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Beyond Vox Pop: The Role of News Sourcing and Political Beliefs in Exemplification Effects

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Abstract

The people we see in news media can affect our perceptions of public opinion through exemplification. Although research shows that individuals interviewed in a news story can influence perceptions of public opinion, little attention has been paid to the role that source type and audience attitudes play in the exemplification process. This study tests how the exemplification process is influenced by different types of news sources featured in an article (e.g., vox pop, protester, and interest group interviews) and the audience's own political ideology. The study finds that the perceived typicality of sources is affected by both source type and how much an audience member agrees with the source. Source type is also found to directly affect perceptions of public opinion.

Introduction

Mass media play a crucial role in shaping how people look at the world (and others) by providing "pictures" of the people and places that exist beyond one's own immediate locality (Lippmann, 1922). The production and consumption of any mediated representation of the public is inherently political, as the legitimacy of a system of governance rests in part on perceptions

of the public (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996, p. 2; Macpherson, 1980, p. x). Perceptions of public opinion also inhibit political expression (Noelle-Neumann, 1993), affect attitudes (Axson, Yates, & Chaiken, 1987), and influence vote choice (e.g., Bartels, 1985; McAllister & Studlar, 1991; Skalaban, 1988). Given these important effects, it is important to know how perceptions of public opinion are formed.

News media can affect perceptions of the public through *exemplification*. In general, news media tend to frame stories around individuals, rather than socioeconomic structures (e.g., Iyengar, 1991; Postman, 1985). Such news coverage, which “describes causes, importance, and consequences of the problem from the unique perspective of an individual” (Brosius & Bathelt, 1994, p. 48), makes use of exemplars to represent broader social phenomena. According to Bennett (2005), the “tendency to personalize situations is one of the defining biases of news” (p. 40). In terms of media effects, an exemplification effect occurs when “the attributes of known individual members generalize to the category as a whole” (Rothbart, 1996, p. 307). Although studies in news media exemplification find that people interviewed in a news article can affect perceptions of public opinion (e.g., Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Daschmann, 2000; Gan, Hill, Pschernig, & Zillmann, 1996; Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997), actual empirical work on this process is limited.

In explaining exemplification effects, media scholars generally refer to Tversky and Kahneman’s (1974) availability heuristic (e.g., Daschmann, 2000; Zillmann & Brosius, 2000) as well as the ratio of exemplar opinions (e.g., Brosius & Bathelt, 1994). Consequently, little attention has been given to whether exemplification effects might be affected by the characteristics of the exemplars themselves, or the audiences that consume them. Brosius (1999) found that there was no statistically significant difference between students that read a news article featuring student exemplars and students that read a news article featuring nonstudent exemplars. Lefevere, DeSwert, and Walgrave (2012) found that exemplars differentially affect audiences’ personal opinions—and that audiences’ own attitudes play an important role in such effects—but the study did not measure exemplification effects on public opinion. Thus, the role of source type and audience ideology in exemplification effects is unclear.

Based on research in social psychology, this article argues that exemplars can influence perceptions of public opinion in two ways beyond the mere distribution of opinions held by exemplars. First, the type of source featured in a news article could affect the perceived generalizability of the source’s attitude to public opinion. Second, the extent to which an exemplar’s attitude is generalized to public opinion may depend on how much an audience member agrees with the exemplar’s opinion.

News Media Exemplification

Man-on-the-street interviews are intended to represent how the “common man” feels about an issue, and constitute a journalistic attempt to capture the archetypal “John Q. Public,” and thus are commonly used in studies to test the ability of news media to influence perceptions of public opinion. Lefevere, DeSwert, and Walgrave (2012) defined this type of interview as “people without any specific representative function or expertise who appear to be randomly picked” (p. 103). The seeming randomness of these interviews and the absence of professional credentials and expertise likely contribute to the perception that these interviews represent the thoughts of everyday Americans; it is thus unsurprising that scholars use the vox pop format to test news media exemplification effects (e.g., Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Daschmann, 2000; Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997).

However representative the vox pop interview is perceived to be of public opinion, media scholars do not regard this type of interview as being very representative of journalistic sourcing. One of the core tenets of journalism is the norm of objectivity (Schudson, 2001), and to maintain the appearance of neutrality – and to collect information efficiently – journalists use a news beat system heavily dependent on elite sources (e.g., Bennett, 1990; Sigal, 1973). “Ordinary” people rarely appear in the form of exemplars, especially regarding political issues. Thus, although news media exemplification studies focus on vox pop interviews, audiences are far more likely to encounter interviews with elite sources.

Despite the dominance of elite sources in political news stories, non-elite citizens are also used, particularly when drama and conflict are involved. The inclusion of non-elite citizens in political news stories often occurs when an individual has a close connection to the issue (Cook, 2005, p. 92). Gans (1979) observed that journalists tend to cover non-elite citizens (whom he called “Unknowns”) when they “engage in conflict, break the law, or carry out unusual activities” (p. xvii). In doing so, non-elite citizens become newsworthy by providing drama, a story element prized and often enhanced by journalists (Bennett, 2005). Given these implicit criteria for the inclusion of non-elites to appear in political news stories, it is fitting that our primary knowledge of non-elite citizen appearances in news comes from research on news coverage of protest and social movements (e.g., Gitlin, 1980; McLeod & Hertog, 1992; Shoemaker, 1984).

In summary, there are three common types of sources appearing in news media that implicitly represent the public: people that are sourced by virtue of the newsworthy pedigree of their institutional affiliation (e.g., politicians, interest group spokespersons), people that are sourced by virtue of having a personal (and often dramatic) relationship with an issue, such as with a polit-

ical protest/demonstration, and people that are sourced by virtue of their putative ordinariness, in the case of the vox pop. Although the latter is arguably the purest representation of John Q. Public, their appearance in scholarship is more common than their appearance in political news stories.

Because news media exemplification studies have looked at the effects of only vox pop interviews, it is unknown if other types of sources will have the same effect or simply no effect. Like vox pop sources, protesters lack elite status, an absence that arguably enhances perceptions of typicality. However, unlike vox pop sources, protesters self-select into their group (by virtue of engaging in a protest) and are not “randomly” selected by journalists.

Whether either of these source qualities matters for exemplification effects is unclear. Research finds that people tend to be poor at making statistical inferences, and instead tend to rely on the information that is most available (e.g., Tversky & Kahneman, 1974), which would include the exemplars on hand. People also tend to overgeneralize from samples that are unrepresentative and small (Nisbett & Ross, 1980), even when they are told that the individuals in the sample are atypical (Hamill, Wilson, & Nisbett, 1980). When it comes to making political inferences, people are more likely to rely on causal narratives based on easily recalled information than extensive, logical information searches that carefully weigh all facts (Popkin, 1991). Consequently, the extent to which news source status plays a role in news media exemplification requires further testing.

Exemplar Categorization

Social psychologists find that the mental categorization of people into social categories takes two broad forms: *subgrouping* and *subtyping*. Subgrouping involves classifying an individual within one of several different subordinate categories, and thus allows for greater stereotype diversity (e.g., Hewstone, Johnson, & Aird, 1992; Richards & Hewstone, 2001; Weber & Crocker, 1983). For example, within the superordinate category of “women,” people make distinctions between housewives, career women, and athletic women (Clifton, McGrath, & Wick, 1976). Within the category of “the American public,” there are such subgroups as feminists, Black professionals, blue-collar Southerners, and gay men (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002).

Another process of exemplar categorization is *subtyping*, which is most likely to occur when exemplars are viewed as being atypical. Subtyping refers to “the process by which group members who disconfirm, or are at odds with, the group stereotype are mentally clustered together and essentially set aside as ‘exceptions to the rule’” (Maurer, Park, & Rothbart, 1995, p. 812). Because this study concerns the role of perceived news source typical-

ity and perceptions of public opinion, the focus is on subtyping rather than subgrouping.

Research in social psychology suggests that sources may not be perceived as being equally typical of Americans. Perceptions of typicality may derive from an incongruity between an exemplar's trait and the broader category to which it belongs (e.g., Rothbart, 1996). Rothbart and Lewis (1988) argued that "inferences from an individual to a group are critically dependent on the goodness of fit of that individual to the group" (p. 868). For example, experimental research finds that people are more likely to make inferences about corporate law firms from the experiences of a wealthy White lawyer than a poor Black lawyer, because the former conforms to the stereotype of lawyers better than the latter (Weber & Crocker, 1983). Given the ostensible randomness of vox pop interviews and their lack of elite or activist status, the following hypothesis is made:

H1a: Man-on-the-street exemplars will be perceived as being more typical of Americans than protester or interest group exemplars.

Perceptions of typicality can also derive from one's motivation to maintain existing stereotypes, particularly when a pretext is provided. Kunda and Oleson (1995) found that when confronted by an exemplar that contradicts their stereotype, people will even use a neutral attribute about an exemplar (e.g., working for a small/large law firm) in order to dismiss the exemplar as being atypical of its group; this same neutral attribute is ignored by people when an exemplar *confirms* their stereotype about a group. Consequently, counterstereotypic exemplars have a greater impact on generalizations about a group when no pretext is provided (Kunda & Oleson, 1995). Source characteristics (e.g., protester, interest group) could provide the type of context needed for a motivated audience member to dismiss an exemplar as being atypical.

Research in social psychology suggests that people are motivated to be in the majority, particularly when they like the group in question. According to Ross, Greene, and House (1977), people tend "to see their own behavioral choices and judgments as relatively common and appropriate, while viewing alternative responses as uncommon, deviant, or inappropriate" (p. 280). This projection of beliefs onto the group as a whole appears to be motivated in part out of a need for self-validation (Marks & Miller, 1987). Baker and Petty (1994) found that people appeared to be surprised when told that they hold a minority opinion, and subsequently engaged in greater message scrutiny of the majority's opinion. This type of heightened scrutiny could lead individuals to pay greater attention to source characteristics in an attempt to subtype counterattitudinal sources. Based on the aforementioned literature review, it

is hypothesized that audiences will feel motivated to subtype counterattitudinal exemplars, and should be especially likely to use the source status of some exemplars (i.e., protester, interest group spokespersons) in dismissing the typicality of exemplars.

H1b: Counterattitudinal exemplars will be perceived as being less typical than attitudinally congruent exemplars.

H1c: Counterattitudinal protester and interest group spokesperson exemplars will be perceived as being less typical than counterattitudinal man-on-the-street exemplars.

Finally, studies in news media exemplification have focused on perceptions of public opinion on a specific issue such as apple wine (Brosius & Bathelt, 1994), school prayer in the classroom (Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997), and support for a political party (Daschmann, 2000). Although these studies establish that audiences infer public opinion on an issue from the *same issue* discussed in a news story, it remains unclear if audiences generalize public opinion on one issue to other issues; that is, whether perceptions of a conservative attitude on one issue is associated with perceiving that the public is more conservative in general. Given that a political attitude often does not exist in isolation of other attitudes, but rather as part of an overall ideological constellation, it is possible that if news consumers assume that the public is conservative on one issue, they may also assume that the public is more conservative.

RQ1: To what extent do different sources have differential effects on perceptions of public opinion?

RQ2: To what extent do exemplars shape perceptions of the ideological composition of the public?

Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act

This study looks at how exemplars in news media can affect perceptions of public opinion regarding the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA). PPACA provides for greater federal regulation of the health care industry. Among other things, PPACA expands Medicaid coverage to the poor and prohibits insurers from denying coverage to individuals with pre-existing conditions. In addition to both consuming and characterizing the early part of President Obama's presidency, attempts to pass health care reform were met with boisterous and numerous protesters that received national attention. Following the passage of PPACA (March 23, 2010), Republicans continued to denounce "Obamacare," and the Supreme Court ultimately weighed in on the constitutionality of the bill.

To test the ability of news media to influence perceptions of the general American public, it is necessary to use news media coverage of a truly national issue, of which PPACA certainly qualifies. The national scope and saliency of PPACA increases the likelihood that many individuals will have opinions about PPACA and feel comfortable making estimates of how the public stands on the issue. Although the debate on PPACA endures, exact memory about public opinion at the time of its passage has likely faded. However, even if participants happen to recall such public opinion data, research finds that exemplars tend to have a stronger effect on perceptions of public opinion than poll data (e.g., Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Daschmann, 2000).

Methods

Recruitment through Amazon's Mechanical Turk

Participants for the online experiment were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (AMT). AMT is an online crowdsourcing site where individuals (called "requesters") can post tasks online. Anonymous individuals (called "workers") can decide if they would like to perform the task. Although they range in duration and compensation, requesters often post tasks that take less than 30 minutes, with payment typically under \$0.50. Tasks include such things as taking surveys, conducting online searches, and language translation.

Because AMT is relatively new, a brief discussion of the values and potential concerns of using AMT to recruit subjects is necessary. A study of 1,000 AMT workers finds that the population tends to be more female (64.9%), be more educated, and have an average age of 36 years (Paolacci, Chandler, & Ipeirotis, 2010). AMT produces results that are fairly similar to the American National Election Studies on a variety of measures (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2010). The AMT sample is younger and more liberal than the 2008 American National Election Studies sample, but "relative to other convenience samples often used in experimental research in political science, [AMT] subjects are generally more representative of the general population and substantially less expensive to recruit" (Berinsky et al., 2010, p. 17). Moreover, the AMT sample replicates canonical experimental work (Berinsky et al., 2010, p. 17; Paolacci et al., 2010).

Study Design

A description of the study was posted on AMT, which included a link that directed AMT workers to an online survey on SurveyGizmo. Participants had

to be at least 18 years old, currently reside in the United States, and have at least 95% of the work that they submitted on AMT be accepted. This setting is recommended by AMT and Berinsky et al. (2010) to minimize the risk of individuals skipping through materials.

After agreeing to participate in the study, subjects were randomly assigned to one of four news story experimental conditions. Three of the news story conditions featured sources. The fourth condition (control) had the same news text but did not include the sources. After reading the news story, subjects answered a short questionnaire. Subjects were provided a code to enter at the AMT website to receive their compensation (\$.10) following their completion of the experiment. The experiment was fielded from October 10 through October 30, 2011, well over 1 year since PPACA was signed into law (PPACA was signed on March 23, 2010), with 500 participants recruited for the experiment. Demographic information about the sample as well as the sample that passed the manipulation check ($N = 372$) is displayed in Table 1.¹

To confirm that randomization was successful, one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were run on each of the demographic variables. There was a statistically significant difference in the sex of participants between experimental groups, $F(3, 368) = 3.14, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03$, with fewer women in the protester condition ($M = 1.48, SE = .50$) than the interest group condition ($M = 1.69$). Controlling for participant sex did not affect any of the findings.

Respondents were first asked what percentage of Americans that they thought opposed the health care bill. Later in the survey (following several questions about the perceived popularity of conservative and liberal attitudes in the country), respondents were asked about the perceived typicality of the sources. Respondents were asked to identify which types of sources appeared in the article only at the very end of the survey. Given this sequence, it is more likely that respondents were thinking about typicality in terms of attitudinal congruity with "most Americans," rather than the occupational status of the sources. Thus, to the extent that differences occur between the experimental groups, they arguably suggest that respondents did the additional mental work (perhaps in an effort to find a subtext to subtype counterattitudinal sources) of reflecting on the nonattitudinal traits of the sources.

1. One-way analyses of variance find that there is only a statistically significant difference between the samples in age, $F(1, 493) = 4.40, p < .05, \eta^2 = .01$, with a relatively small difference between the group that correctly identified the sources ($M = 34.77, SE = .66$) and the group that incorrectly identified the sources ($M = 32.02, SE = 1.13$). However, follow-up analyses did not find age to be associated with any of the dependent variables at a statistically significant level.

Table 1. Summary of Sample Characteristics in Amazon's Mechanical Turk Study

	Entire sample ^a	Correct source recall ^b	2011 Census
Gender			
Female	60.4%	58.3%	50.8%
Race			
White	81.3%	82.3%	74.1%
Hispanic	4.8%	4.3%	16.7
Black	7.9%	6.8%	13.7%
Asian	4.2%	4.1%	5.7%
Native American	0.4%	0.5%	1.6%
Other	1.5%	1.1%	
Age			
18–24	28.3%	24.9	13.1%
25–30	21.6%	21.4%	10.8%
31–44	28.5%	31.5	24.2%
45–64	20.0%	20.6%	34.7%
65+	1.6%	1.6%	17.2%
Education			
No high school	0.4%	0.5%	15.2%
High school/GED	13.0%	13.4%	29.3%
Some college/2-year degree	43.4%	49.8%	30.0%
4-year degree	31.0%	32.5%	16.5%
Advanced degree	12.2%	12.6%	9.0%
Ideology			
Extremely liberal	8.1%	8.5%	6.0%
Liberal	21.3%	22.5%	12.9%
Slightly liberal	17.7%	17.7%	12.4%
Moderate	23.0%	21.9%	30.9%
Slightly conservative	10.4%	9.7%	14.3%
Conservative	15.5%	16.2%	13.5%
Extremely conservative	4.0%	3.4%	10.0%

Ideology comes from ANES data December 7–13, 2011. Although the American National Election Studies also uses a 7-point scale, the wording of the response options is slightly different, with “Very Liberal/Conservative,” “Somewhat Liberal/Conservative,” and “Closer to Liberals/Conservatives.”.

a. $N = 500$

b. $N = 372$

Measures

Perceived public opposition to PPACA. To test the ability of news media exemplars to influence perceptions of public opinion on PPACA, participants are asked, “What percentage of Americans do you think opposed the health care bill when it was passed by Congress?” Following other research on perceptions of public opinion (e.g., Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chia, 2001),

this item uses a 10-point interval scale (e.g., 0–9%, 10–19%, 20–29%), ranging from 0 to 100 ($M = 5.21$, $SD = 1.55$).

Perceived size of conservatives in public. To measure the perceived size of conservatives in the public, participants are asked, “What percentage of Americans do you think are politically conservative?” This item uses the same 10-point interval scale and response options as the measure for perceived public opposition to PPACA.

Perceived typicality of news sources. It was hypothesized that the perceived typicality of sources can be affected by both their status and whether audiences agree or disagree with their opinions. To measure the perceived typicality of the sources interviewed in the news article as ordinary Americans, participants are asked, “How typical do you think the people interviewed in this news article are of most Americans?” The question and response options are based on an item used by Hewstone and Hamberger (2000). The response options are on a 7-point scale from 1 (*not at all typical*) to 7 (*very typical*; $M = 4.45$, $SD = 1.47$). This question is *not* given to the control group, where the news article does not include any sources.

Personal support for PPACA. To control for projection, which can influence estimates of public opinion (Gunther & Christen, 2002), a 5-point scale is used, from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), to measure personal support for PPACA. The item asks participants, “To what extent do you support or oppose the 2009 health care bill that was passed by Congress?” ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 1.48$).

Stimuli

To enhance the external validity of the stimulus materials, a Reuters article entitled “Obama Signs Historic Healthcare Overhaul Into Law” was used as a template. The news article and stimuli provide basic information about the health care bill to readers, noting that “the law will extend health insurance to 32 million Americans who currently have none. It will bar practices like insurers’ refusing coverage to people with pre-existing medical conditions, and expand ... Medicaid.” To ensure that individuals are minimally aware of the ideological divide on the issue, the news article’s observation that, “while Democrats exulted, Republicans, who describe the measure as an example of big government run amok, said it was no day to celebrate” is retained. However, for the article headline and picture, material is used from the *New York Times* (2010) article entitled “Obama Signs Health Care Overhaul Bill, with a Flourish.”

The experimental manipulation of the study—and where the stimulus materials diverge from the news articles—is the use of sourcing. Subjects in the man-on-the-street condition (353 words) read a news article that uses four *vox pop* interviews of non-elite citizens (car mechanic, electrician, plumber, and high school math teacher). Subjects in the protester condition (351 words) read a news article that uses four *protester* interviews. Participants in the interest group condition (369 words) read a news article that uses four fictional *interest group* interviews. Subjects in the control condition (154 words) read the same news article, albeit with no interviews. The man-on-the-street, protester, and interest group conditions are nearly identical, with the first three sources criticizing the health care bill and the last source supporting the health care bill. Unlike much of the research in news media exemplification, this study does not compare the effects of exemplars vis-à-vis base-rate information such as public opinion polls (e.g., Brosius & Bathelt, 1994) but instead studies the effects of one type of exemplar vis-à-vis other types of exemplars. For this reason, the experimental stimuli do not contain base-rate information.

The difference between these conditions is whether the source is labeled by its profession (man on the street condition), its participation in a protest (protester condition), or its affiliation with an interest group (interest group condition). The ratio of exemplar opinions (3:1) is similar if not slightly more evenly balanced than other exemplification studies, which use ratios of 4:1 (Brosius & Bathelt, 1994), 5:1 (Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997), and 3:0 (Lefevere, DeSwert, & Walgrave, 2012). To give a sense of the comments, one of the anti-PPACA source argues, “I’ve never felt that you can make a problem go away by throwing more bureaucrats at it,” whereas the sole pro-PPACA source says, “I support the bill because it will rein in costs and regulate an insurance industry that has become more interested in making money than helping people.”

Results

Manipulation Checks

Two manipulation checks were conducted. The first manipulation check involved randomly assigning 100 participants (they did not partake in the main experiment) to one of the four experimental conditions. These participants were asked how typical they found the article they read to be of most news articles. The response options were on a 7-point scale from 1 (*not at all typical*) to 7 (*very typical*). In general, the articles were perceived as being typical of most news articles ($M = 5.88$, $SD = 1.06$). There was not a statistically

significant difference between the perceived typicality of the different experimental conditions, $F(3, 96) = 1.08$, *ns*, $\eta^2 = .00$.

The second manipulation check measured how many people correctly remembered the type of sources that were in the article. Subjects in the experimental noncontrol conditions were asked to list the occupation of one of the sources that voiced opposition to PPACA. The response options were "Rush Limbaugh," "protester," "resort manager," "nurse," "interest group spokesman," "plumber," "lawyer," "car mechanic," and "electrician." Of the noncontrol condition participants, 67.0% of the sample correctly identified the correct source. Participants that did not score correctly on this manipulation check were removed from the analyses (all participants from the control condition were included in the overall sample).

Sourcing and Perceptions of Typicality

H1a predicts that vox pop sources will be viewed as being more typical of most Americans than either protester or interest group sources, as vox pop sources lack the explicit activism of either. A one-way ANOVA found a statistically significant difference in the perceived typicality of sources, $F(2, 220) = 4.14$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .04$. Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey Honestly Significant Difference test found that, as hypothesized, there was a statistically significant difference in the perceived typicality of the vox pop sources ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 1.33$) and the interest group sources ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.48$). The post hoc comparisons also found a statistically significant difference between the perceived typicality of protester sources ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 1.38$) and interest group sources ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.48$). However, there was not a statistically significant difference between the perceived typicality of vox pop ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 1.33$) and protester sources ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 1.38$). Consequently, H1a is only partially supported.

Attitudinal Congruity and Perceptions of Exemplar Typicality

Research finds that individuals are more prone to receive scrutiny and be perceived as being atypical if they are seen as unusual. It was hypothesized (H1b) that counterattitudinal sources would be perceived as being *less typical*. To measure attitudinal congruity, the sample was divided into conservatives and liberals (moderates were removed). Because the majority of the sources in the article disapproved of the health care bill, it was expected that liberals would perceive the sources as counterattitudinal and that conservatives would see the sources as attitudinally congruent.

The ANOVA did not find a statistically significant direct effect for source type, $F(2, 193) = .90$, *ns*, $\eta^2 = .01$, or for conservatism, $F(1, 193) = 1.60$, *ns*,

$\eta^2 = .01$. However, there was a statistically significant interaction effect between source type and conservatism, $F(2, 193) = 3.41, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03$. Follow-up Ordinary Least Squares regression analyses find that there is no statistically significant relationship between conservatism and either the vox pop ($B = -.11, SE = .18, ns$) or protester ($B = -.00, SE = .19, ns$) sources, controlling for age, education, race, and sex. However, there is a statistically significant relationship between interest group sources and conservatism ($B = .56, SE = 1.85, p < .01$), controlling for age, education, race, and sex. Thus, conservatives were more likely to perceive interest group sources (who opposed the health care bill) as being more representative than liberals but did not differentiate between the other types of sources. These results indicate that attitudinal congruity is positively associated with the perceived typicality of sources, albeit only with interest group sources.

The final analysis of typicality tests the hypothesis that counterattitudinal protesters and interest group sources would be perceived as being *less typical* than counterattitudinal vox pop sources (H1c). Again, characteristics possessed by protesters and interest group representatives should make it more likely for them to be subtyped than vox pop sources when they are counterattitudinal to a news consumer.

To test this hypothesis the perceived typicality of the sources in the man-on-the-street condition ($N = 61$) were compared against the perceived typicality of the sources from the protester and interest group conditions ($N = 101$), with the latter two conditions being combined. To test for the interaction effect between source traits and attitudinal congruity, an analysis of covariance was run for political ideology. The interaction effect was not statistically significant, $F(1, 160) = .01, ns, \eta^2 = .00$. Consequently, H1c is not supported.

Sourcing and Perceptions of Public Opinion

Up until this point, this study has considered how source type and audience beliefs can affect perceptions of typicality, which is viewed as an important variable in exemplification. This study now looks at the role that source type plays on exemplification effects.

A one-way analysis of covariance was conducted to test RQ1. There was a statistically significant difference between the conditions, $F(3, 368) = 2.79, \eta^2 = .02$. Post hoc comparisons found that the mean score for perceived public opposition to the health care bill was higher in the protester condition ($M = 5.62, SE = .17$) than the vox pop condition ($M = 5.00, SE = .16, p < .01$) or the control condition ($M = 5.09, SE = .15, p < .05$). There was not a statistically significant difference between the protester condition and the interest group condition ($M = 5.25, SE = .17$). Unexpectedly, there was not a statisti-

cally significant difference between the vox pop condition and either the interest group or control condition.

Finally, although studies have looked at the ability of news exemplars to influence perceptions of public opinion on a *specific issue* or support for a specific *political party*, research has not looked at the ability of news exemplars to influence perceptions of public opinion in general. An ANOVA was run to test RQ2 by running an interaction effect between the experimental manipulation and participant conservatism (to control for projection effects) on the perceived size of the American public that is conservative. There was a statistically significant difference between the experimental conditions, $F(3, 323) = 1.25, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03$. Post hoc comparisons found that the mean score for the perceived percentage of conservatives in the public were higher in the protester condition ($M = 4.81, SE = .19$) than the vox pop condition ($M = 4.24, SE = .14, p < .05$), the interest group condition ($M = 4.19, SE = .13, p < .01$), and the control condition ($M = 4.23, SE = .16, p < .05$).

Conclusion

Mass media provide us not only with information about political issues but also the mass public. Although news media exemplification scholars have analyzed the effects of sources on perceptions of public opinion, they have largely ignored how audiences view these sources in the first place. Research in news media exemplification has focused only on the valence and distribution of exemplar opinion in an article, and thus has implicitly assumed exemplar equivalency – that all exemplars are weighed equally by news consumers. In this sense, Miller and Krosnick's (2000) characterization of the media priming effects field viewing audiences as passive "victims" applies to the news media exemplification literature. Like priming, news media exemplification effects are believed to be the result of accessibility (e.g., Daschmann, 2000; Zillmann & Brosius, 2000), rather than active information processing.

The results of this study paint a different portrait of news media audiences. As the manipulation check indicates, media audiences do not uniformly encode and retrieve information about news sources, as 67.0% correctly identified the types of sources that appeared in the news article.

This study also finds that perceptions of typicality are affected by journalistic sourcing and the political attitudes of audiences. Vox pop and protester interviews were viewed as being more typical of most Americans than interest group spokesperson interviews. Perhaps more interesting is that audiences did not distinguish between the typicality of vox pop and protester interviews, which suggests that the professional affiliation or elite status of interest group spokespersons, rather than political activism, lessens their per-

ceived typicality. In light of these results, it bears repeating that the experimental conditions contained very similar content. Had the protester condition depicted the sources unfavorably and as a spectacle—which is often the case with news coverage of protests (Gitlin, 1980; McLeod & Hertog, 1992)—the perceived typicality of protesters could have been lower.

In addition to source traits, this study also looked at the role of attitudinal congruity on perceptions of typicality. As hypothesized, audiences viewed sources as being more typical of most Americans when they agreed with the opinions of a source. Thus, it is not only source status, but the source's message that matters to perceptions of typicality. However, there was not an interaction effect between source type and attitudinal congruity on perceived typicality.

Finally, this study also considered how source type could affect perceptions of public opinion. People who read protester sources perceived greater public opposition to PPACA than people who read vox pop or interest group spokesperson interviews, as well as those who read no interviews (control condition). In terms of more generalized perception of public opinion, people who read the protester condition had higher estimations of the percentage of conservative Americans than people who read the vox pop, interest group, or control condition news articles. To better understand these results, we must consider the nature of protests in general as well as in the context of PPACA. Regarding the former, protests are generally attended by a large number of people. Thus, in the news consumer's mind, these three interviewed protesters could be standing in the midst of several thousand protesters, which could increase estimates of public opposition to PPACA; this same image is less likely to occur with either vox pop or interest group spokesperson interviews.

In addition, news consumers in the protester condition may have perceived greater intensity from these sources. Even though the content of the interviews was identical in the experimental conditions, protesters in news likely speak with greater intensity than vox pop or interest group sources—both for reasons of passion and the need to be heard outdoors in a large, boisterous crowd. Research on exemplification finds that exemplars that are more dramatic and violent increase frequency estimates of how prevalent the social phenomenon exists in society (Gibson & Zillmann, 1994). Thus, the perceived atmosphere of the protester news article could have also contributed to greater exemplification effects.

It is also worth noting the role of protests during debates on PPACA. As the discussion on health care reform progressed, a number of protesters, often disruptive, appeared at town hall meetings in opposition to the bill. A number of protests—which became a rallying cry for the nascent Tea Party—

were staged in Washington, DC to oppose the health care bill as well, and received a wide amount of coverage. It is possible that subjects in the protester condition were reminded of these incidents, which in turn could have increased their estimates of public opposition to the health care bill.

A few limitations of the study deserve mention. To do a comparative analysis of sources, the texts were kept very similar. However, there was a necessary trade-off in experimental precision for experimental realism. In practice, when journalists select a different source, they also select a somewhat different story. Compared to an interest group source, a vox pop or protester source is probably less likely to use technical language or be able to cite statistics. Moreover, an interest group source will likely be afforded more space to discuss an issue than any single vox pop or protester source. Second, protester coverage often focuses on eccentric characters, protest theatrics, and any arrests or conflict (e.g., Gitlin, 1980). To minimize confounds, the stimulus does not fully reflect the type of articles and quotations that often accompany these different sources.

A second possible limitation of this study comes from the use of PPACA. As noted earlier, the health care reform bill was a high-profile issue. Selecting an issue with this level of salience increases the probability that participants were familiar with public opinion on the health care bill; in turn, this familiarity could inoculate participants against the stimulus. In addition to salience, health care is substantively different from other types of issues. Being macro and technical in nature, health care arguably has more in common with many macroeconomic issues (e.g., taxes, subsidies) than social issues like abortion and gun control, and thus scholars should be cautious about assuming these results hold for other types of issues. Finally, the lack of effects for vox pop sources is surprising, and stands in contrast to the existing research on news media exemplification, which, as noted earlier, relies almost entirely on vox pop sources. Many studies in news media exemplification use an exemplar ratio of 4:1 or greater (e.g., Brosius, 1999; Daschmann, 2000; Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997), whereas this study used a 3:1 ratio of exemplar opinions, and it is possible that this smaller exemplification ratio may have dulled some effects. In addition, the sources were not described with rich detail or vivid quotes, and if this produced less emotion in respondents, it could have lessened the exemplification effect (Aust & Zillman, 1996). The very invocation of protests may have in itself aroused some additional emotion, and thus contributed to their greater exemplification effects.

In light of these findings, scholars should view news media exemplification effects as a product of both news conventions and audience processing. Future experimental work could consider how perceptions of public opinion are affected by different ways of reporting different sources, different types of

sources (e.g., politicians, religious leaders), and the conditions under which audiences are more or less likely to subtype news sources. More basically, future research should acknowledge that news media exemplification scholarship must move beyond the vox pop interview and the implicit view of a passive media audience.

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