

THE ACCESSIBILITY BIAS IN POLITICS: TELEVISION NEWS AND PUBLIC OPINION*

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ABSTRACT

The influence of television news over public opinion is traced to the 'accessibility bias' in processing information. In general, the argument stipulates that information that can be more easily retrieved from memory tends to dominate judgments, opinions and decisions. In the area of public affairs, more accessible information is information that is more frequently or more recently conveyed by the media. Four different manifestations of the accessibility bias in public opinion are described including the effects of news coverage on issue salience, evaluations of presidential performance, attributions of issue responsibility, and voting choices.

The latter half of the twentieth century may well be remembered as the age of television. People in industrialized societies spend a significant portion of time watching television, and television takes up a larger share of the typical person's waking hours than social interaction. The ritualization of television viewing has led to scholarly fascination with the medium, and virtually all forms of behavior, both anti-social and pro-social have been attributed to television viewing. A recent review of communications research identified no fewer than 1043 effects of television on social behavior.¹

Observers of American politics take for granted the pervasive influence of television. While no 'meta analysis' has as yet appeared, a casual reading of the political communication literature suggests that television has been held responsible for declining voter turnout, increased disenchantment with governmental institutions, weakening of political parties, changes in the strategies of

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¹ Susan Hearold. 'A synthesis of 1043 effects of television on social behavior', in George Comstock (ed.), *Public Communication and Behavior, Volume 1*, New York, Academic Press, 1986.

leadership and governance, and other fundamental changes in the political process. The unprecedented policy successes and public popularity of President Reagan, for instance, were widely attributed to his mastery over television.

How well the litany of political effects attributed to television will withstand strict scrutiny is unclear. Many of the postulated effects of television on social behavior have proven to be less than robust (see McGuire, 1986). In some instances, disentangling the influence of television from that of other causal forces, may prove impossible (as in the declining turnout argument) and in others, the alleged effect may be neutralized by instances of the opposite effect (as in the 'oppositional' vs. 'deferential' journalism debate).

This paper describes certain well-documented effects of television news programs on Americans' political opinions and choices. I begin by proposing a general explanation of the impact of television news on public opinion, an explanation rooted in the concept of information accessibility. I then present evidence consistent with this explanation. Finally, I discuss the normative implications of television's influence.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF MEDIA INFLUENCE: THE ACCESSIBILITY BIAS

The influence of television news stems from its power to make information 'accessible' or more retrievable from memory. In general, the 'accessibility bias' argument stipulates that information that can be more easily retrieved from memory tends to dominate judgments, opinions and decisions, and that in the area of public affairs, more accessible information is information that is more frequently or more recently conveyed by the media.

Obviously, any number of factors and criteria could be considered in forming an impression of a person, purchasing a product or making a choice between political candidates, vacation tours, or job offers. The accessibility bias assumes that individuals tend to retrieve only a tiny sample of information from long-term memory. Rather than ransacking their memories for every piece of relevant information, individuals select information that happens to be more conveniently 'located' or accessible.

There are several competing accounts of the memory structures and processes giving rise to the accessibility bias. Wyer and Srull, for example, propose a model of long-term memory in which pieces of information are categorized and stored in a series of 'referent bins' (bins containing subject-matter information about particular politicians, issues, events, groups, etc.). A critical postulate of the Wyer and Srull model is that those items of information that have been more frequently (or recently) used are stacked *at the top* of the referent bins and are,

therefore, encountered first when individuals locate the appropriate bin (see Wyer and Srull, 1986).²

The accessibility bias is a particular instance of the well-known human proclivity to simplify. From Simon's pioneering work on 'satisficing' to Tversky and Kahneman's 'cognitive heuristics', the common denominator of psychological research into judgment and decision-making has been the dominance of intuitive and informal over rigorous and systematic solutions to decision or choice problems. People search for strategies that economize effort and are simple to apply, and settle for acceptable rather than optimal strategies. As Slovic, Fischhoff and Lichtenstein have described this general tendency:

People solve problems, including the determination of their own values, with what comes to mind. The more detailed, exacting and creative their inferential process, the more likely they are to think of all they know about the problem. The briefer that process becomes, the more they will be controlled by the relative accessibility of various considerations (Slovic *et al.*, 1980, p. 127).³

Simplification strategies should also be expected in the arena of politics where so few citizens are 'detailed, exacting and creative'.

The accessibility bias appears primarily in the weights individuals assign various considerations when expressing attitudes or making choices. Considerations that were made more accessible (by a variety of experimental methods) have been found to exert significantly greater effects on attitudes and choices than equally relevant, but less accessible considerations.⁴

Well-known manifestations of the differential-weighting-by-accessibility principle include the tendency to overestimate the importance of sensationalized events (such as fires and traffic accidents) as causes of death and to underestimate the importance of 'quiet' risks such as heart disease and stroke (see Slovic *et al.*, 1980). Identical results have been obtained with respect to interpersonal impressions—people evaluate their friends or colleagues according to traits or features that are momentarily prominent (see Wyer and Hartwick, 1980; Higgins and King, 1981 for a review of these studies). Researchers have also shown that attitudes, like information, may be made more or less accessible and that the more

² Although Wyer and Srull do not themselves make this point, it is likely that information considered particularly valuable or important (e.g., a candidate's stand on the budget deficit for a staunchly conservative voter) is also accorded preferential location in long-term storage, thus accounting for 'chronic' accessibility effects.

For alternative accounts of long-term memory, information retrieval, and the accessibility bias, see Anderson, 1983; Collins and Loftus, 1975; Craik and Lockhart, 1972; Rumelhart and Ortony, 1977.

³ For reviews of the various strands of decision-making and judgment research, see Einhorn and Hogarth, 1981; Abelson and Levi, 1985; Kahneman *et al.*, 1982.

⁴ For research summarizing this evidence see Wyer and Srull, 1986; Taylor, 1982; Higgins *et al.*, 1985; Sherman and Corty, 1984; Bargh 1985).

accessible the attitude, the higher the degree of attitude-behavior consistency (for a review of this work, see Fazio, 1987; Fazio and Williams, 1986).⁵

Accessibility can have many sources, both individual and contextual. In the world of politics, where people must rely heavily on the media for information, it goes without saying that patterns of news coverage are critical determinants of accessibility.⁶ Typically, what comes to mind when the citizen thinks about public affairs are the images and information that flash across the television screen. Four manifestations of this type of accessibility bias in political judgment are described below.

TELEVISION NEWS AND ISSUE AGENDAS

The well known 'agenda-setting' effect refers to the tendency of people to cite issues 'in the news' when asked to identify the significant problems facing the nation. In one study of agenda-setting, Roy Behr and I monitored television news coverage of inflation, unemployment and energy-related matters between 1974 and 1980. We also compiled data on the proportion of the American public referring to these issues as among the 'most important' facing the country. For both inflation and energy, we found significant effects of news coverage. These effects were *independent* of actual events such as presidential speeches on the issue, the inflation rate, or meetings of OPEC nations. In the case of unemployment, the effects of news coverage were weak and overshadowed by the effects of prevailing economic conditions (see Behr and Iyengar, 1985).

Agenda-setting effects have been captured for all forms of mass media coverage, in experimental studies that physically manipulate the degree of news coverage, and in survey-based studies that have tracked news coverage and issue salience over time, using both open-ended questions in which respondents identify the 'most important problems facing the country' and closed-ended items in which they rate the importance of particular issues. These effects have been observed for both local and national 'problems'. In all these areas, agenda-

⁵ Parallel accessibility effects have been detected in studies of survey responses. Public opinion researchers have demonstrated that the wording, format and ordering of questions produce dramatic variations in reported beliefs or opinions. Thus, people describe themselves as disinterested in politics if they are first asked a series of difficult factual questions concerning the identity and activities of various public officials. On the other hand, if they are asked about their political interest before being confronted with the factual knowledge questions, they describe themselves as substantially interested (see Bishop *et al.*, 1982). Similarly, the percentage of respondents favoring more generous federal financial assistance is markedly higher if the recipients of such assistance are described as 'poor people' rather than 'people on welfare' (see Smith, 1987; for a general discussion of accessibility effects in surveys, see Zaller and Feldman, 1988).

⁶ I do not mean to deny the importance of motivational or other dispositional determinants of information accessibility. Such 'chronic' differences in accessibility may be caused by various personal experiences or motives—party affiliation, socio-economic status, cultural values, religious upbringing, or the intensity of particular attitudes (for an analysis of accessibility effects in political opinion associated with level of political information see Iyengar, 1989a).

setting research has shown that individuals habitually refer to issues or events that have recently commanded extensive news coverage.⁷

TELEVISION NEWS AND EVALUATIONS OF THE PRESIDENT

In the course of several experimental investigations into the impact of television news on public opinion, Donald Kinder and I found that sustained news coverage of a particular political issue not only enhanced the salience of the issue, but also increased the significance of viewers' assessments of how well the president had handled that particular issue on their overall assessments of the president's performance. We termed this effect 'priming'.⁸

Our experiments clearly revealed that, in arriving at their overall assessments, participants accorded extra weight to their assessments of the president's performance in areas accorded heavy news coverage. The overall pattern was clear: the more prominent an issue is in the national information stream, the greater will be the weight accorded that issue when individuals evaluate the president.

The magnitude of priming was substantially enlarged when the news presentations implied that the president was personally responsible (in some experiments the news suggested causal responsibility, in others treatment responsibility) for the political issue in question. After watching news stories documenting President Reagan's aversion for arms control and the mammoth budgetary outlays for the Pentagon under the Reagan Administration, viewers were more likely to be primed, than if they had been shown stories that did not link the arms race to particular presidential actions. That is, the effects of arms control performance ratings on overall evaluations were heightened when the news coverage made both, the issue of arms control and presidential responsibility, more accessible (see Iyengar and Kinder, 1987, Ch. 9).

The priming effect was replicated in several of our experiments, with news of both presidential accomplishments and failures, for both Presidents Carter and Reagan, across a wide range of issues. We also analyzed the effects of priming on assessments of presidential competence and integrity and found that priming effects were present, though to lesser degree than with respect to assessments of overall performance. In addition, we were able to control for 'halo effects' that occur when participants adjust their assessments of the president's performance on a specific issue to be consistent with their overall assessment (for details, see Iyengar and Kinder, 1987).

Significant priming effects have also been detected in 'naturalistic' studies that

⁷ The most comprehensive review of the huge agenda-setting literature is to be found in Rogers and Dear-
ing, 1988.

⁸ For methodological details on these experiments, see Iyengar and Kinder, 1987.

rely on data from national surveys. In a recent study, for example, Krosnick and Kinder found that Americans' opinions towards US support for the Nicaraguan Contras and their support for US intervention in Central America became *twice as influential* as determinants of President Reagan's popularity in the period immediately following the disclosure that funds from the sale of arms to Iran had been used to finance the Contras (see Krosnick and Kinder, 1988).

In the course of our priming research, we also pursued the possibility that voters' preferences for political candidates would similarly be subject to an accessibility bias. One of our experiments was timed to coincide with the 1982 congressional election. In this experiment, participants (selected from registered voters) watched a week-long sequence of local newscasts immediately before the election. The newscasts were edited so as to vary the degree of coverage accorded the two candidates and the degree of coverage accorded the national economy (for additional details on this study, see Iyengar and Kinder, 1987, Ch. 11). The results showed that viewers' economic beliefs predicted candidate preferences powerfully, regardless of experimental condition. Even when not presented with economic news, voters who were more optimistic about the economy favored the Republican incumbent by a wider margin than voters who were more pessimistic. However, among optimists who watched heavy coverage of economic conditions, the impact of economic beliefs on support for the Republican incumbent more than tripled. An even stronger boost emerged with respect to participants' perceptions of the candidates. Viewers generally felt more positive toward the candidate in whom they saw more positive characteristics. But when voters were primed with news about the candidates, this same effect was increased nearly five-fold.

TELEVISION NEWS AND ATTRIBUTIONS OF ISSUE RESPONSIBILITY

The effects of television news coverage on citizens' attributions of responsibility for political issues is of interest for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that the concept of responsibility embodies a powerful psychological cue. Attitudes and actions in a wide variety of domains have been found to follow attribution of responsibility. In the area of politics, individuals' policy preferences, group sentiments and evaluations of political leaders are all structured by their attributions of responsibility for political issues (see Iyengar, 1989b). Perhaps the most well-known instance of political consequences of issue responsibility concerns unemployment: elected public officials who are held responsible for rising unemployment are invariably penalized at the polls (see Hibbs, 1987; Abramowitz *et al.*, 1988).

Issue responsibility may generally be divided into causal and treatment

dimensions. Causal responsibility focuses on the origin of the issue or problem, while treatment responsibility focuses on who or what has the power either to alleviate or forestall alleviation of the issue (for illustrative discussions of responsibility, see Fincham and Jaspers, 1980; Brickman *et al.*, 1982). To illustrate with the issue of poverty, causal responsibility concerns the processes by which people become poor while treatment responsibility would seek to establish what could be done to alleviate (or perpetuate) poverty.

I analyzed the connection between television news coverage of political issues and attributions of causal and treatment responsibility through studying the effects of alternative news 'frames' identified by an exhaustive content analysis of all network news reports bearing on poverty, unemployment, racial inequality, crime, and international terrorism aired between 1981 and 1986. Typically, the networks' issue coverage was framed in either 'episodic' or 'thematic' terms. The episodic frame depicts public issues in terms of concrete instances or specific events—a homeless person, an unemployed worker, a victim of racial discrimination, the bombing of an airliner, an attempted murder, and so on. Visually, episodic reports make for 'good pictures'. The thematic news frame, by contrast, places the public issues in some general or abstract context. Reports on reductions in government welfare expenditures, changes in the nature of employment opportunities, the social or political grievances of groups undertaking terrorist activity, changes in federal affirmative action policy, or the backlog in the criminal justice process are examples of thematic coverage. The thematic news frame typically takes the form of a 'take-out' or 'backgrounder' report directed at general outcomes or conditions and frequently features 'talking heads'.⁹

Given the nature of television news—a twenty-one minute 'headline service' operating under powerful commercial dictates (see Gans, 1979; Arlen, 1976; Tuchman, 1974), the networks rely extensively on episodic framing to report on public issues. Episodic framing is visually appealing and consists of 'on-the-scene', live coverage. Thematic coverage, which requires interpretive analyses, would simply crowd out other news items. It is not surprising therefore, that news coverage of four of the five issues examined was primarily episodic. Two-thirds of all stories on poverty concerned a particular poor person. Most stories on racial discrimination or civil rights focused on specific instances of discrimination. The subject of crime reports was invariably (89 per cent of all stories) a specific perpetrator, victim or criminal act. Of the nearly two thousand stories on

⁹ In practice, very few reports are 'purely' episodic or thematic. Even the most detailed, close-up look at a poor person, for instance, might include lead-in remarks by the anchorperson or reporter on the scope of poverty nationwide. Conversely, an account of the legislative struggle over budgetary cuts in social welfare might include a brief scene of children in a day care center scheduled to shut down as a result of the funding cuts.

terrorism, 74 per cent consisted of 'live' reports of some specific terrorist act, group, victim or event while 26 per cent consisted of reports that discussed terrorism as a general political problem. The only issue to be accorded extensive thematic coverage was unemployment. Between 1981 and 1986 75 per cent of all reports on unemployment were primarily thematic.¹⁰ On balance, therefore, network news coverage of political issues is mainly episodic. This evidence is consistent with several previous studies which have documented a clear 'event' bias in the networks' treatment of public affairs (see especially Paletz *et al.*, 1982; Altheide, 1987; Graber, 1980).

Participants in the framing experiments (all of whom were residents of the 'Three Village' area of Eastern Suffolk County, New York) were exposed to newscasts in which the 'target' issue (either poverty, unemployment, racial inequality, crime, or terrorism) was framed either in episodic or thematic terms. On the completion of the videotape, participants were asked a set of open-ended questions concerning causal and treatment responsibility for particular issues. Specifically, they were asked 'In your opinion, what are the most important causes of _____?' and 'If you were asked to suggest ways to reduce _____, what would you suggest?' Participants could answer freely without prompting. Up to four separate responses were coded for each question. Although these responses are unwieldy and coding-intensive, they have the distinct advantage of non-reactivity. Trained coders read each questionnaire and classified each response.¹¹

With the exception of unemployment, the results of several experimental studies revealed that the manner in which network newscasts frame political issues significantly influences viewers' attributions of causal and treatment responsibility. Since it is not possible in the scope of this paper to adequately describe the results from all five areas, I will use the issue of poverty to illustrate the framing effects.¹²

Causal responsibility for poverty was assigned either to individuals or to general societal factors. Individual responsibility included the themes of character deficiencies (laziness, immorality, etc.) and inadequate education which together accounted for approximately 40 per cent of all causes. Societal

¹⁰ The coding of each news story was based on the number of lines devoted to thematic or episodic coverage in the transcribed *Abstracts* of the nightly newscasts. This coding is therefore *textual* and not a direct measure of the amount of news time. In order to assess the validity of this method, every story related to the issue of poverty broadcast by CBS News between January, 1981 and December, 1986 was viewed and classified on the basis of actual air time. The results of this more precise 'visual' coding corroborated the coding based on the *Abstracts*.

¹¹ The average level of inter-coder agreement was approximately .90 for the three issues.

¹² The matrix of results includes five issues, two dimensions of responsibility and multiple experiments within each issue area.

responsibility, which included the themes of economic conditions, institutional barriers, and inadequate governmental efforts, accounted for 60 per cent of all causes.

Participants' treatment attributions were also phrased in terms of individual or societal responsibility. Thirty-five per cent of all treatment responses were directed at actions by individuals (e.g. hard work). The remaining responses were directed at changes in societal conditions (e.g. lowered institutional barriers, stronger governmental efforts, faster economic growth, etc.).

The result of two separate experiments indicated that what people cite as the causes and cures of poverty depends significantly upon the manner in which television news presentations frame the issue. People held society responsible to a greater degree when the news frame was thematic and held individuals responsible to a greater degree when the news frame was episodic. In addition to the effects of thematic vs. episodic framing, different categories of poor people elicited differing patterns of issue responsibility attribution. Single mothers, in particular, elicited a 'blaming the victim' syndrome. In addition, the race of the poor person proved to be a meaningful cue; black poverty was understood more in terms of individual treatment responsibility; white poverty was understood more in terms of societal treatment responsibility (for additional details on these studies, see Iyengar, 1987, 1989c).

In sum, Americans are subject to considerable media influence when they consider questions of responsibility for social and political issues. The use of particular news frames to report on issues effectively alters viewers' attributions of causal and treatment responsibility. When a single news frame predominates, as is clearly the case with poverty, crime and terrorism, journalistic practice takes on considerable political significance.

TELEVISION NEWS AND ELECTORAL MOMENTUM

The final illustration of the accessibility bias in the 'media effects' literature concerns the phenomenon of 'momentum' or campaign bandwagons. Although the bandwagon concept has a distinguished pedigree, recent analyses have centered specifically upon the effects of 'horse race' coverage in the making and unmaking of American presidential candidates. As countless studies of campaign journalism have shown, the horse race story is ubiquitous. The story detailing the candidates' electoral prospects—their poll standings, delegate counts, fund raising efforts and related campaign indicators—has become the staple of campaign reporting that dwarfs coverage of equally (and usually more) relevant facets of the campaign in emphasis. As Robinson and Sheehan summed up their thorough comparison of CBS News' and United Press International's treatment

of the 1980 campaign 'Horse race coverage permeates almost everything the press does in covering elections and candidates (1983, p. 148).¹³

Given that we know about the accessibility bias, it is hardly surprising that the American public tends to think about candidates in terms of their *electoral viability*. Bartels has provided a powerful illustration of the prominence of viability in the electorate's image of candidates. Virtually all Democrats interviewed after the 1984 New Hampshire primary who had heard of Gary Hart offered an opinion on his prospects for gaining the nomination. However, one out of every four such Democrats *failed to offer an opinion* concerning Hart's position on the issue of cutting social programs (Bartels, 1988, p. 42). Clearly, electoral viability was a more visible feature of Gary Hart's candidacy than his position on major issues of the day.

As might be expected, the public's perceptions of the candidates' electoral strength are significantly colored by their candidate preferences. In effect, voters engage in wishful thinking and overestimate the chances of the candidates they like (see Popkin, forthcoming). Nonetheless, perceptions of viability are independently affected by news coverage of campaign events, above and beyond the effects of prevailing candidate preferences (see Bartels, 1988). Brady has provided striking experimental evidence documenting the extent to which public perceptions of candidate viability depend upon media coverage of the candidates. By providing his respondents with either 'encouraging' or 'discouraging' news about the standing of various candidates contesting the 1984 Democratic presidential nomination, Brady was able to induce significant shifts in perceptions of viability (Brady, 1984). Brady's experimental results have been corroborated by Bartels' survey analyses of both the 1980 and 1984 campaigns in which voters more attentive to the media were found to be the first to assimilate information about candidate viability (see Bartels 1985, 1988).

Finally, and most importantly, perceptions of the candidates' electoral viability provides a strong evaluative impetus toward the candidate whose prospects appear brightest. Bartels has demonstrated that electoral viability affects voting choices both directly (voters choose the candidate who is seen as more viable) and indirectly (voters come to feel more favorable toward the viable candidate and their feelings affect their choices). Moreover, in addition to these direct and indirect effects, perceptions of viability interactively affect voting choice because voters who like a particular candidate are especially likely to vote accordingly if they consider the candidate viable (see Bartels, 1988, Ch. 6).

In summary, media coverage of the presidential campaign dwells on the can-

¹³ There are several undercurrents to the tide of horse race coverage the most important of which include advantages that accrue to 'winners', and the bonus coverage accorded candidates who violate journalistic expectations, that is, candidates who perform better than expected in the race. Gary Hart, for instance, ran third in the 1984 New Hampshire Democratic primary; coupled with his previous obscurity, this outcome created a tremendous outpouring of media attention.

didates' electoral viability. This has the effect of making viability a particularly accessible feature of the candidates. Voters spontaneously think about candidates in terms of their chances or prospects and perceptions of viability are granted heavy weight when voting decisions are made.

CONCLUSION

As I have tried to suggest, the common psychological denominator linking agenda-setting, priming, issue responsibility framing, and candidate momentum studies is information accessibility. When the networks make a particular issue more accessible by granting it extensive coverage, viewers grant that issue greater significance and use their opinions concerning that issue to a greater extent when thinking about the performance of their president. The effects of news frames on attributions of responsibility can be similarly understood. To the degree individuals are fed a steady diet of episodic as opposed to thematic views about terrorism, characteristics of terrorists will be relatively accessible and therefore used to a greater degree when individuals think about causal or treatment responsibility for the issue. Finally, when news reports repeatedly dwell on candidates' electoral prospects, the public evaluates candidates more in terms of their prospects and less in terms of other features.

The normative implications of media-induced accessibility effects are unclear. The exercise of enlightened citizenship demands that the complexity of public affairs be somehow overcome and the accessibility bias is certainly a convenient means for doing so. The important question is how well the 'pictures in their heads' help citizens realize the 'right' choices. Would a voter acting according to the accessibility bias arrive at the same result if endowed with perfect information and a 'detailed, exactive and creative' choice process?

Accessibility-based reasoning would serve voters' personal interests well to the degree that they retrieve information more readily about issues or subjects that impinge them directly, or for which they have intense preferences. There is some psychological evidence to suggest that self-relevant information is more accessible (for a discussion of self-reference effects in memory and information-processing, see Higgins *et al.*, 1984). In this sense, the accessibility bias may be functional, guiding voters to need-relevant domains.

However, when accessibility is determined by factors extraneous to the individual's concerns or preferences as is obviously the case with media-induced accessibility, the possibility that individuals will be deflected from their personal concerns and needs is significant. To the degree the media stress issues or events that individuals are ordinarily unconcerned about, it is likely that these issues will be accorded more attention than they would be, given individuals' natural

(e.g., selfish) inclinations. This may be the process underlying the 'sociotropic' voting phenomenon (see Kinder and Kiewiet, 1979). Information about the state of the national economy may prove more accessible to voters during political campaigns than information about their personal economic circumstances and is therefore weighed more heavily when evaluating the candidates. Insofar as voters become less personal and more national in their perspective, the democratic process may be enhanced. Obviously, the crucial question here concerns which particular national issues or events the media make more accessible (for a general discussion of this issue with respect to the economy, see Behr and Iyengar, 1985; Harrington, 1989). Do the issues covered by the media and the news frames that constitute issue coverage correspond to the 'real-world', or even the world as defined by political candidates and their parties? If this correspondence is loose, the democratic process is likely to be distorted. Voters are not only deflected from their personal interests, they are led down an illusory pathway of judgment, one defined by organizational, commercial or other such idiosyncratic determinants of news coverage.

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