

## **The Impact of Individual and Interpersonal Factors on Perceived News Media Bias**

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*A large percentage of the public believes that the news media are biased, and the majority of these individuals consider the direction of bias to be against their own viewpoints. Past research has examined how individual factors such as strength of partisanship or extent of political involvement heighten bias perceptions, but little attention has been paid to interpersonal factors such as the ideological similarity or dissimilarity of personal communication networks. Results of a national survey show that perceptions of media bias were unrelated to the overall amount of discussion but were positively related to conversations with ideologically like-minded individuals. Moreover, the impact of conversations with similar others was stronger among Republicans than among Democrats, a finding consistent with recent work on news self-coverage of media bias claims.*

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Research on perceptions of media bias and their antecedents falls under diverse labels such as media credibility, trust in news, and the hostile-media phenomenon. Many scholars who focus on media credibility consider source variables (e.g., media organization or actual news content) to be of paramount importance (Lichter, Amundson, & Noyes, 1988; Lichter & Noyes, 1996; Lowry & Shidler, 1995; Sigelman, 1973). Others studying trust in news (e.g., Gunther, 1992; Stamm & Dube, 1994) have argued that individual cognitive and motivational factors (e.g., involvement, attitude strength) should be the focus of schol-

arly inquiry. Research on the hostile-media phenomenon, in particular, has made apparent the significance of individual partisanship in assessments of media bias (Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). In this study, we attend to individual-level variables as predictors of news bias assessments yet also acknowledge the potential importance of the composition of interpersonal discussion networks. In particular, we consider how ideologically concordant communication might reinforce perceptions among Republican partisans that the media are biased in a liberal direction. Using national survey data, we examine how individual and interpersonal variables work independently and in combination to influence media bias perceptions.

### **Foundation: Source Factors and Objective News Bias**

One approach to understanding public perceptions of news bias or credibility perceptions is to turn to the source of the object being perceived. If people perceive news media to be biased, one logical question to ask is: Can we demonstrate that news media are indeed biased in favor of a given candidate, party, or ideology?

Despite numerous claims of partisan media bias by politicians, the public, and even academics (e.g., Lichter, Rothman, & Lichter, 1986), a number of recent empirical studies of media bias (Domke et al., 1997; Shah, Watts, Domke, Fan, & Fibison, 1999; Waldman & Devitt, 1998) and a meta-analysis of the media bias literature (D'Alessio & Allen, 2000) have found little evidence of consistent bias in one direction or the other. For example, Shah et al. (1999) used computer-assisted content analysis procedures to evaluate print news coverage of principal candidates across four presidential elections (1984, 1988, 1992, and 1996). They found that although incumbents received a majority of coverage during elections, the valence of that content was not in their favor. Likewise, D'Alessio and Allen (2000) did not find any significant gatekeeping or coverage biases in any media, nor favorability bias in newspapers. They did uncover small favorability biases in television news and news magazines. But, even when bias was present, it was in a different direction depending on the medium (liberal bias in television news, conservative bias in news magazines). Thus, little systematic evidence exists for a consistent ideological media bias.

Findings in the literature that do suggest apparent bias are inconsistent regarding the direction or nature of the bias across studies or at least over time. That is, some studies have produced evidence of a liberal bias, whereas others have claimed to find a conservative bias (e.g., Lowry, 1974; Lowry & Shidler, 1998; Smith & Roden, 1988; Stempel & Windhauser, 1989). Structural factors would likely remain relatively constant over time (i.e., across election campaigns) and thus are unlikely to be responsible for the types of ideological shifts required to explain these changes. One could interpret from the inconsistency of findings

across contexts that perceived news biases are actually due to distortions in the environment outside of the control of the media, and not to structural factors such as ownership or journalist attitudes, as often assumed by those leveling charges of partisan bias. For instance, research on the 1984 through 1996 presidential elections indicates that winning candidates generally garner more favorable than unfavorable coverage, although the difference is not dramatic (Shah et al., 1999). Therefore, news media coverage may simply be “biased” in favor of candidates who are doing well in public opinion polls.

Assuming that there is no consistent directional partisan bias in the news—at least not bias in terms of the two major political parties in the United States—then we must ask the question: What drives perceptions of media bias if not slanted coverage? It is notable that public concern about press bias is on the rise, with an increasing percentage of the public—particularly Republicans and independents—expressing a belief that the media are ideologically slanted (Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999). In January 1988, for example, 12% of randomly sampled respondents claimed that the news media exhibit a liberal bias in presidential election coverage. By November 1996, this proportion had risen to 43% (Watts et al., 1999).

To explain this shift in public opinion, Watts and colleagues examined press coverage of the topic of media bias, along with the favorability of coverage of presidential candidates, during the 1988, 1992, and 1996 presidential elections. Their results suggest that the rise in public perception of liberal media bias is *not* the result of differences in the valence of candidate coverage, but rather is due to increasing news *self-coverage* that focuses on the general topic of liberal bias in news content trumpeted by conservative elites. Public critiques—both in traditional news media and in political talk radio—increasingly proclaim a liberal slant that is projected to the entire media industry. By 1996, the claims of liberal media bias were commonplace and likely played a role, either directly or indirectly, in shaping conservatives’ opinions about media credibility. Given this, we predicted:

*Hypothesis 1:* Perceived hostile bias will be greater among Republicans than among Democrats.

Despite this expectation, liberal partisans also perceive media bias against their views. Thus, we next consider variables at the individual and interpersonal levels that may help to explain a full range of bias perceptions.

### **Individual Differences in News Bias Perceptions**

One prominent area of research in media credibility is the examination of individual-level variables that could lead to perceptions of bias in the absence of objective biases. Simple social observation leads one to the conclusion that prominent Republicans consistently argue that news media favor Democratic candidates (recall George Bush’s oft-repeated 1992 stump speech sound-bite, “Annoy the

media: Re-elect Bush”), whereas Democrats point to the lack of a real media honeymoon for Bill Clinton and the media frenzy surrounding numerous scandals during his presidency as evidence of a conservative bias.

Vallone et al. (1985) reported hard evidence of what many have noted in casual social commentary: Those who perceive bias in news reports overwhelmingly perceive this bias to run in a counter-attitudinal direction. That is, Democrats believe that news is tilted in favor of Republicans, and Republicans believe that news is tilted in favor of Democrats. Vallone et al.’s study informally examined media bias perceptions in the 1980 presidential election, and then conducted an experiment designed to study perceived bias in media coverage of the Beirut massacre of 1982. Results of both studies suggested that when bias was perceived it was more likely to be seen as bias *against* one’s own position. Moreover, bias perceptions were more likely among those who were strongly committed to the relevant issue (i.e., partisans) than among those who were neutral (see also Dalton et al., 1998).

More recent research has generally supported what Vallone et al. (1985) labeled the “hostile-media phenomenon.” In a study examining perceived bias of content very similar to that of Vallone et al., Perloff (1989) essentially replicated the earlier results. Content designed to be as neutral as possible by researchers—and generally seen as neutral by non-partisans—is perceived as biased in different directions by partisans on one side or the other of the political fence. Further support, with only a few exceptions, has been provided by more recent work on the hostile-media phenomenon and related research on ideological biases in news processing (e.g., Becker & Kosicki, 1995; Christen, Kannaovakun, & Gunther, 1998; Duck, Terry, & Hogg, 1997; Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994; Gunther, 1992; Mutz & Martin, 2001; Rimmer & Weaver, 1987).

Thus, the evidence of contradictory—and potentially unfounded—perceptions of media bias among the public seems to suggest that a substantial amount of variance in these perceptions must be explained by something other than “real” source factors, which would produce a common tendency in the direction of perceived bias. Most research moving beyond source factors has examined individual-level variables to explain these findings. For instance, both the direction of attitudes and the strength or intensity of attitudes may influence the extent and direction of perceived media bias (Gunther, 1988). Other research has extended this to examine the influence of other factors, such as involvement in an issue or group that is covered in the news (e.g., Stamm & Dube, 1994). In addition to involvement, factors such as commitment to a social cause, membership in a group, and other forms of behavioral engagement may prove consequential for such perceptions. Given these findings, we predicted:

*Hypothesis 2:* Perceived hostile bias will be greater among strong partisans than among weak partisans.

*Hypothesis 3:* Perceived hostile bias will be greater among those heavily involved in politics than among those not heavily involved.

### Interpersonal Determinants of News Media Bias Perceptions

Missing from most past research on news bias and credibility perceptions are variables at one level of analysis higher than the individual. Therefore, one potential avenue for innovation and extension of this literature would be to consider the study of perceptions of news media bias as closely related to other more general perceptions of social reality (Eveland, 2002). There are at least two ways to examine the link between mass media and perceptions of social reality. The first, and more traditional, is to consider the role of mass media as an independent variable in the creation of social reality perceptions. This focus has been advanced through theories such as cultivation (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994). However, one might also look at perceptions of *media* reality as a dependent variable, which has been the focus of work on the third-person effect (i.e., perceptions of media impact) and the hostile-media phenomenon (i.e., perceptions of media content).

By thinking of media credibility and bias research in the broader context of perceptions of social reality, one could draw upon a more diverse set of theories to understand what produces misperceptions such as those concerning news content. For example, research not normally considered in scholarship on news bias that could contribute to our understanding might include the study of misperceptions of public opinion, as described in work on the spiral of silence and pluralistic ignorance. The innovation to be brought to news bias research from these areas is the connection of bias perceptions to interpersonal communication environments.

The spiral-of-silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1993), for instance, suggests that perceptions of the climate of public opinion are drawn not only from examinations of representations of public opinion in news content, but also from the frequency of opinions heard in public discussion. As individuals who believe themselves to be in the minority become reluctant to voice their opinions in public because of a fear of social isolation, the interpersonal environment, and thus perceptions of the overall climate of opinion, begin to change. This process compounds itself over time to produce the spiral of silence. The potential lack of representativeness of the resulting interpersonal communication environment is central to this theory of perceptions of social reality, and may be applied to perceptions of media reality. However, the evidence on the spiral of silence is mixed (Glynn, Hayes, & Shanahan, 1997).

A related argument was made by Prentice and Miller (1993), who argued that one explanation for pluralistic ignorance—narrowly defined by these authors but often defined more generally as a misperception about generalized others (e.g., Korte, 1972; O’Gorman, 1986)—is a process labeled “biased sampling.” Prentice and Miller (1993, p. 253) generally described this explanation by noting that the public data from which the attitudes of others are inferred “may have been skewed in the direction of the perceived norm.” In other words, the information to which

individuals are exposed in their social environment may be subject to one or another bias. Although the initial spiral-of-silence hypothesis and this biased sampling explanation generally consider the bias to be in the expression of opinions favoring a social norm, it may also be that the perceiver has engaged in a biased sampling of individuals with whom to have conversations. This is more likely, we would submit, among strong partisans.

Somewhat similarly, Beck (1991) examined the intermediation environments that shape partisan dispositions during presidential elections (see also Robinson, 1976). He contended that personal networks of family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers “are a critical source of information about politics and of political evaluations” (Beck, 1991, p. 372). There is considerable value in moving beyond a conception of citizens as autonomous agents toward one that recognizes that they are embedded within interpersonal networks. These interpersonal connections help people develop and reinforce their preferences as they discuss politics with like-minded or unlike-minded others (MacKuen & Brown, 1987). For most people, there is a high degree of concordance between their political views and those of their most frequent intermediaries. Nonetheless, many people find themselves in political discussions with people who do not share their ideological leanings and political views (Beck, 1991).

As this suggests, individuals’ perceptions of media reality may be shaped by a range of factors: (1) cues within the media environment concerning press bias—particularly among conservatives, given the recurrent claims of liberal bias in media self-coverage; (2) individuals’ ideological leanings and extent of partisanship; and (3) the ideological similarity or dissimilarity of political discussion partners. Indeed, these three factors may operate both independently and in combination to shape bias perceptions. This is because partisans who surround themselves with people sharing their political views may develop a distorted view of news bias. This would be above and beyond the effects of party identification or extent of partisanship because such interpersonal environments may not only reinforce and strengthen previously held beliefs about media bias, but may also serve as conduits of information concerning elite claims of bias.

The relevance of these interpersonal communication variables to media bias perceptions is relatively straightforward and relates to the cognitive processes necessary to make a judgment of news bias. To assess news bias, one must have a standard of what “unbiased” should be. Individuals may in part be using their interpersonal environments, and the information conveyed in them, to infer reality. This interpersonally generated reality is then compared to news media content, and the individual defines inconsistencies as “bias.” This explanation can at least partially account for the common finding of perceived news bias against one’s opinion by the simple assumption that the sampling bias operates in a direction favorable to one’s own opinion—something that research has demonstrated to be true particularly for strong partisans (Mutz & Martin, 2001). That is, we are more likely to talk with individuals with whom we agree, whether this is intentional (a

case of selective exposure) or simply structural (individuals tend to associate with those similar to themselves in age, race, and social status variables that are correlated with opinions).

Hostile-media phenomenon researchers have examined biased information processing as a potential explanation for their findings (e.g., Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994; Vallone et al., 1985), but to date they have not considered this more social phenomenon. The incorporation of our social network perspective and the notion of “biased sampling” provides some advantages over the information processing explanation. Our view does not require that the *same* information be processed *differently* across individuals; rather, we contend that individuals likely apply different standards to their judgments about the fairness or balance of similarly processed news content. That is, over time, individuals—as a consequence of their social interactions—develop heuristics that are easily activated for application to judgments about press content relative to some existing norm (see Shrum & O’Guinn, 1993; Tversky & Kahneman, 1973, 1974). Most individuals apply these heuristics. For some, these heuristics may be distorted because of biased sampling; for others, judgmental norms may not be skewed in a particular direction. 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 social sampling that occurs before processing.

This social-level interpretation of the biased sampling explanation suggests that we must move beyond only individual-level measures of attitude direction and strength when examining the predictors of news media bias perceptions. Given the biased sampling explanation, we would expect that the nature of interpersonal discussions about a given topic—a social-level variable—could also be important in predicting bias perceptions. That is, conversations that are generally consistent with one’s viewpoint (“safe” discussions) should *increase* the likelihood of media bias perceptions against one’s viewpoint, whereas conversations that are generally inconsistent with one’s viewpoint (“dangerous” discussions) should *decrease* the likelihood of these perceptions. Therefore, we made the following predictions:

*Hypothesis 4:* Perceived hostile bias will be greater among those who have high levels of discussions with like-minded individuals than among those who have low levels of discussions with like-minded individuals (controlling the overall level of discussion and individual political orientation variables).

*Hypothesis 5:* Perceived hostile bias will be less among those who have high levels of discussions with non-like-minded individuals than among those who have low levels of discussions with non-like-minded individuals (controlling the overall level of discussion and individual political orientation variables).

Finally, given the prevalence of claims of liberal media bias, Republicans who engage in discussions with ideologically like-minded people may perceive a greater degree of press bias. This could occur because such discussion networks

are particularly likely to serve as conduits for claims of bias against a conservative viewpoint. Accordingly, we predicted:

*Hypothesis 6:* Perceived hostile bias will be greater among Republicans who have high levels of discussions with like-minded individuals than among Democrats who have high levels of discussions with like-minded individuals (controlling other political orientation and communication network variables).

## Method

### *Sample*

This study relies on national survey data collected in February 1999 and June 2000 from a single panel of respondents. The February 1999 data were collected as part of an annual mail survey—the “Life Style Study”—conducted by Marketfacts on behalf of DDB-Chicago, an international marketing communications company. A massive number of people were contacted via mail and asked to express their willingness to participate in mail or telephone surveys, and if so, to provide basic demographic information. A balanced sample was then drawn from among the more than 500,000 people who agreed to participate in the pre-recruited “mail panel.”

The starting sample was adjusted within the subcategories of race, gender, and marital status to ensure representativeness and to compensate for expected differences in return rates. The sample was also drawn to reflect demographic distributions within the nine Census divisions of household income, population density, panel member’s age, and household size. This stratified quota sampling method was used to select roughly 5,000 Life Style Study respondents, from which 3,388 usable responses were received. This represents a response rate of 67.8%.

This stratified quota sampling method differs markedly from more conventional probability sample procedures yet produces highly comparable data. Putnam (2000; Putnam & Yonish, 1999), who used 1975 to 1998 Life Style Studies as the primary data for his book *Bowling Alone*, took great care to validate these data against the General Social Survey and Roper Poll. This validation involved longitudinal and cross-sectional comparisons of parallel questions found in the Life Style Studies and conventional probability samples. He concluded that there are “surprisingly few differences between the two approaches,” with the mail panel approach producing data that are “consistent with other modes of measurement” (Putnam, 2000, pp. 422–424; see also Groeneman, 1994).

For the June 2000 wave of the study, from which most measures used in the present study (except respondent ideology and some demographic variables) were obtained, we developed a custom questionnaire and then engaged Marketfacts to recontact the individuals who completed the February 1999 Life Style Study. Because of some erosion, 2,737 questionnaires were mailed out. To ensure a high



response rate and a more representative sample, we offered an incentive for completing the survey. The response rate for this survey was 70.1%, with 1,902 respondents completing the questionnaire. Comparisons of the demographic composition of our sample—the second wave of a panel—with the respondents who participated in both the pre- and post-election waves of the 2000 American National Election Study (ANES) indicate that our sample is similar to those who completed the ANES. Our respondents were only slightly more likely to be female (60.7% vs. 56.7% in ANES), similar in age (45–54 median vs. 47.89 mean in ANES), similarly educated (median “attended but not graduated college” vs. more than 12 years but no college degree for ANES), and similar in household income (\$40,000–\$44,999 median vs. \$35,000–\$49,999 for ANES). Our measure of household income was asked in the February 1999 wave rather than the June 2000 wave (although only data for panel respondents are reported).

### *Measurement*

The central dependent variable in this investigation—respondent self-report of perceived media bias—was measured with responses on a scale from 1 (“definitely disagree”) to 6 (“definitely agree”) to the following item: “Most news media are biased against my views” ( $M = 2.93$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ). Note that this indicator represents not only perceived bias, but bias in opposition to the individual’s personal opinions. Thus, the mean is likely somewhat lower than the overall perception of news bias, independent of direction.

A number of independent variables were measured. First were four demographic characteristics: age, education, income, and gender. Three political orientations were also measured. Republican affiliation was measured on a 7-point scale (“very strong Democrat,” “not so strong Democrat,” “Democratic-leaning independent,” “independent,” “Republican-leaning independent,” “not so strong Republican,” and “very strong Republican”) ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = 2.05$ ). A “folded” version of this variable, in which the midpoint (independent) was recoded to zero and each step outward in both directions from the midpoint was recoded to the next highest integer, was used to measure strength of partisanship ( $M = 1.72$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ). Finally, political involvement was measured by summing responses to ordinal measures (e.g., none = 1, one to four times = 2, five to eight times = 3, etc.) of engaging in six behaviors during the past year that were expected to be representative of political involvement: (1) circulating a petition for a candidate or issue, (2) contributing money to a social group or cause, (3) working on behalf of a social group or cause, (4) contributing money to a political party or campaign, (5) working for a political party or campaign, and (6) displaying a campaign button, sticker, or sign. These six indicators were averaged to form a reliable index of political involvement ( $\alpha = .72$ ,  $M = 1.54$ ,  $SD = .59$ ).

Three measures of political discussion were constructed. The survey instrument asked respondents about the frequency of political discussions with “very

liberal people” and “very conservative people” during the past year on an ordinal scale (e.g., none = 1, one to four times = 2, five to eight times = 3, etc.). A measure of safe discussion was constructed by using the scale values of the “very liberal people” question for those reporting being either “moderately liberal” or “very liberal,” and using the scale values of the “very conservative people” question for those reporting being either “moderately conservative” or “very conservative,” on a question included in the 1999 Life Style Study ( $M = 2.44$ ,  $SD = 1.78$ ). A measure of dangerous discussion was constructed by doing just the opposite—that is, using discussions with very liberal people for conservatives and discussions with very conservative people for liberals ( $M = 2.01$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ). Self-reported “middle of the road” respondents (36.9% of the sample) were excluded from further analyses.

The final measure of political discussion—overall discussion—was an averaged measure of the frequency of political discussions on an ordinal scale (e.g., none = 1, one to four times = 2, five to eight times = 3, etc.) with the following types of people during the past year: co-workers, neighbors, friends, family, and acquaintances. This index produced a reliable measure of overall political discussion ( $\alpha = .89$ ,  $M = 2.54$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ) that was used as a control variable, so that the influences of safe discussion and dangerous discussion were examined independent of the influence of general frequency of political discussion.

## Results

The zero-order correlations among all variables used in this study are presented in the Appendix. To test our hypotheses, we conducted several ordinary least squares regression analyses. Analyses were conducted in blocks, beginning with (1) demographics, then adding (2) political orientation variables (i.e., Republican identification, strength of party identification, and political involvement), then (3) overall political discussion, (4) safe and dangerous political discussion, and finally (5) the interaction between Republican identification and safe discussion. Results are shown in Table 1.

The initial model, which included only the demographic variables, was able to account for about 1% of variance in perceived news bias against one’s own views [ $F_{\text{change}}(4, 1126) = 3.336$ ,  $p < .01$ ]. However, only gender significantly predicted bias perceptions, such that men were more likely than women to perceive news bias.

The addition of political variables produced a significant increase in the predictive power of the model [ $F_{\text{change}}(3, 1123) = 41.387$ ,  $p < .01$ ]. Republican party identification (hypothesis 1), strength of party identification (hypothesis 2), and political involvement (hypothesis 3) were all positively associated with perceptions of news bias against one’s own opinion, as predicted. The strongest of these associations was with Republican party identification, which is consistent with claims of conservative elites that news media have been biased in favor of the Democrats. The introduction of the political variables had little impact on the

Table 1. Predicting Perceived News Bias Against One’s Own Position

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Gender (female)	-.10**	-.10**	-.09**	-.09**	-.08**
Age	-.00	-.04	-.04	-.04	-.03
Education	.03	-.01	-.01	-.03	-.02
Income	-.05	-.11**	-.11**	-.11**	-.11**
Republican ID		.28**	.28**	.27**	.26**
Strength of ID		.07*	.06*	.06*	.05
Political involvement		.13**	.11**	.11**	.10**
Overall discussion			.05	-.03	-.03
Safe discussion				.15**	.12*
Dangerous discussion				-.05	-.04
Republican ID × safe discussion					.13**
Increment to R <sup>2</sup>	.012**	.098**	.002	.007**	.015**
Model R <sup>2</sup>	.012**	.110**	.112**	.120**	.135**

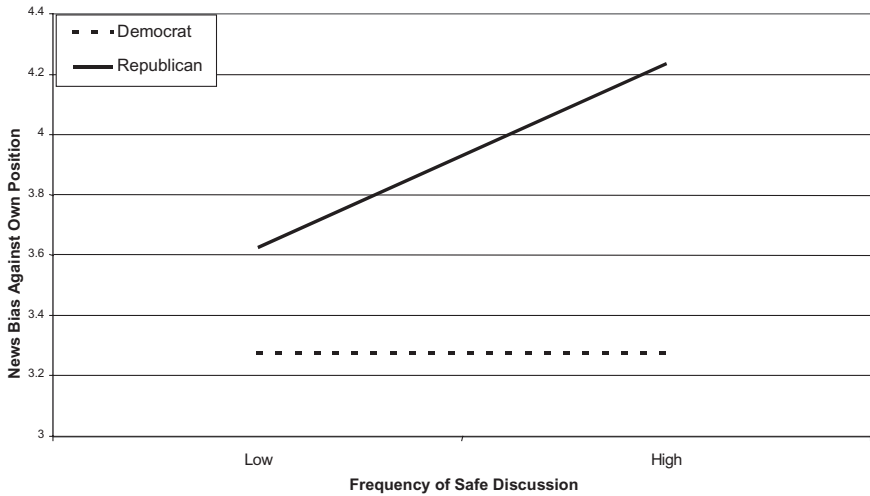
Note. Coefficients are standardized regression coefficients (βs).  
 \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

coefficients for the demographic variables, except that the influence of income increased slightly and thus became statistically significant. The direction of the relationship suggests that those with less income are more likely to perceive news media to be biased against them, a relationship that was perhaps suppressed given that lower income is associated with Democratic party identification.

The third model, which introduced the overall level of political discussion as a predictor, did not change other coefficients in the model in any meaningful way. Overall discussion also did not have any independent influence on news bias perceptions [ $F_{\text{change}}(1, 1122) = 2.934, p = .087$ ].

The introduction of the other measures of political discussion in the fourth model—safe discussion and dangerous discussion—did have a significant impact [ $F_{\text{change}}(2, 1120) = 4.514, p < .05$ ]. As predicted in hypothesis 4, the extent to which individuals engage in political conversations with those who hold similar opinions, holding the overall frequency of political discussion constant, significantly increases perceptions of bias against one’s viewpoint. Dangerous discussions—those with individuals with whom one is not ideologically consistent—are negatively related to perceptions of bias, as expected, but are just below the threshold of statistical significance. Thus, hypothesis 5 was not formally supported. Notably, the introduction of these additional two political discussion measures did not have any meaningful influence on the coefficients of other variables in the model, despite their high correlations with one another (see the Appendix) and with overall political discussion.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Although correlations among these independent variables are high, multicollinearity was not a serious problem in the model, as indicated by variance inflation factor (VIF) statistics of 3.04, 2.21, and 3.05 for overall, dangerous, and safe discussion, respectively, at this stage of the regression model. Neter, Kutner, Nachtsheim, and Wasserman (1996) suggested that substantial multicollinearity is present only when VIF for a given variable approaches 10.



**Figure 1.** Influence of Republican identification  $\times$  “safe” discussion interaction on perceived news bias.

The final model included the interaction between the two strongest predictors of news bias perceptions in the model—Republican party identification and the frequency of safe discussions. The effect of this interaction, above and beyond all other effects in the model, was statistically significant and of approximately the same magnitude as the main effect for safe discussion [ $F_{\text{change}}(1, 1119) = 19.809, p < .01$ ]. To determine the nature of this interaction, we used the regression equation to calculate predicted regression lines for respondents one standard deviation above and below the mean on party identification (i.e., moderate Democrats and moderate Republicans). As Figure 1 indicates, the influence of having safe discussions on news bias perceptions is strong among Republican self-identifiers but essentially nonexistent among Democrats. These findings support hypothesis 6.

## Discussion

The results of our analyses provide support for nearly all the hypotheses examined in this study, suggesting that individuals’ political orientations and social networks both play a significant role in shaping perceptions of media bias. As suggested by research on liberal media bias perceptions and the hostile-media phenomenon, political orientations did shape perception of media bias: Republican party identifiers, strong partisans, and the politically involved all indicated that the news media were biased against their views. More theoretically impor-

tant, perhaps, the social network variable “safe discussion”—representing an interpersonal environment that is concordant with one’s own views—proved to be an important additional predictor of media bias perceptions. Individuals who have high levels of ideologically like-minded discussions tend to hold stronger media bias perceptions than do individuals who have low levels of ideologically like-minded discussions. This is particularly true among Republicans, for whom safe political discussion has a pronounced effect on perceptions of media bias. As this indicates, individual political orientations and discussion networks work not only independently, but also in a synergistic fashion to shape beliefs about news media bias.

These findings confirm the conclusions of research on hostile-media phenomena and biased ideological processing. They also lend support to the “biased sampling” perspective proffered by researchers studying the spiral of silence and pluralistic ignorance and further elaborated in this study. It appears that individuals’ perceptions of media bias are at least partly shaped through their interactions with others. People who frequently discuss politics with others who share their views likely have distorted standards of what constitutes unbiased media content. This may occur for a variety of reasons, the most likely of which is the chronic accessibility of certain judgmental heuristics concerning press coverage of politics. These effects may be amplified among Republicans because of persistent claims by conservative elites that the media are biased against them. Consequently, the perception that press coverage is slanted in a liberal direction has been growing in recent years to the point where it is now widely held among Republican identifiers. For this reason, interpersonal discussion with like-minded Republicans is particularly likely to result in perceptions of media bias.

These findings must be viewed with some caution, however. For instance, our measurement system only required individuals to report their frequency of discussion with particular types of people, not their levels of talk about specific issues or topics. Our measure of perceived media bias is limited because it consists of a single item, with unknown reliability, that does not specify differences across media sources or the nature of the “views” that the media are presumably biased against. We consciously chose to focus on a small number of independent variables tested against a general dependent variable for this initial test. But the somewhat indirect nature of this and other measures may explain the rather low levels of variance accounted for by the regression models in this study. Greater predictive strength could probably be achieved by making all measures issue-specific. Future research may narrow the scope of the dependent variable to focus on certain types of media bias and particular forms of news media (e.g., biased reporting on a particular topic, in particular media such as talk radio or television news, or in relation to certain issues, political figures, or ideologies).

Another limitation in the present study is our inability to make strong causal inferences. Although theory suggests that the causal influence runs from the indi-

vidual and interpersonal variables we have specified in our model to perceptions of news bias—and some quasi-experimental evidence backs up these claims (e.g., Vallone et al., 1985)—we cannot with certainty rule out the reverse causal direction. Additional research using panel data or true experimental designs should work to bolster the causal inferences made from the present study.

Despite its limitations, this study is not without its strengths. Although the sample was not a true probability sample, we were able to test our hypotheses using national data collected using procedures to ensure broad representativeness of the population. Most research on perceptions of media bias has relied on local surveys and has often tested hypotheses using convenience samples. That was not the case in this research. More important, we have expanded the scope of work on perceptions of media bias to include the role of interpersonal contexts. We have done this in a way that complements, rather than contradicts, existing research on source effects and individual-level factors. Indeed, our findings suggest that source factors (i.e., claims of liberal media bias reported in the news) and individual-level factors (i.e., political party affiliation, partisanship, and extent of political involvement) work in conjunction with network-level variables such as interpersonal discussion to shape media bias perceptions. Hence, this study offers an explanation of hostile-media bias perceptions that integrates theory and research findings across multiple levels of analysis (McLeod, Pan, & Rucinski, 1995) and multiple fields of research.

### APPENDIX: Zero-Order Correlations

	Bias	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
2: Gender (female)	-.10*	—								
3: Age	.00	.03	—							
4: Education	.01	-.03	-.06*	—						
5: Income	-.02	-.09*	-.06*	.42*	—					
6: Political involvement	.12*	.01	.18*	.19*	.17*	—				
7: Strength of ID	.08*	-.02	.12*	.02	.04	.09*	—			
8: Republican ID	.27*	-.04	-.01	.13*	.18*	.05	.02	—		
9: Overall discussion	.12*	-.13*	.05	.17*	.17*	.36*	.11*	.11*	—	
10: Dangerous discussion	.08*	-.12*	.00	.14*	.15*	.35*	.04	.05	.69*	—
11: Safe discussion	.16*	-.12*	-.01	.24*	.18*	.33*	.11*	.14*	.79*	.69*

*N* = 1131 (listwise deletion of missing values); \**p* < .05.

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