipher what makes people trust or mistrust the news media. Two types of answers emerged. The first ties audience trust in media to some feature of the text. For example, journalists’ sourcing practices – for example, quoting or not quoting a source in the story’s headline – was found to be related to the perceived trustworthiness of the news story (Sundar, 1998). Newhagen and Nass (1989) found that audience trust in a news story is related to their perception of the individual person presenting the news story. Factors such as race and

gender of the newscaster were related to audience trust (with males perceived as more trustworthy than females, and race affecting perceived trust only for male newscasters; Balon, Philport, & Beadle, 1978). Medium characteristics such as television's ability to provide sound and pictures as evidence supporting the claims of the news stories, and the possibility to use hyperlinks to external sources in online news, explained why television news was perceived as more credible compared to print journalism in the 1960s, and online news was perceived as more newsworthy than television news early in the twenty-first century (Kioussis, 2001).

The second type of answer is related not to the text but to audience characteristics. Not much is known about the personality of media trustors versus mistrustors but we do know that trust in media is related to interpersonal trust (though weakly; Tsfati, 2002) and to other forms of political trust (Jones, 2004). Conservatives are more mistrusting of the news media and liberals more trusting (Jones, 2004), and those with extreme attitudes are more mistrusting than moderates (Gunther, 1988). Involvement with the issues covered by media also reduced trust in news coverage (Gunther & Lasorsa, 1986). For instance, Palestinians and Israelis are more likely to mistrust coverage of the Middle East than US citizens who have had no direct ties with, or experience in, the Middle East. These findings point out that much of people's trust or mistrust in media is explained by their own biases (Gunther, 1992). This topic relates to the next section of this review, namely, the hostile media perception.

What are the Consequences of Audience Trust in Media?

In general, trust is known to be more likely to lead to cooperation whereas mistrust is likely to decrease cooperation (Blackburn, 1998; McAllister, 1995). How do we apply this logic to media contexts?

One type of evidence about consequences of trust in media demonstrates that audience trust in mainstream news media is associated with mainstream news exposure and that mistrust of mainstream news is associated with exposure to non-mainstream media (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). The associations are rather small, however ($r = .18$ at best), indicating that many people report that they read and watch news they do not trust. A possible explanation is that news may satisfy diverse needs including some that are not related to the core of trust relations. People may watch news they do not trust because it helps them stay in touch with other people, because it is interesting, or because it is fun. Since reported levels of trust in media are relatively low, it is obvious that some people will watch news they say they do not trust while trying to filter out information they consider biased or untrustworthy.

Another line of research on the consequences of trust in media explored whether audiences trusting the news media are more affected by news media coverage than those mistrusting. Indeed, the evidence points out that, at least when it comes to certain news media effects, audience trust in news media is related to news media effectiveness. This is true with regard to agenda setting (Tsfati, 2003a; Chapter 1, this

volume), priming (Miller & Krosnick, 2000; Chapter 3, this volume), and climate of opinion perceptions (Tsfati, 2003b). For example, when the public opinion climate portrayed in media predicted that George W. Bush would overcome Al Gore in the 2000 US presidential elections, media-trusting audiences were more likely than non-trusting to perceive that Bush was the likely winner, but when the mediated opinion climate changed and the news media predicted a Gore victory, trusting audiences were more likely to perceive that Gore was the likely winner. However, some media effects (especially cultivation effects of news) seem resilient to audience mistrust of media and take place even in the absence of trust (Tsfati, 2002). Moreover, research on the role of media trust in media effects has not been thus far investigated in the context of behavioral effects.

The democratic implications of audience mistrust of media remain unclear. Given the essential role news media play in democratic processes, the drop in audience trust in news media in the last decades in the United States has been presented by some scholars as a problem for democracy (Jones, 2004; Kohut & Toth, 1998). On the other hand, other scholars have argued that audience mistrust in media could be seen as healthy skepticism (Gaziano, 1988, p. 278).

While there is no clear-cut answer to the question of whether audience mistrust in media is good or bad for democracy (and a similar argument is made regarding political trust; see Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), there is quite a bit of evidence indirectly bearing on this question. For example, research has documented that *mistrust* of media is correlated with higher political participation (Tsfati, 2002; Chapter 22, this volume; but Ho et al., forthcoming, demonstrate that perceptions of media bias are related only to issue-specific political participation and not to participation in general), and higher political involvement (Eveland & Shah, 2003). Hence, we do know that citizens' mistrust of media probably does not produce political apathy. On the downside, we know that mistrusting audiences do not tend to discuss politics more often, and when they do discuss politics, they do so with ideologically like-minded individuals (Eveland & Shah, 2003). According to some accounts, the increase in audience mistrust of the news media over the past 40 years has been an important contributor to the growing polarization of the US political system (Ladd, 2005).

In sum, audience trust in the news media has roots both in the journalistic text and in the characteristics and biases of the audience. Trust is related to audience news diets and to the way people respond to news. But trust is a general attitude, targeted toward news media as an institution. How do people perceive specific news texts? This topic was covered by research on hostile media perceptions.

Hostile Media Perceptions

As part of their drive to be consistent and avoid dissonance, people's perceptions of other people and social groups that they favor tend to be favorably biased (Hastorf

& Cantril, 1954). To test this notion in the context of news, Vallone et al. (1985) screened several news segments about the Sabra and Shatila massacre in Lebanon to pro-Arab, pro-Israel, and neutral students on the Stanford campus. As expected, each group saw the coverage as, on the whole, less sympathetic to their side, more sympathetic to the opposing side, and generally hostile to their point of view. This pattern of findings, repeated since many times, has been dubbed the hostile media phenomenon (HMP), suggesting a general perception about news media as being hostile to one's own positions and social affiliations. Perloff (1989) showed not only that partisans (again pro-Israelis and pro-Palestinians) believed coverage to be biased against them, but that each group of partisans also believed that neutral audiences would be persuaded by this hostile coverage to support the opposing position. In a second experiment, Perloff (1989) showed that neutral observers did not in fact change their attitudes following exposure to the materials and thus there was no basis for the partisans' biased suspicions.

More recent research has clarified several aspects of the HMP. First, Gunther and Schmitt (2004) demonstrated that this hostility bias may not necessarily take place when it comes to non-media messages. That is, people reading the same text presented as a student essay instead of news did not perceive it as hostile. To explore why news media tend to be singled out to be perceived as hostile, Gunther and Liebhart (2006) conducted an experiment that varied both the source of the message (news vs. student essay) and the reach of the message (will or will not be published), and found that both the identity of the source and the expected audience independently contribute to the perceived hostility of the text.

But there are limits to this bias. What happens when partisans see media coverage that is clearly supportive of their view? In such cases, when coverage is clearly slanted in favor of one's own position, research has found that partisans do not see media coverage as hostile but they do see it as less positive or supportive of their position than non-partisans or opponents. This is known as the relative HMP (Gunther & Chia, 2001) to denote that while clearly favorable coverage is not seen as objectively hostile, the bias does not completely disappear but rather just becomes relative.

Why Do Partisans Believe the Media are Hostile?

Because the HMP occurs when reading media messages but not other messages, it seems that when partisan audiences are exposed to news coverage that affects a topic they are involved in, they process it in a defensive manner. This sort of processing makes the coverage seem more negative. Three specific mechanisms have been suggested (Gunther & Liebhart, 2007) and were tested by these authors in a critical experiment involving materials regarding genetically modified foods presented to partisans as either press coverage (the mass media condition) or a student essay (non-media condition).

The first mechanism tested as explaining the HMP suggests that partisans tend to selectively recall more negative than positive information. This explanation was tested and found incorrect (Gunther & Liebhart, 2007). Partisans from the two camps remembered a similar number of arguments from both sides. A second explanation focuses on the extent to which supporting and opposing arguments are treated as valid. This explanation had been experimentally supported in previous research (Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994). This explanation, known as the different standards mechanism, suggests that because opposing arguments seem less legitimate, their presentation in news reports is seen as proof of biased reporting. In testing this explanation, Gunther and Liebhart (2007) found that different standards were used to decide what was legitimate to include in both the media and non-media conditions, and therefore the different standards mechanism cannot serve as a good explanation for the HMP, which occurs differently when exposed to media and non-media messages.

Finally, a third explanation that has received mixed support suggests that information is differentially categorized as supporting and opposing each position in a way that makes the coverage seem more negative. In essence, strong supporters of a position tend to see mildly favorable or neutral arguments as hostile to their position, simply because they are not supportive enough. For example, from the vantage point of a union leader, arguments that support a strike but perhaps endorse some compromise may seem hostile, whereas from a neutral point of view they may seem to be supportive of labor's position and against management.

Who is a Partisan?

In studies of the HMP, a consistent finding is that media coverage is perceived as hostile by partisans but not by neutral audiences. But what is it that makes someone a partisan and thus susceptible to hostile media perceptions?

In the persuasion literature, involvement is a central concept that explains many facets of attitude maintenance and change (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984) and has been explained in various ways (Choi, Yang, & Chang, 2009). In general, individuals are involved with those topics that matter to them and that they care about. Though involvement is often related to attitude extremity with involved people having more extreme attitudes, this is not necessarily the case and extremity and involvement are conceptually distinct. Attitude involvement is associated with more effortful processing of attitude-relevant information (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984) and being less likely to change one's attitude.

There are various reasons one may be involved with a topic. Someone may be involved with a topic because it has personal relevance to their lives (e.g., an event about to occur in one's town). A subset of issues that are personally relevant are those which are outcome relevant such as a tuition hike that is slated to occur in one's own university as opposed to another university. A third type of involvement

relates to topics that perhaps have no personal or outcome relevance but relate to one's values and thus are important and are associated with strong feelings (e.g., a religious person holding an anti-abortion belief). A final type of involvement is ego involvement whereby one feels so strongly about a topic and identifies with a group defined by that attitude (e.g., party affiliation, nationality, ethnic group) to such an extent that one's self-concept would be threatened if this attitude changed.

Perloff (1989) suggested that his research as well as the initial studies by Vallone et al. (1985) indicate that ego involvement drives the HMP, but these researchers did not directly test groups of partisans defined by other types of involvement. As mentioned earlier, Gunther and Liebhart (2007) report studies that rule out personal and outcome relevance as bases for the HMP. They explain that if an issue has practical relevance, a person is likely to value accurate information over consistent information, but if the involvement is expressive rather than instrumental, then consistency is likely to trump accuracy. For instance, even an individual who has a basic mistrust of media may attend and react to information about a new tax code change that affects her but feels that the very next news story about foreign policy is hostile to her ideological position. Providing additional support for the importance of ego and value involvement, Choi et al. (2009) find that ego/value and outcome-relevant involvement are distinct and that the former has a greater impact on the HMP.

What are the Consequences of the HMP?

The HMP has the potential to polarize public opinion because those who care the most about any issue become convinced that the media are against them. Thankfully, the same partisans who believe the media are out to get them do not rely on this perception when estimating public opinion. Rather, both the United Parcel Service workers and the Teamsters who had opposing attitudes about a Teamsters strike (Christen, Kannaovakun, & Gunther, 2002) projected their own attitudes on others and thought that the US public supported their view more than their opponents' view despite negative media coverage.

Tsfati and Cohen (2005a) found that among Gaza settlers who were threatened with an evacuation of their homes there was a high degree of hostile media perceptions, and that the more settlers felt the media were hostile toward them, the more they mistrusted Israeli democracy and the more willing they were to use force to oppose the government evacuation. Tsfati (2007) found that members of the Arab-Palestinian minority in Israel who felt that mainstream Israeli media are hostile to Palestinian Israelis tended to feel alienated from Israeli society. Interestingly, the perception of negative coverage was also associated in both studies with a belief that the settlers and Israeli Palestinians suffered from a negative public image (Tsfati, 2007; Tsfati & Cohen, 2005b), suggesting that unlike the striking Teamsters, settlers projected their perceptions of media coverage, rather than their own self-view, onto others. Thus, the HMP can have severe consequences for democracy but only under

some conditions. In other conditions (perhaps when a group does not feel as marginalized or is as insular as the minorities studied in Israel were), it is limited to attitudes about the media.

The perception that media are hostile becomes crucial especially if one believes that the media are powerful. Individuals may think that if media have little influence over what others think, it may be unpleasant that they disagree, but if they are powerful agents of influence over others, then their oppositional messages represent a more serious social problem. Thus, the importance of the HMP is linked to perception of media influence, which is the third focus of this chapter.

Perceived Media Influence

The degree of influence and power people attribute to media and their content is another topic of interest for media scholars. One thing that has been clearly established is that such attributions are inaccurate. Several key findings point to the conclusion that the way we view the media has as much to do with how we view ourselves (or would like to view ourselves) and others than with an assessment of the media or media content. Davison (1983) identified the original bias that is referred to as the third-person perception (TPP), namely that people attribute greater power to the media when they are asked about its effect on others than when they are asked about media influence on themselves. This basic finding has been replicated endless times in an array of areas from health communication (Gunther, Bolt, Borzekowski, Liebhart, & Dillard, 2006), through parental mediation of violent televised content (Tsfati, Ribak, & Cohen, 2005), to audience reaction to media panics (Tewksbury, Moy, & Weis, 2004). Indeed, replicating this bias has become so popular that one survey ranked the third-person effect fifth on a list of “most popular theories” in contemporary communication research (Bryant & Miron, 2004). A meta-analysis (Sun, Pan, & Shen, 2008) covering 60 papers, 106 studies, and 372 effect sizes found robust support for the perceptual component of the third-person effect (the average effect size was $r = .307$).

Why Do People Perceive that Others are Influenced?

Given that the TPP disappears or even reverses itself when the topic under study is a media effect that is normatively positive (e.g., if asked to what degree a public service announcement or the media in general influence people to abstain from alcohol consumption before driving, people tend to believe they are at least as influenced as others, if not more so; Duck, Terry, & Hogg, 1998 – a finding dubbed the first-person perception), many scholars tend to explain the TPP as stemming from a motivation to view oneself positively (Gunther, Perloff, & Tsfati, 2008; Tal-Or &

Tsfati, 2007). Other evidence supporting our understanding of the TPP is that the gap between how powerful the media are expected to be in their influence on the self and on others depends on who these others are. The social distance corollary of the TPP states that the greater is the social distance between the self and the other who is perceived to be influenced by the media, the greater will be the gap in attributed media impact (Cohen, Mutz, Price, & Gunther, 1988).

There are, however, exceptions to the social distance corollary that are manifested when the others addressed have a unique connection to the message. When estimating the effects of media messages on members of a group that are expected to know more about the topic of the message, members of this group would be perceived as being less affected even if they are very socially distanced (Tsfati & Cohen, 2004), and if there is good reason to assume that they are especially vulnerable they may be perceived as especially affected even if they are more socially similar (Scharrer, 2002). These findings have been used by scholars to advance a cognitive explanation for the TPP.

According to the cognitive account of the TPP, people's perceptions of media impact are the result of their best guess, using what they know about the world in order to reach as accurate an answer as possible to a question to which even media scholars do not have the real answer. Cognitive explanations attribute errors in estimation not to self-serving biases but to more general cognitive biases. These include the attribution bias (people acknowledge the impact of external factors such as persuasive intent when they estimate the potentially undesirable impact of media on themselves, but when estimating that same effect on others, they concentrate on the innate characteristics of other people, such as gullibility; Gunther, 1991), and self-categorization theory (when people estimate media influence, they take into account what they know about the norms of the in-group and those of the out-group; Reid, Byrne, Brundidge, Shoham, & Marlow, 2007). According to one of the most studied cognitive explanations, people hold naïve theories of media influence. According to these "magic bullet-like" theories, greater exposure leads to greater media impact, and thus, when people estimate the impact of media content on others, they take into account what they know about the exposure of these other people to the specific media content. This explanation was called the perceived exposure corollary (Eveland, Nathanson, Detenber, & McLeod, 1999).

What are the Consequences of Perceiving Media Influence?

Davison's (1983) original interest in the TPP was predicated not on a fascination with the biased nature of human perceptions but rather on his claim that biased perceptions of media influence are the basis for social action and individual behavior. For example, he pointed out that movie censor boards who decide what is legitimate or illegitimate expression base their decisions on their (biased) fear that others would be harmed, whereas they are never concerned with the effect of screening these films

on their own morals or conduct. Likewise, it is now well established that biased perceptions of media influence underlie many other social decisions and actions. Such indirect media effects, the consequences of the perception of media impact, have been well documented as influence of presumed media influence or IPMI (Gunther & Storey, 2003), also known as the behavioral component of the third-person effect.

Recent reviews of the various contexts in which perceived media influence plays an important role provide a good summary of this research (e.g., Tal-Or, Tsfati, & Gunther, 2009). Such reviews point to a myriad of findings showing that people act based on their beliefs that media have effects on others to either protect themselves or others from such effects (e.g., Tsfati et al., 2005, show that parents restrict their children's TV viewing based on fears of detrimental effects), to coordinate their behavior to accommodate such media effects (Cohen & Tsfati, 2009), or to comply with normative pressures assumed to be the result of presumed media effects (Gunther et al., 2006). What is common to these studies is that they point to very real impacts of perceived media influence, a perception we know to be biased. Some of the consequences revealed in research are rather benign, such as having parents limit their children's TV viewing (Tsfati et al., 2005). Other consequences of the TPP, however, may be dangerous, as when teens claim to feel pressure to engage in sexual activity because they believe the media make this normatively expected, or rather important, as when voters change the way they vote (Cohen & Tsfati, 2009). And yet other effects may be life changing, as when people consider moving away from a town they perceived to be stigmatized by media coverage even though they enjoy living there. Thus, what at first seems like a curious self-affirming bias may have somewhat serious consequences.

Toward a Theory of Perceptions of Media

Thus far, we have defined and reviewed the causes and consequences of three perceptions regarding media: trust, hostility, and influence. But, besides the fact that these three perceptions are targeted toward the same object, are they related? Is trust in media at all related to hostile media perceptions, and are these two at all connected to perceptions of media influence? We argue that the answer to these questions is yes. From reviewing the three separate research traditions, we have learned that all three are at least somewhat irrational beliefs: while they incorporate relevant information, the motivation to all three is at least partially ego defensive. As we have shown, people who care more about a topic tend to be more defensive in how they understand media coverage of that topic. They thus tend to perceive the coverage as more hostile and influential and to increase their mistrust in the media.

The three questions underlying the three concepts – Are the news media trustworthy? Is news coverage of a given topic biased? What influence do the media in

general or a certain media content have on other people? – are not easy to answer even for academic experts deliberating for an extended period of time (and in the case of media effects, for decades). In that sense, the three perceptions cannot be expected to represent accurate assessments of media. That said, in all three cases it seems that people factor in what they do know about the world when they assess the media and their impact. There are cognitive factors involved in people's judgments of bias in a news story or the estimate of the impact of the story on others, and real-world events do influence people's trust in media (e.g., trust in media decreases after a predicted disaster does not take place; Major & Atwood, 1997).

There is an empirical association between the three perceptions as well. Tsfatı and Cohen (2005a) reported a significant association between respondents' perceptions of hostile news coverage and their trust in media, after controlling for a variety of political and demographic factors. Significant associations between hostile media perceptions and perceptions of media impact (on others) have also emerged in some other studies (Tsfati, 2007; Tsfati & Cohen, 2003), again after controlling for political and demographic covariates. That is, the more people mistrust the media, the more they tend to perceive media coverage as hostile to their point of view and the more they perceive news media to exert negative influence on others. It is important to note that these associations are statistically rather small. For example, in the settlers' data (Tsfati & Cohen, 2005a), the partial correlation (controlling for various indicators of political ideology and extremity, religiosity, sex, age, years of education, and involvement – conceptualized as attachment to the particular settlement one lived in) between TPP and HMP was $r = .15$ ($p = .01$), the partial correlation between TPP and media trust was $r = -.10$ ($p = .07$), and the partial correlation between trust in media and HMP was $r = -.13$ ($p = .04$). Given the definition of trust, the association between the HMP and media trust is clear. If an individual thinks coverage is biased against her side of a story that is important to her (especially if this continues over time), it should come as no surprise that she does not trust the news media.

The empirical association between trust in media and the HMP on the one hand and the TPP on the other hand is somewhat harder to explain. It is well known in the TPP literature that perceived influence on others increases with the negativity of a text and its presumed influence (e.g., Tsfati & Cohen, 2003; Tsfati & Cohen, 2005b). Perhaps, then, mistrusted media are perceived as more influential because their effects are perceived as more negative for the evaluator: The more I mistrust the media, the more I see the news as biased, the more negative the messages seem, and the more severe I perceive their influence to be. In addition, though the studies documenting an association between hostile media perceptions, trust in media, and TPPs control for indicators of ego involvement, it is possible that the constructs are empirically connected because they share ego involvement as an antecedent. This could be the case especially if the controls employed in the analysis do not cover the full range of the meaning of "involvement." (For example, involvement in the settlers' study is conceptualized as time living in the settlements, having friends there, or feeling close to it. These indicators do not capture the variance in outcome-

relevant involvement as some settlers were about to lose not only their homes, but also their business or job as a result of the pending evacuation.) Finally, it is also possible that the shared object of the three perceptions can in and of itself explain the minor statistical associations between the constructs. Given that the media are evaluated in three different ways, some of the association between the constructs may stem from more general attitudes toward media underlying hostile media perceptions, media trust, and perceptions of media influence.

But trust in media, hostile media perceptions, and perceptions of media impact are not only empirically connected. As we have seen, they all relate to the way people respond to media and are thus connected through their consequences. Though all three perceptions may be flawed and inaccurate, they have very real consequences for individuals and for societies that increasingly rely on media to inform, entertain, and educate. Media have become central to our politics, economy, and social systems and, as such, how we regard them is crucial. Trust in media, the HMP, and the TPP are perceptions of media as social institutions that account for their motivation and power and sometimes trigger attitudinal or behavioral changes. To the extent that news media indeed exert influences on individuals and society, our perceptions of media play a key role in the process.

As we have seen, one of the realms in which all three perceptions have real-world consequences has to do with more general democratic trust. Trust in media was related to trust in democracy (Tsfati & Cohen, 2005a); hostile media perceptions were related to minority alienation (Tsfati, 2007); and perceived media influence was related to intentions to use force to thwart democratic decisions (Tsfati & Cohen, 2005a). A growing body of literature in communication research is concerned with the possibility that sensationalized, strategic, and cynical news coverage of political life (which itself has become increasingly commercial, personalized, and negative) is creating greater cynicism and apathy among voters (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Norris, 2001), expressed in decreased levels of political participation (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1997). The findings cited above imply that perhaps attitudes and perceptions of media do play a part in such effects. If people perceive their news coverage as biased, sensationalized, unprofessional, and unfair, and if these perceptions are coupled with perceptions of powerful media impact on other individuals and on society at large, then it is only logical that they would lose faith in the democratic process.

When considering perceptions of media in a volume on media effects, it is important to stress that the effects of perceptions of media are conceptually separate from the direct effects of a specific media text. Many of the consequences of trust in media, hostile media perceptions, and TPPs discussed above could and should be conceptualized as “media effects” because they represent attitudinal and behavioral changes that would have not occurred without the media and thus are caused by media. Whereas most traditions of research on media effects examine direct and intended effects, the effects of media perceptions covered in this chapter are often indirect effects, and for the most part they are unintended effects, not planned or even foreseen by

journalists, editors, and other producers of news media texts. Some of the studies demonstrated that these take place over and above the direct effects of frequency of exposure to media (Tsfati, 2007; Tsfati & Cohen, 2003), and in many cases the above-mentioned effects are not contingent on exposure but rather stem from knowledge or beliefs about the texts and media institutions that do not require frequent, continuous, and attentive exposure to news or other media content.

Rather than a stimulus–response model of media “effects,” the studies reviewed above point to a more complex process in which attitudes toward media shape responses to media and interact with responses to media. As we have seen, audience trust in the media seems to moderate some known media effects, such that the effects of media (e.g., agenda-setting effects) are stronger for trusting audiences and weaker for those mistrusting media institutions. This is not a surprising finding, as it stems directly from the definition of trust, yet it is an important one. In many ways, it echoes the claims by reception theorists about audiences’ ability to “resist” some of the persuasive powers of media texts (e.g., Livingstone, 1998; Morley, 1980). Audiences emerge stronger from research on the role of media trust in media effects, as well as from research on the consequences of hostile media perceptions and TPPs. They are critical and active, and they do not accept the media’s agenda and climate of opinion at face value. When they react to media portrayals, they incorporate what they think they know about media and their influences into their reactions. In this sense, the findings tell us that mistrust of the media, hostile media perceptions, and perceptions of media influence can be liberating.

Audiences may emerge from research on the consequences of media perceptions as more active, and perhaps more sophisticated, but they do not necessarily emerge as more sensible. Indeed, it makes sense that those mistrusting the media would be less willing to accept the media’s presentation of the world. Some effects of perceptions of media influence may also seem logical as they reflect coordination reactions to knowledge or expectation regarding the behaviors of others (such as in the case of changing one’s vote and voting strategically in part because media are perceived to have an influence on other voters). However, in many cases, audience reactions to their perceptions of media seem counterproductive. Consider, for example, the case of peripheral town residents who, despite liking their towns, considered moving away because they inaccurately perceived large effects of media on other people living in more central towns (Tsfati & Cohen, 2003). Evidence from this study demonstrated not only that people reacted to their perceptions of media impact, but also that these perceptions were grossly inaccurate (as evident from data collected in central towns, in which no evidence for media effects was documented). The fact that some of these people live their life with a desire to live elsewhere just because of naïve theories of media effects does not seem particularly functional to their well-being.

The main implication of this review is that we should probably pay more attention to perceptions of news media in media theory building. In addition to trying to explain audience mistrust of the media, hostile media perceptions, and TPPs, we

should also try to understand how these perceptions affect the interactions between news and audiences. The hypothesis that mistrust of the media moderates media effects should also be tested on other kinds of effects, such as media framing. The influence of presumed media influence should be tested in additional contexts, while more rigorously demonstrating the temporal sequence advanced by the theory. A more detailed explanation of the conditions under which people comply with perceived social norms fostered by media, and when they defy these norms, also seems warranted. Thus, as always, much is left for further research.

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