

**No Time for Tea:  
Media Bias, Selective Exposure, and a New Party**

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A number of recent studies have considered media bias or selective exposure as having an influence on audience perceptions, regardless of the medium under consideration (Garrett, 2009; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Hart, 2005; Lee, 2005; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). Few, if any, studies have considered these critical theories together, and no study has done so in light of the recent development of the Tea Party movement, which has both ostracized and mobilized people across the country.

This paper will reveal that media bias and selective exposure may work together to create an environment where finding an objective media consumer is impossible. And further, because of this, new political forces, such as the Tea Party movement, may struggle to be fairly understood or accepted, while traditional political parties and their ideas become more entrenched in the fabric of the culture. Through the examination of previous studies and recent news articles, it will be shown that the media has both supported and revealed bias against the Tea Party movement, which may be resulting in an opposing echo chamber effect for liberal and conservative audiences. Such selective exposure to biased media by politically-minded audiences may, in turn, solidify opinions so that engagement with conflicting ideas is, or will become, nearly impossible.

To begin, the paper will briefly explore media bias.

**Media Bias**

Accusations of media bias between political parties are typical, regardless of the medium of communication (Balan, 2011; Boyer, 2011; D'Alessio, 2003; Eveland & Shah, 2003; Garrett,

2009; Iyengar, Shanto & Hahn, 2009; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008; Lee & Cappella, 2001; Weigel, 2010; Lee, 2005; Sterin, 2012). Media bias, as defined by Sterin (2012), is the intentional or unintentional slanting of news reporting toward one side due to the political views or cultural beliefs of journalists, producers or owners of a media outlet. Bias is always built upon a foundation of facts manipulated to skew the meaning and the message of a story in a direction that supports the particular views of the outlet and the audience (p. 300).

Although such arguments are common, media bias may have a deep and far-reaching impact for either or both involved parties. For instance, perceptions of media bias may weaken audiences' confidence in news outlets (Hart, 2005), especially for members of the audience who strongly affiliate themselves with the Republican Party (Lee, 2005).

According to Tien-Tsung Lee's (2005) study, "The Liberal Media Myth Revisited: An Examination of Factors Influencing Perceptions of Media Bias," those holding an extreme position politically are more likely to accuse the media of being biased, although that bias may not actually exist. Lee states that systematic research has found no consistent partisan or ideological favoritism in news content despite frequent complaints of biases (p. 58). Overall, this study's findings suggest that if one claims a media bias exists, the complainant is likely to lean toward the far right on partisan and ideological scales. These extreme positions, along with a cynical attitude, affect one's evaluation of the news media. As a result, the perception that the media are biased is likely grounded in an observer's own stance rather than in manifest media content (p. 58).

Media bias may have surprising impact in that it may "have weakened the public's confidence in news" (Hart, 2005, p. 20). And yet this lack of confidence does not stop many

from engaging with the news, often times through multiple forms of media, on a daily basis. Lee (2005) states, “Strong conservatives and Republicans are more likely to distrust the news media, whereas the best predictor of a media bias perception is political cynicism” (p. 43; see also Eveland & Shah, 2003, p. 112; Meade, 2008). Appropriately, Lee (2005) notes later in the same article that “even though reporters’ news coverage does not necessarily reflect their political views, conservative and Republican masses are convinced that the news media cannot be trusted” (p. 56). A question arises, however, regarding this statement. If conservatives and Republicans distrust the news media, what makes the likes of Fox News or Rush Limbaugh immune from such criticism? The answer, of course, is that these sources are seen to reflect the same ideology that the critics themselves hold (Iyengar & Hahn, 2005, p. 19 and p. 33). Further, as Iyengar & Hahn note, “The availability of Fox News, in fact, makes it possible for Republicans and conservatives to seek out a more sympathetic perspective, and conversely, to avoid exposure to discordant points of view” (p. 22).

Conversely, however, liberals may also find bias in conservative media, which makes it understandable to read such accusations as Scarborough’s (2010) description of a scene at a town hall meeting near the beginning of the Tea Party movement:

I saw the faces of talk show fans, pushed into action by the apocalyptic warnings of personalities like Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck. Those two right-wing talkers had spent the past year telling listeners that the Democratic president was a racist who somehow managed to find the time also to be a Nazi and a communist (p. 26).

It is clear, then, that neither conservatives nor liberals are innocent in the media bias conflict. Not surprisingly, according to Meade (2008), it would be questionable for media consumers with a strong political stance to seek out sources relating opinions that differ from their own (p. 4). It is

understandable, therefore, that conservatives should choose to receive messages from traditionally conservative sources while alternately rejecting messages from liberal sources. At the same time, liberal media consumers prefer to receive messages that are also consistent with their own ideology and resist those messages that oppose it.

There are some who see bias as a natural part of the media, and one that need not be feared since it can be understood, avoided, or at least engaged. Sterin (2012) writes:

The reality is far more complicated—and far more interesting. Moreover, in the rich mosaic that is mass media today, with so many venues presenting multiple voices and views, a natural process of checks-and-balances prevails much of the time. In other words, the extreme voices and views on both sides of a given issue offer the media consumer the opportunity to make up his or her own mind—assuming that we each make the effort and take the responsibility to do so (p. 301).

The challenge presented here to the audience is that it not be complacent in the process of selecting and consuming media. As receivers of a message, the audience must also proactively pursue varying messages as well, so as to gain a fuller picture of the issue at hand. The question, however, is whether the audience is willing to work to achieve this end, or if it is more desirous of engaging only or mostly sources consistent with its own ideas.

Media bias need not be a problem in the process of message reception. For audience members who are aware that bias may exist, the answer lies in making an effort toward receiving messages from sources that the receiver both agrees and disagrees with so as to avoid selective exposure to only ideologically-acceptable or -agreeable messages. Unfortunately, this is often not the case, as such consumption takes more effort than most consumers wish to put forth. Indeed, selective exposure is a relevant part of this discussion and so next will be considered.

## Talk Radio and Selective Exposure

Research has suggested, not surprisingly, that politically-minded individuals tend to pursue and consume media consistent with their own ideologies, a practice known as selective exposure, which has recently been studied extensively (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Garrett, 2009; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008; Meade, 2008). Selective exposure is an expected and understandable practice mainly because a biased media typically sells since that is what its audience often desires (Sterin, 2012, p. 302). A lesser-known fact, however, is that this type of selective media exposure may limit one's ability to consider different points of view, and thus, make opinion-changing nearly impossible. This result, known as an "echo chamber" effect, is just one result of voters' repeated exposure to the same type of news over a period of time (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009, p. 34; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008, p. 76).

While it is possible to access multiple mediums in creating a selective exposure environment, public talk radio is a medium through which audiences are likely to encounter an echo chamber effect (Garrett, 2009; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). Because talk radio listeners tend to be conservative Republicans (Bennett, 2009; Bush, 2008; Chafets, 2010; Hart & Rendall, 2010; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Lee & Cappella, 2001; Massing, 2009; Younge, 2010), it is safe to say that Democrats are not as likely as Republicans to suffer the ramifications of an echo chamber effect in their political ideology, at least in light of talk radio usage. Selective exposure may, however, occur for liberal audiences through the consumption of other forms of media.

Examining public talk radio as a selective exposure environment is interesting because this medium struggles to walk a fine line between political information and political entertainment (Barker & Knight, 2000, p. 151) and therefore, makes few attempts at objectivity.

This may even create a stronger echo chamber effect for the audience. At the forefront of talk radio success is Rush Limbaugh. Barker and Knight (2000) conclude that “while Limbaugh is primarily an entertainer, he has become an opinion leader for his devoted followers and makes no secret that political persuasion is his intention” (pp. 151-152). These “devoted followers,” Barker and Knight (2000) find in their study, may even alter their attitudes and beliefs so as to agree with Rush Limbaugh on topics on which the host regularly comments (p. 168). Further, according to Jamieson and Cappella (2008), “Practically since the launch of his show, Limbaugh has been the top-rated political radio host in the nation. Media reports place his listenership at between 13.5 and 20 million listeners” (p. 46). Despite the fact that many of these listeners can be defined by the simple demographic of being older listeners who prefer talk radio to music (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008, p. 45), it is impossible to overstate the impact Rush Limbaugh can have politically and socially with numbers like these.

While Democrats tend to dismiss Limbaugh as merely an entertainer (Bennett, 2009, p. 80), studies have shown that his listeners “are more likely to participate in politics, have feelings of greater efficacy, and have a stronger sense of the importance of political decisions and differences between the strands of political parties” (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008, p. 138). And further, according to a Pew Research poll done in 2007, 50 percent of Limbaugh’s audience scored high when tested on public affairs (p. 13). These facts make it clear that, while Limbaugh may deserve some of the criticism he receives, his listeners are educated, informed, and politically-active voters.

There are some talk radio critics, however, who offer much more scathing criticism of this medium. Michael Massing (2009) states:

In reach and rancor, it [conservative talk radio] had no equal. Leading the way was Rush Limbaugh. An estimated fourteen to twenty million people tune into his show every week, and he treated them to nonstop character assassination, calling the Democratic candidate [Barack Obama] the Messiah, a revolutionary socialist, a liar...a man with a perverted mind who wants to destroy America and the middle class (p. 14).

But Massing (2009) does not stop there. He continues that “the noxious clouds emitted by these national windbags were further fed by gassy eruptions from scores of local and regional radio hosts” (p. 14). If this writer for the *Columbia Journalism Review* feels this way regarding talk radio and its hosts, it is clear that the division between the two groups might be a greater chasm than some may have imagined.

In an effort to find their own success in talk radio, however, liberals launched their own version in Air America. Fronted by already well-known figures from Al Franken to Marc Maron and Randi Rhodes, Air America sought to mimic conservative talk radio’s success as well as balance the playing field in this medium. According to Jo Ann Oravec (2005), “Air America has sought to establish and reinforce its own legitimacy in the political sphere, a difficult task in a complex political climate and crowded broadcast market” (p. 191). Whether this was the cause of Air America’s downfall or not, the fledgling radio network filed for bankruptcy in 2010, never achieving the success of conservative talk radio. Hampp (2010) notes: “Air America’s plight has always been in direct contrast to conservative talk radio, which has thrived with personalities, such as Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity” (p. 36). Some argue that liberal audiences simply aren’t as interested in listening to talk radio as conservative audiences (Hampp, 2010; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Oravec, 2005), which could mean Air America was doomed from the start. Regardless, there is little to compare conservative Republican radio to in terms of opposing

philosophies in the talk radio market since Democrats prefer to receive their news from alternative sources.

Although Republicans and Democrats alike choose to pursue media outlets that align with their personal political ideologies, this selective exposure is no surprise. With the increasing access to all types of media on the Internet, however, this presents a unique challenge to audiences. As Iyengar and Hahn (2009) note:

Consumers can access—with minimal effort—newspapers, radio, and television stations the world over. Given this dramatic increase in the number of available news outlets, it is not surprising that media choices increasingly reflect partisan considerations. People who feel strongly about the correctness of their cause or policy preferences seek out information they believe is consistent rather than inconsistent with their preferences (p. 20).

Because of the availability of various perspectives in multiple types of media, audiences needn't pursue outlets or ideas they disagree with, and the tendency to do so is decreasing rapidly.

Media bias, coupled with this type of selective exposure, can be problematic.

Eveland and Shah (2003) indicate that selective exposure to media and media bias can work together to create an environment where the understanding of objectivity can be skewed.

The authors state that this may be so 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 (p. 106).

Because media bias coupled with selective exposure lends itself to an echo chamber effect, the audience's understanding of political and social issues may be severely flawed, with little hope for change considering that it is unlikely for a coherent discussion between those with opposing viewpoints.

To establish this point further, this paper will next examine the Tea Party in light of media bias, and the audience tendency toward selective exposure.

### The Media and the Tea Party

The origins of the Tea Party are as controversial as the movement itself has become. Not long before CNBC reporter Rick Santelli had his now-famous rant regarding the president's policies on home foreclosures, groups had started forming across the country to discuss what could be done with the struggling economy. This group called itself the Tea Party. Many, however, cite the origins of the Tea Party with the "rant heard round the world" (Pollak, 2011).

'How about this, President and new administration?' CNBC business reporter Rick Santelli yelled from the floor of the Chicago Board and Trade on February 19, 2009.

'Why don't you put up a Web site to have people vote on the Internet as a referendum to see if we really want to subsidize the losers' mortgages.' Santelli went on: 'We're thinking of having a Chicago Tea Party in July. All you capitalists that want to show up to Lake Michigan, I'm gonna start organizing.' Within four days, Santelli's rant had been viewed 1.7 million times on the CNBC Web site (CQ Press, Sage Publications, 2010, p. 245).

This moment is credited with beginning what is now known as the Tea Party movement. A group of mostly conservative Republicans quickly supported this movement, which spread, thanks to the help of talk radio hosts like Glenn Beck, Sean Hannity, and media giant Rush Limbaugh

(Barstow, 2010, p. 1; see also Hart & Rendall, 2010, p. 7-8; Limbaugh, 2011; Massing, 2009, pp. 14-15; Scarborough, 2010, p. 26; Weigel, 2010). Stephen Dinan (2011) writes that, according to an American National Election Studies' October 2010 pre-election survey, Tea Party voters tend to be "more likely than other Republicans to be registered to vote, to have contacted a public official or to have donated to a campaign. They also are generally older, wealthier and more likely to be evangelical" (p. 1).

While Santelli's challenge might have been a spontaneous comment intended to encourage the audience to think about current presidential policies, and perhaps even to react to such policies, it ultimately became the start of something much more. Ensuing Internet blog posts became a grassroots effort to protest the president's economic policies and grew into a movement to incite change in the country.

And yet, less than a week after Santelli's rant, writers Yasha Levine and Mark Ames (2009) co-wrote an article that appeared on Playboy.com, questioning the spontaneity of the event and accusing him of being a

frontman, using CNBC airwaves for publicity, for some of the craziest and sleaziest rightwing oligarch clans this country has ever produced. Namely, the Koch family, the multibillionaire owners of the largest private corporation in America, and funders of scores of rightwing thinktanks and advocacy groups (Levine and Ames, 2009).

The article was quickly removed from Playboy's website, but later appeared on Ames' own website, "exiledonline.com" under a new title.

Joel Pollak (2011) argues that Ames' political beliefs, "in both their right and left incarnations, have retained the same persistent theme: a hatred of 'oligarchs'—those who have amassed great private wealth, through legitimate means or otherwise." And yet, David Weigel

(2010), writing for the *Columbia Journalism Review* disagrees, instead criticizing the media itself, stating that there were few journalists who took the Tea Party movement seriously in its early days, save Mark Ames and Yasha Levine. Weigel's (2010) concern is whether the biased media may have influenced not only the prevailing coverage of the Tea Party but also future audience perceptions of this movement. Weigel (2010) states that the problem with the "left press" was

[...] journalistic: oversimplifying a genuinely complex phenomenon. But the cause was political: a desire to destroy a perceived threat. The new towers of the left media, sites like Talking Points Memo, the Huffington Post, the Center for American Progress's ThinkProgress, and programs like MSNBC's the Rachel Maddow Show, did not take the movement seriously and their initial coverage was mocking (p. 14).

Weigel (2010) continues that the article by Ames and Levine (2009) "foreshadowed where the left press was headed once mockery failed" (p. 14). Although this thought may be valid, one may wonder if considering Playboy.com as a reputable media source may show that Weigel (2010) is taking these writers too seriously. These differences aside, Ames and Levine were not alone in their struggle to make sense of this new and powerful force known as the Tea Party.

An early and unfortunate problem for the Tea Party was that many journalists felt it lacked definition or purpose. If, as Santelli argued, it was not intended to be a "movement," then perhaps the inability to define it makes sense; but if, as Levine and Ames argue, the Tea Party was a carefully planned anti-Obama campaign, it is perhaps the most poorly planned movement in the nation's history since it has received such criticism for its lack of focus (Harris, 2011; Hart & Rendall, 2010). Harris (2011) notes, "There appears to be no consistent ideology or coherent

set of policies behind the movement,” while others define the movement through the lens of their own political ideologies. For instance, Hart and Rendall (2010) argue that

the Tea Party movement—an amorphous, politically incoherent umbrella designation for various strands of opposition to Obama, much of it beset with racism and backed by less-than-grassroots, deep-pocket Beltway lobbying groups—has managed to buck that trend, getting the fervent support of conservative media and wide, often uncritical, coverage in the corporate media (p. 7).

Others, like Paul Rahe (2011), argue that the Tea Party movement is

testimony to the fact that all is not lost. When confronted in a brazen fashion with the tyrannical impulse underpinning the administrative state, ordinary Americans from all walks of life are still capable of fighting back. It is easy enough to mock. Like all spontaneous popular movements, the Tea Party has attracted its fair share of cranks (p. 16).

These varying ideas reveal that the Tea Party was going to be controversial without conflicting media perspectives, but through these conflicts, the movement was even more attractive to some writers.

A further problem for the Tea Party was that their solutions for major societal problems were perceived by some to be “simplistic and often downright wacko” (Harris, 2010, p. 5). This may explain the venom with which many in the press began to attack the Party in major media outlets, even resorting to off-color comments such as calling the members of the Tea Party “clueless teabaggers” (Scarborough, 2010, p. 26), a name that seemed to stick when the likes of respected journalists such as CNN’s Anderson Cooper and MSNBC’s Rachel Maddow, and even President Barack Obama himself, referred to them in this manner (Weigel, 2010, p. 16; Rahe,

2011, p. 13). Boyer (2011) adds that “Democrats in Washington have called them terrorists and extortionists, but Tea Party activists say the name-calling is only proof they are finally having a real impact on the debate over government spending” (p. 3). Even in the face of such offensive descriptions in respected media circles, the members of the Tea Party movement refused to be discouraged, often finding support in talk radio through conservative hosts like Sean Hannity, Rush Limbaugh or Glenn Beck. Chafets (2010) states that “although he has never publicly claimed leadership of the amorphous Tea Party, it is a mirror of Limbaugh’s longstanding themes of small government, low taxation, tight immigration enforcement, the belief in American exceptionalism, and a sense of estranged hostility from the “country-club wing” of the GOP” (p. 34). And yet, Scarborough (2010) gives credit to Glenn Beck as being the “tea party’s spiritual leader and carnival barker” (p. 26; see also Barstow, 2010, p. 1; Kim, 2010, p. 1; and Wilentz, 2010, p. 2). It would be remiss, however, to give too much credit to any of the talk radio hosts, who already have been established as serving a mostly-conservative audience, and as the previous quote indicates, hold beliefs reflective of the Tea Party movement.

While it may be admirable that the Tea Partiers have weathered this tough criticism and found solace in talk radio, the movement faces other obstacles. As recently as August 2011, however, a New York Times/ CBS poll revealed that the Tea Party might be facing opposition from many Americans. Whether this is a result of the media’s unfavorable coverage remains to be seen, however. Kate Zernike (2011) writes that nearly forty percent of those polled said they had an “unfavorable” view of the Tea Party, compared to just eighteen percent in the first poll conducted nearly a year before. The same poll revealed that the “Tea Party ranks lower than any of the other 23 groups we asked about—lower than both Republicans and Democrats. It is even less popular than much aligned groups like ‘atheists’ and ‘Muslims.’ Interestingly, one group

that approaches it in unpopularity is the Christian Right” (Campbell & Putnam, 2011, p. 7). A Pew Research poll conducted around the same time found that “37 percent of respondents said they had a worse impression of members of Congress affiliated with the Tea Party movement, while 11 percent said they viewed the group more favorably” (Boyer, 2011, p. 3). It remains to be seen whether the influence of selective exposure or echo chamber impact may have had anything to do with such negative perceptions. Perhaps future studies can shed some light on this issue.

While the Tea Party may be waning in popularity as more people come to understand its message, there are many writers who feel the Tea Party was never difficult to define. Younge (2010) states, “If you were looking for one thing that unites them, it would not be an agenda, but anger. Many are regular anti-tax, small-government social conservatives” (p. 29). Others agree that the Tea Party is not a mystery, but a group who has been open regarding their purpose and philosophy. Harris (2010) states:

The Tea Party movement is not about ideas. It is all about attitude, like the attitude expressed by the popular poster seen at all Tea Party rallies. Over the head of a hissing rattlesnake threatening to strike is inscribed the defiant slogan so popular among our revolutionary ancestors: “Don’t tread on me!” The old defiant motto is certainly not a new idea. In fact, it is not an idea at all. It is a warning (p. 3-4).

The Tea Party movement may just be a warning, or it may be something more.

The Tea Party has arguably gained its greatest ally in conservative news media, specifically talk radio hosts like Sean Hannity, Glenn Beck and Rush Limbaugh. As Rush Limbaugh observed during his broadcast on October 7, 2011:

I didn't know that the left had such jealousy of the Tea Party. That's what this is all about. I just thought it was pure hatred. I thought they hated the Tea Party for all the obvious reasons: It's organic, leaderless, spontaneous, and it's real. It's made up of people who have never before done anything like they're doing: Showing up at town halls, engaging public protest. Every member of the Tea Party is a solid individual, most of them work, take time off from work to do what they're doing. They dramatically, dramatically oppose everything the Democrat Party stands for. Well, you can understand the Democrats hating and reviling that, but what I didn't know is, they're jealous!

Limbaugh's statement is the most concise summary of the issues between the Tea Party and its opponents, many of whom can be found in the Democratic Party, or the liberal media audience. The issues between the two groups are not likely to be remedied anytime soon, especially if the selectively exposed, biased media consumption continues in both political parties.

### Conclusion

This paper attempted to answer questions of media bias and selective exposure as they relate to the Tea Party movement's portrayal by the media, most specifically talk radio, which may be the Tea Party's strongest media support. It was shown that conservative Republicans tend to view this movement favorably, but note that it gets biased treatment in the media, while Democrats see the movement almost as a joke, calling its members and supporters everything from 'racists' to 'teabaggers' (Scarborough, 2010, p. 26; *Washington Times*, p. 2). While this may be cast aside as simple and expected disagreement between opposing political camps, the problem is deep. Republicans are often less likely to desire change, and so immerse themselves in their position by selectively exposing themselves to media with which they agree. Lee (2005) states that "conservatives tend to be uneasy about new and unfamiliar situations at a personal

level. They prefer things to remain unchanged and traditional. It is therefore logical to expect conservatives to harbor a similar attitude toward societal changes” (p. 56). Because of this, it is clear that conservatives’ views on media bias, which may or may not lead to selective exposure, are not surprising.

Members and supporters of the Tea Party may simply be misunderstood based on the idea of selective exposure—those who disagree with them tend to reinforce this notion through the media that they consume, while those who agree with them widen the gap by continuing to support their ideas through their own media consumption. Sterin (2012) also points out that it takes work to be a wise media consumer who can “carve out the truth from the morass of nicely packaged half-truths and massaged facts that we routinely encounter in today’s mass media” (p. 316). Because it takes work, many simply find it much easier to continue reading and consuming media with which they agree rather than taking the time to pursue various types of media to uncover the truthful messages within. Sterin (2012) observes that such “slanted media succeed because there are large segments of the audience who want slanted content, who seek it out and remain loyal consumers of those outlets expressing positions with which they agree” (p. 318).

A problem with this type of behavior may be that opinion-changing becomes increasingly difficult the more entrenched in an opinion or ideology a person becomes. As Garrett (2009) states:

Although reinforcement seeking and challenge avoidance both have important consequences for attitude formation and opinion strength, avoiding opinion-challenging information is particularly harmful. Exposure to political difference is a defining element of effective deliberation and has a significant influence on individuals’ ability to accept disagreement and seek political solutions (p. 677).

While conflict and differences of opinion may be uncomfortable for both parties involved, this type of engagement can be helpful in creating solutions to large scale problems involving the economy, society, or culture. Because of this, it is possible that conservatives who struggle with changing their opinions may actually be hindering the discovery of greater solutions to some of the world's biggest problems. As Garrett (2009) observes:

Exposure to other opinions is important because it fosters political tolerance and can improve group deliberation processes. As this exposure drops, the evidence suggests that our society will become more polarized and politically fragmented, that political tolerance will drop, and that citizens will be less able to effectively deliberate over important political problems (p. 692).

Engaging with others of varying opinions can provide a healthy and fruitful dialogue, one that could uncover solutions to large scale problems.

And yet liberal Democrats are not without fault. Conservatives cannot be wrong in being disgusted with the name-calling or accusations of racism that have come their way. While it is possible that these accusations or names are justified by those accusing the Tea Party of such infractions, it is unlikely that any solutions will be found in such rhetoric. For instance, as recently as late August 2011 when Rep. Carson accused Tea Party-friendly members of Congress of wanting to bring back Jim Crow and went so far to accuse his colleagues of wanting to bring back lynching: "Some of them...would love to see you and me...hanging on a tree," few, if any Democrats spoke out against such violent imagery (Balan, 2011).

And yet perhaps this conflict-oriented phenomenon will continue out of a sheer need for this type of political discourse. Lee and Cappella (2001) state:

Listeners in the conservative or the liberal/ moderate PTR groups, while skewed toward one party and ideology, are not monolithic. The audiences' political predispositions might bias the way they process messages from the hosts (or Republicans and Independents in the audience for liberal/ moderate hosts) could counter-argue, selectively attend, selectively recall, or selectively judge the messages that contradict their values (p. 384).

Simply put—because people, with distinct opinions and ideas who are free to share such things in our democratic, free-speech society, are involved in the political process and discourse, there will always be media bias and selective exposure, perhaps increasingly so, in today's media-saturated society.

The question remains as to whether the Tea Party has received objective treatment in the media. Based on the examination of recent news items for this paper, it is a fair conclusion that much of that determination remains in the hands of the observer. As Dave D'Alessio (2003) writes,

Perception of bias is subjective. Different people looking at identical content can come to idiosyncratic, often opposing, judgments. Second, perception of bias is relativistic.

'Biased' often means 'disagrees with us, the users,' regardless of users' awareness of any of their own biases or the overall balance of the content (p. 292).

Liberal audiences would likely argue the Tea Party is getting what they deserve, while conservative audiences would probably cry foul. Thanks to consistent accusations of media bias on the part of conservative Republicans and the practice of selective exposure on the part of all parties, it is likely that a firm answer is impossible to declare.

This discussion was limited to the consideration of the Tea Party as a new political force. While this was enough of a challenge for this paper, future studies should be conducted to help further these points. For instance, as this paper was being written, the new Occupy Wall Street movement was finding its own place as a voice for some in liberal Democratic circles. While Tea Partiers resist comparisons between the groups (McLaughlin, 2011, p. 1), the OWS protesters have been compared to the Tea Partiers, despite having strong ideological differences. It would be wise to seriously consider such comparisons as well as the ideas presented in this paper in light of the OWS movement itself. For instance, is the OWS movement critical of media bias against it? Are those involved in or supporting this movement impacted by selective exposure to like-minded media? These issues, along with others, would provide important information for those both inside and outside this movement.

This paper attempted to prove, through the examination of previous research, that the Tea Party has been supported by mostly conservative Republican voters who justify their position through immersion in conservative media such as modern public talk radio. Because of this selective exposure, Tea Partiers and their supporters are unlikely to find challenges to their position, and when they do find such opposition, they are often unable to address it. Additionally, these Tea Partiers argue that media bias unfairly impacts the audience perception of the movement.

Conversely, liberal critics of the Tea Party are also unlikely to change their position on this movement, thanks to their own selective exposure to media as well as their accusations of media bias against conservatives. This study has shown that, regardless of political persuasion, media bias may not even exist, but remains a key argument for many in conservative circles. While liberals may be less likely to rail against bias in the media, they are equally impacted by

issues of selective exposure, and certainly also have conducted their fair share of insulting in regard to the Tea Party movement.

While the controversy surrounding the Tea Party movement has changed over time, it is unlikely to end anytime soon. Whether disagreeing with their ideas or methods, many journalists have struggled to define the Tea Party. Younge (2010) even argued:

The 'Tea Party' does not exist. It has no members, leaders, office bearers, headquarters, policies, participatory structures, budget or representatives. The Tea Party is shorthand for a broad, shallow sentiment about low taxes and small government shared by loosely affiliated, somewhat like-minded people. That doesn't mean the Right isn't resurgent. It is. But the forces driving its political energy are not those that underpinned its recent electoral success (p. 29).

Despite criticizing the Tea Party for what journalists and media professionals perceive to be a lack of purpose, it seems the Party, thanks to help from talk radio and a conservative Republican backing, will continue.

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