

Credibility Gaps and Public Opinion in a Competitive Media Environment: The Case of Arab Satellite TV News in Lebanon

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In research on news exposure and public opinion, media credibility is typically examined as the dependent variable and is rarely considered an independent variable of interest. We move the understanding of media credibility forward by examining its role in attenuating the effects of media exposure on public opinion and how individual differences may moderate the linkage between exposure and credibility. Testing our model of opinion formation in the competitive media landscape of Lebanon, our findings suggest that credibility evaluations of competing news sources mediate the relationship between news exposure and opinion formation. Religious group identity also acts as an inconsistent moderator of the link between media exposure and credibility. Theoretical implications for opinion formation and public diplomacy are discussed.

Keywords: media credibility, Arab TV news, Lebanon, anti-Americanism, Islam, public diplomacy

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Date submitted: 2015–10–16

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The fact that the Arab Spring did not quash anti-American sentiments—and in some cases inflamed them—may have baffled some journalists, but it hardly surprised foreign policy experts who are painfully aware that the sentiments exist because of deep cultural and political differences (Fillingham, 2012). More recently, researchers have examined the role played by satellite news stations such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, local Arab news as well as social media in driving Arab public opinion concerning the United States. The relationship has been found to be complex, particularly because results often depend on whether those surveyed held a strong state-centric (e.g., Egyptian) identity or a strong Arab or Islamic one (Nisbet & Myers, 2011). The results also raise the possibility of a media credibility gap. That is, the more you watch either Al-Jazeera or Al-Arabiya, the more likely you are to judge it as credible and the other Pan-Arab network as not credible, creating a gap that is likely to affect public opinion, including anti-American sentiments (Golan & Kioussis, 2010).

These research findings stem from the dramatic growth in media choice paired with ideological polarization in Arab countries during the last two decades. Prior to this growth, Arab citizens held little trust in the news they received from their government-controlled television stations (Mellor, Rinnawi, Dajani, & Ayish, 2011; Rugh, 2004). Political liberalization in the 1990s and the diffusion of satellite TV technology provided a catalyst for the emergence of transnational satellite networks such as Al-Jazeera that have operated free from most government controls while adhering to Western journalistic techniques and values (el-Nawawy, 2003; Lynch, 2006; Nisbet & Myers, 2010). This has resulted in an incredibly fragmented media environment composed of transnational and domestic Arab satellite news channels competing for credibility in the eyes of Arab audiences across the region. This competition for credibility and media influence between domestic and transnational TV channels is particularly fierce in Lebanon due to its religiously diverse population and open media system relative to other Arab countries in the Middle East (Dabbous, 2010; Dubai Press Club, 2012).

Changes in the media and information environment across, and within, Arab states have also been linked to differences in Arab public opinion about the United States (e.g., Nisbet, Nisbet, Scheufele, & Shanahan, 2004). For instance, while reliance on Al-Jazeera is strongly linked to anti-American attitudes, reliance on the more moderate Al-Arabiya promoted more positive attitudes toward the United States (Nisbet & Myers, 2011; Nisbet & Shanahan, 2008). The relationship between Pan-Arab use and anti-American sentiments is also affected by political identity. Nisbet and Myers (2011) discovered that although Al-Jazeera use by itself may lead to reduced anti-American sentiment, Al-Jazeera users with strong Arab and Islamic identities became increasingly anti-American, whereas Al-Arabiya users with more state-centric (e.g., pro-Egyptian) or Arab identities exhibited less anti-American sentiment. However, to date, little attention has been paid to synthesizing the relationships between the consumption of competing domestic and transnational Arab TV news sources, the perceived credibility of these sources, political identity, and how these news sources may impact public opinion about an important political actor such as the United States.

This study, based on a 2013 general population survey of Lebanon citizens, employs a conditional process analysis model (Hayes, 2013) to examine how media credibility may mediate the influence of transnational and domestic satellite TV news exposure on Arab public opinion about the United States. Furthermore, we explore how the relationship between TV news exposure and a perceived media

credibility gap is moderated by religious identification. We conclude by discussing the theoretical implications for understanding the relationship between media credibility and opinion formation, as well as the policy implications for mediated public diplomacy by the United States in the Middle East and other regions of the world (e.g., Stoycheff & Nisbet, 2016).

Theoretically Integrating Media Exposure, Media Credibility, and Opinion Formation

Credibility is not inherent to a source (Berlo, Lemert, & Mertz, 1969); rather, it is a judgment made by the user based on a range of factors, including believability, accuracy, fairness, depth, trustworthiness, bias, completeness, and reliability (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Metzger et al., 2003). Credibility is critical to the success of a medium because people will not seek out sources they do not trust (Johnson & Kaye, 1998, 2004). As credibility drops, so does the audience using that medium as well as the advertising dollars needed to keep most commercial media viable.

Studies consistently show that media use is the most consistent predictor of credibility (Carter & Greenberg, 1965; Greenberg, 1966). Specifically, the more people use a source, the more credible they judge it to be. Also, the more satisfaction they gain from a source, the more they use it (Johnson & Kaye, 2000; Stavrositu & Sundar, 2008; Wanta & Hu, 1994). Although the relationship between media use and credibility is reciprocal, the strongest support is for the influence of media use on credibility, because studies indicate that credibility is largely a function of users' preference for and familiarity with a medium (Metzger et al., 2003). Media use is such a strong predictor of credibility because the more experience users have with a medium, the stronger their ability to judge its credibility (Johnson & Kaye, 2004, 2009; Johnson, Kaye, Bichard, & Wong, 2007). Studies have historically found that people judge their preferred medium as the most credible, which is most often the case of local TV news in the United States, for example (Carter & Greenberg, 1965; Greenberg, 1966). Indeed, the most recent credibility poll by the Pew Research Center (2012) found that although television credibility ratings have been slipping since 1985 in the United States, local television news continues to be the most trusted source compared with other print, radio, and cable TV media outlets.

However, what is the role of media credibility in opinion formation in information environments where audiences may select from a range of news information sources? From the time researchers first began assessing the credibility of media, messages, and sources, they have been interested in not only whether they are judged as credible but the processes individuals used to reach that decision (Hovland, Janis, & Kelly, 1953; Metzger et al., 2003). Several researchers have developed models to explain how individuals determine site credibility (e.g., Metzger, 2007; Wathen & Burkell, 2002). More recently, many of these credibility models are based on information-processing models such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and the Heuristic-Systematic Model (Chaiken, 1980).

Five evaluation strategies users should employ to assess information credibility are accuracy, authority, objectivity, and scope of the information, and/or its source (Flanagin & Metzger, 2013; Metzger, 2007). Credibility researchers have found that the degree to which media sites and messages are examined for credibility depends on users' ability to evaluate the site or message and how motivated they are to ensure that the information they receive is accurate and credible (Metzger, 2007; Metzger &

Flanagin, 2013; Wathen & Burkell, 2002). Metzger's (2007) dual processing model of credibility found that the analytical strategy involves a systematic attempt to determine credibility through such means as double-checking facts, checking other websites for supporting information, checking for different views on a topic, and researching a source to determine his or her credibility (Flanagin & Metzger, 2013). The heuristic strategy relies on a faster, and more cursory, search for credibility cues. Studies have identified a host of heuristics that users employ to determine credibility, including reputation (they choose sources they recognize), self-confirmation (putting a greater value on information that supports their beliefs), persuasive intent (the belief that biased information, particularly for commercial purposes, is less credible), and bandwagon effects (people see something as credible because others see it as credible; Metzger & Flanagin, 2013; Metzger, Flanagin, & Medders, 2010; Sundar, 2008).

Whether researchers rely on a systematic or a heuristic approach depends on the situation. People who are highly motivated to get accurate information, such as someone diagnosed with a serious disease, will be much more likely to use a systematic approach than people who are just using the media to be entertained (Metzger & Flanagin, 2015; Sundar, 2008). Credibility studies indicate that media consumers overwhelmingly rely on heuristics rather than strategies to determine credibility as a way to cope with perceived time and cognitive costs of determining the believability of information (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000; Metzger, 2007; Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). Although analytic means of credibility evaluation have traditionally been considered superior to heuristic approaches, evidence suggests that heuristics can be as effective as more systematic strategies in inference as well as decision-making contexts (Metzger & Flanagin, 2015; Trumbo & McComas, 2003; Van Der Heide & Lim, 2015).

Studies suggest that the mechanisms linking credibility, information processing, and public opinion are motivations of the user, issue involvement, and prior knowledge of the issue (Trumbo & McComas, 2003). Indeed, those who are more motivated, involved with the issue, and had more knowledge are more likely to use systematic rather than heuristic cues to influence public attitudes (Van Der Heide & Lim, 2015). However, both heuristic and systematic processing affect public attitudes and behavior (Trumbo & McComas, 2003; Van Der Heide & Lim, 2015).

Studies also indicate direct effects of credibility on public opinion, not moderated by information processing (Van Der Heide & Lim, 2015). Credibility's direct effects on opinions may be greater than the effects of media use. Scholars have increasingly employed credibility as an independent variable predicting public opinion because credibility is a measure of information quality; credible information satisfies user's needs and is considered more relevant in making decisions than noncredible information (Hargittai, Neuman, & Curry, 2012; Johnson & Kaye, 2014).

Media Use, Credibility, and Attitudes

Several studies have specifically examined the effects of media use and credibility on attitudes toward nation-states. Media credibility enters this opinion-formation process by mediating the relationship between media exposure and the accessibility of considerations. Golan and Kiousis (2010) argue that greater perceived media credibility increases the susceptibility to media effects concerning the accessibility of positive and negative considerations about nation-states featured in the news. Similarly, Kim and Rubin

(1997) assert that low perceived media credibility inhibit media effects because it leads to audiences "avoiding, discounting, and distrusting messages" (p. 111). In other words, researchers argue that the amount of perceived media credibility acts as a recursive feedback loop and an intervening construct that attenuates (mediates) the effects of media exposure on audiences' cognitive and affective processes of opinion formation (Wanta & Hu, 1994). Golan and Kiouis (2010) demonstrated that the perceived media credibility of international media influenced Arab public opinion about democracy.

A common framework for understanding how news exposure may influence public opinion is to conceptualize audiences as "cognitive misers" who rely on the a combination of their preexisting beliefs and the most immediately available and retrievable information on which to base their opinions and make evaluations (Nisbet & Myers, 2011; Popkin, 1991). In addition, the ability of media to influence the accessibility of what information or considerations upon which audiences when forming their opinions or making judgments is amplified and disproportionately strengthened when the object of evaluation is socially and/or physically distant, as in the case of foreign nations (Ball-Rokeach, 1985; Nisbet & Myers, 2011).

In this context, we understand that media may influence opinion formation by increasing the accessibility of some considerations or beliefs when individuals are asked to form an opinion or make an evaluation (Zaller, 1992). This "memory-based" model of opinion formation assumes that some considerations are more readily retrievable in a person's mind than others, and this accessibility is mostly a function of either the amount of exposure or how recent the exposure was to these considerations. Thus, the relative prevalence and valence of considerations within news content about an issue or topic will influence what considerations are more accessible when individuals are asked to make judgments or evaluations about actors and/or policies, such as the United States and its foreign policy (Nisbet & Myers, 2011).

Furthermore, we should conceive this mediating role of perceived credibility in the context of competitive media environments. The effects of exposure to one media outlet compared with another on opinion formation will be based on individual assessments of the media outlets' *relative credibility*. In this sense, the *perceived credibility* gap between competing media outlets will determine the magnitude of their relative media influence on opinions and evaluations. If one media outlet is perceived as more credible than the other, then that outlet will be more likely to influence opinion formation than the other, and vice versa. If they are perceived to be equally credible, they may equally influence opinion formation, or possibly even cancel each other out if they have differing valence within their content. Thus, assessing how perceived credibility gaps may mediate the influence of media on public opinion in highly competitive news environments, such as emerged in most Arab states during the last decade, is of great import.

In addition to the mediating role of media credibility, the effects of media exposure may amplify or dampen preexisting beliefs or schemas. Drawing on McLeod, Pan, and Rucinski (1989), Nisbet and Myers (2011) argue that opinion formation does not occur in social isolation but rather results from a combination of communication processes and preexisting cognitive constructs. These preexisting beliefs, schemas, or identities may act as "perceptual screens" (Goidel, Shields, & Peffley, 1997) that influence which considerations in memory are most readily retrievable when forming an opinion by impacting selective attention and accessibility (Nisbet & Myers, 2011; Zaller; 1992).

Likewise, preexisting cognitions may also moderate the relationship between media credibility and exposure. Strong preexisting beliefs or identities may bias perceptions of media sources through processes of motivated reasoning (Hart & Nisbet, 2012; Lodge & Taber, 2013) and result in what is called the “hostile media effect,” where respondents will perceive even neutral stories as biased against their opinions (Feldman, 2011; Hansen & Kim, 2011). Motivated reasoning posits that when audiences who hold strongly held beliefs are exposed to information that is either pro- or counterattitudinal, they have a motivational response that results in selective processing of that information, including either derogating or bolstering that source, which influences perceived credibility and trustworthiness of the information source (e.g., Feldman, 2011; Hansen & Kim, 2011; Nisbet, Cooper, & Garrett, 2015).

Similarly, selective exposure researchers suggests that people seek out sources and media messages that support their viewpoints because they perceive such sources as more convincing and more credible than information that challenges their beliefs (Fischer, Jonas, Frey, & Schulz-Hardt, 2005; Johnson, Bichard, & Zhang, 2009; Stroud, 2008, 2011). In turn, increased selective exposure to pro-attitudinal content will enhance credibility perceptions of the media source over time (Golan & Kiousis, 2010; Wanta & Hu, 1994).

Pulling these different opinion formation processes together into an integrated whole, a *moderated mediation* model of news media exposure, media credibility, and opinion formation emerges (Hayes, 2013). In this model, media exposure on public opinion is mediated by the degree of the perceived media credibility gap between the competing media outlets. In addition, the relationship between perceived media credibility, as well as any direct relationship between media exposure and opinion, may be amplified or dampened—that is, moderated—by preexisting beliefs, schemas, or identities. This integrated set of relationships is illustrated in Figure 1.

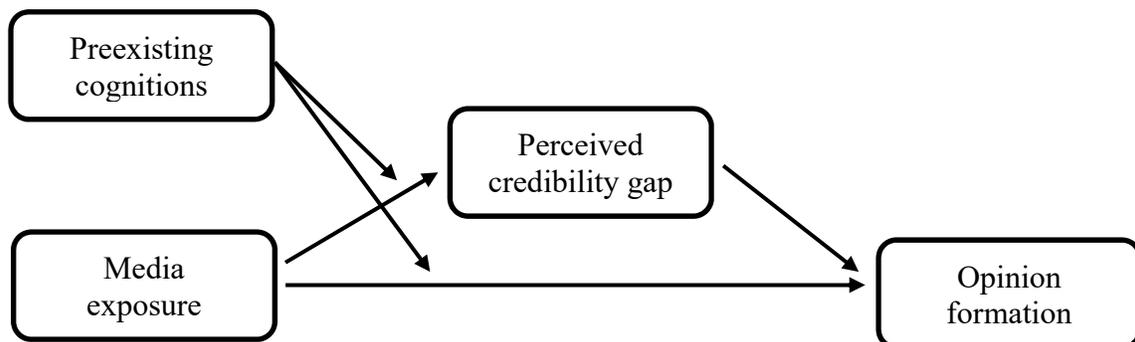


Figure 1. Moderated mediation model of media exposure, media credibility, and opinion formation.

Arab Satellite TV News: Competition and Polarization

As has been recounted in detail elsewhere, the combination of political liberalization and diffusion of satellite TV and Internet technology in the Middle East during the 1990s led to a relatively open, transnational, electronic communicative space that some scholars herald as a “new” Arab public sphere (Ayish, 2002; Lynch, 2006; Rugh, 2004). Previous to the emergence of this competitive information environment, most news media in the Middle East was structured purely along national lines, with news outlets tightly controlled either directly or indirectly by the national governments (Ayish, 2002; Rugh, 2004; Samuel-Azran, 2013). As of 2011, there were more than 500 free-to-air Arab satellite TV stations in the region, most of them privately held and sponsored by either nongovernmental economic interests or political parties/movements (Dubai Press Club, 2012).

Scholars argue that, before the growth of free-to-air satellite TV, Arab audiences had little reason to view TV news as a credible source of information and news because of government control and dominance (Elareshi & Gunter, 2012; Lynch, 2006; Rugh, 2004). However, the rise of independent, nongovernmental satellite TV news outlets offered a new credible source of information for many Arab viewers. For instance, in a survey of Al-Jazeera users, Johnson and Fahmy (2010) found that Al-Jazeera viewers judge the satellite network as highly credible, rating the credibility measures of Al-Jazeera higher than those for Al-Arabiya, Al-Hurra, and local Arab stations. These findings are consistent with other studies that have found that Al-Jazeera viewers judged the network as credible (Johnson & Fahmy, 2008, 2009). Television news continues to be perceived as the most reliable source of information in the region (69% of respondents rated as such) compared with other print, digital, or broadcast media based on a recent audience survey across eight Arab countries (Dennis, Martin, & Wood, 2013).

In recent years, what has emerged in many Arab countries is considerable competition for viewers between transnational satellite television (TSTV) news and domestic satellite television (DSTV) news channels. This competition for viewers plays at the local, regional, and international levels when state-sponsored broadcasters attempt to gain favor with members of religious and ethnic in groups, such as in the case of Saudi Arabia with Sunni Arabs or Iran with Shiites (see Powers & Samuel-Azran, 2015; Youmans & Powers, 2012). Across the Arab region, Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya continue to be the dominant transnational news channels for Arab audiences (Fahmy, Wanta & Nisbet, 2012; Nisbet & Myers, 2011). At the same time, the number of DSTV news channels has increased dramatically. For instance, 12 new satellite news stations were launched in Lebanon by competing political parties in recent years (Dubai Press Club, 2012). The popularity of domestic TV channels in Lebanon is noteworthy because it is one of the few Arab countries where the ratings and popularity of DSTV channels either match or are greater than those of the dominant transnational TV news stations like Al-Jazeera or Al-Arabiya (Dubai Press Club, 2012).

This fragmentation and competition for ratings and political influence, by both TSTV and DSTV within the Arab public sphere is further complicated by religious and political polarization in the region. Scholars have noted the rise of competing religious and political identities in many Arab countries with audiences increasingly identifying as Pan-Arab or Pan-Muslim more so than citizens of their own state (Lynch, 2006; Nisbet & Myers, 2010). Furthermore, many scholars have linked this trend directly to the

growth in the popularity of and exposure to TSTV news, which is in competition with national, often government-controlled, news offerings (e.g., Lynch, 2006; Nisbet & Myers, 2010). In turn, these different forms of religious-political identification have been demonstrated to influence the relationships between transnational Arab TV news exposure and both media credibility and public opinion (Fahmy et al., 2012; Nisbet & Myers, 2012).

As discovered by Tsfati and Ariely's (2013) analysis of public opinion from 44 nations, individual characteristics often predict assessments of media trust and credibility. Indeed, previous studies identified individual-level factors such as ethnic, tribal, and religious variables as key predictors of media credibility (Armfield & Holbert, 2003; Beaudoin & Thorston, 2006; Golan & Day, 2010). The cited literature was mostly confined to research conducted in the United States. Our study extends the examination of individual-level variables to Lebanon, a nation where religious and ethnic identity underlines most political, economic, and social institutions (Dabbous, 2010). Research on how domestic religious, ethnic, or political identities may be associated with media credibility and opinion formation has been scant. One exception is a study by Shim, Day, Golan, and Yang (2015), which examines the relationship between ethnic identity and media credibility in Pakistan. The results of the study identified significant differences in media credibility assessment across several of the Pakistani ethnic groups regarding both tradition and new media. The authors argued that ethnic political divisions may yield differences in media credibility assessments based on the relationship between media orientation and ethnic political media ownership.

We posit that the relationship between ethnic identity and media credibility is likely to be salient in Arab states with a high level of domestic political, religious, or ethnic fragmentation, such as Iraq (Kurds, Shia, Sunni), Yemen (split evenly between Shia and Sunni), and Lebanon (Christian, Sunni, Shia, Druze). For instance, Lebanon is religiously and politically fragmented, with the largest portion of Christians in any Arab country (42%), a sizable Druze population (6%), and the remaining population split evenly between the Sunni and Shia sects of Islam (27% each; Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2011). This religious distribution is reflected in the political environment, with Lebanese parliamentary seats allocated by religious denomination and political parties and blocs closely aligned with religious groups (Salamey, 2013). Like transnational political identities, these domestic religious-political identities also have the potential to moderate the relationship between media exposure and perceived credibility or opinion formation—though to date no such study has assessed this possibility.

In sum, over the past decade, the effects of TSTV channels such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya on Arab public opinion have received much attention, but scant attention has been paid to the effects of exposure to DSTV channels that have increasingly challenged transnational TV stations for audiences in different domestic markets. A large amount of attention also has been devoted to the complex relationship between transnational Arab satellite TV and the emergence of transnational political identities such as Pan-Islam and Pan-Arab. However, again, the domestic side of this equation has been less studied, and the question arises of how domestic religious-political identities may moderate media effects of both transnational and domestic satellite television.

Media Exposure, Credibility, and Arab Public Opinion About the United States

The media landscape and religious-political fragmentation in Lebanon provide an ideal case study to apply the moderated mediation model of media exposure, media credibility, and opinion formation illustrated in Figure 1. We may hypothesize that the aforementioned competition between transnational and domestic Arab satellite TV in Lebanon may result in a perceived credibility gap between the two sets of outlets. In other words:

H1: Exposure to transnational satellite television will increase its perceived credibility relative to domestic satellite television.

Conversely,

H2: Exposure to domestic satellite television will increase its perceived credibility relative to transnational satellite television.

In addition to the perceived credibility gap between the two sets of channels, we are interested in how media exposure and credibility are associated with opinion formation. For this study, we focus on public opinion about the United States. Since 2001, much research has examined the relationship between Arab TV media and anti-American sentiment among Arab audiences (e.g., Fahmy et al., 2012; Nisbet & Myers, 2011; Nisbet et al., 2004). Though the size and magnitude of the relationship may vary, the overall pattern across these studies shows a significant link between exposure to TSTV and public opinion about the United States. To date, most of this research has focused on TSTV such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya and has not focused on the effects of DSTV channels; nor has it directly compared the exposure to these types of channels and TSTV. Thus, applying our moderated mediation model to public opinion about the United States provides an opportunity not only to test the model but to expand our knowledge about potential mediators of Arab media effects on public opinion and how both transnational and DSTV channels may each be associated with anti-American sentiment.

Therefore, based on the previous scholarship examining the links between Arab media exposure and anti-Americanism, we hypothesize that:

H3: Exposure to transnational satellite television will be associated with positive attitudes toward the United States.

Due to the dearth of research on the effects of DSTV on public opinion, we pose the following research question:

RQ1: Will exposure to domestic satellite television be positively or negatively associated with public opinion toward the United States?

Furthermore, based on our proposed model, we hypothesize:

H4: The perceived media credibility gap will mediate the relationships between exposure to TSTV and DSTV and opinions of the United States.

Finally, previous scholarship has demonstrated prior cognitions—such as political identity—moderate the effects of Arab media exposure on Arab public opinion about topics such as the United States. Consequently, in the context of our proposed moderated mediation model, we ask the following questions:

RQ2: How might Lebanese religious-political identities (i.e., Christian, Sunni, Shia, Druze) moderate the relationships between media exposure to transnational and domestic satellite television and the perceived credibility gap?

RQ3: How might Lebanese religious-political identities (i.e., Christian, Sunni, Shia, Druze) moderate the relationships between media exposure to transnational and domestic satellite television and public opinion about the United States?

Method

Data Collection

To evaluate our hypotheses and research questions, we analyzed survey data collected from Lebanon over three weeks in late February and early March 2013 by the Pan Arab Research Center (<http://arabresearch.iniquus.com/>). A total of 1,200 face-to-face interviews were conducted with the target population: citizens from the general public who were at least 16 years old from all six regions of Lebanon (Nabatiyeh, Beirut, Beqaa, Mount Lebanon, North Lebanon, and South Lebanon). The number of interviewed respondents from each major religious group (i.e., Sunni Muslim, Shia Muslim, Christian, and Druze) in the country was selected proportionately. The survey response rate was 82.2%.

Data Coding

For the data analysis, we coded four sets of independent variables: (1) sociodemographics, (2) religious affiliation, (3) media consumption, and (4) perceptions of media credibility. Sociodemographic variables included dichotomous indicators of *gender* (50%), *rural residency* (12.5%), and *employed full-time or part-time* (64.5%). Also included in the model was *age* ($M = 39.9$, $SD = 15.3$); *educational attainment* measured on a 9-point scale ranging from *no formal education* to *postgraduate degree* ($M = 4.7$, $SD = 1.7$), with the median attainment being finishing intermediate but not secondary (high school) education; and a 6-point indicator of *household income* in Lebanese pounds ranging from £L500,000 to £L1 million to more than £L3 million ($M = 2.8$, $SD = 1.4$, median income was £L1 million to £L1.5 million).

Dichotomous indicators of self-identification as a *Sunni Muslim* (26.7%), *Shia Muslim* (25.8%), and *Christian* (39.2%) were all entered into the model with identification as a *Druze* (8.3%) acting as the reference group. In addition, an indicator of *religiosity* was created by averaging together two 4-point survey items that asked respondents how much guidance religion provided in their day-to-day life and how important a role religion played in their life overall ($M = 3.5$, $SD = 0.77$, $r = .73$).

Two sets of media measures were entered in the analysis. The first set of measures was designed to account for selective exposure to specific TV channels. Survey respondents were asked an open-ended question to measure trust: "What is the one news source you trust the most for your information?" The top eight TV stations mentioned by respondents accounted for 81% of the survey responses. Dummy codes for each of the following stations were entered into the model to account for any selective exposure effects. Indicators were entered for six Lebanese DSTV channels: Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation TV (20.6%), Murr TV (16.7%), Al-Jadeed (16.2%), Al-Manar (10.7%), OTV (7.1%), and Future TV (5.8%). Two indicators were entered for the two trusted TSTV channels Al-Arabiya (2.1%) and Al-Jazeera (2.0%). By entering these indicators of selective exposure into the equation, we may be more confident that any observed moderating effects of religious identification are due to biased processing of media content rather than selective exposure to different types of content.

In addition to selective exposure to specific TV channels, our second set of measures tapped frequency of exposure/use to different information channels and attention to different types of news content. *Social media use* was measured by taking the mean of two 4-point measures that tapped how often respondents use social networking and how often they chat or instant-message on mobile phones ($M = 2.5$, $SD = 1.2$, $r = .51$). *Internet news use* was assessed by taking the mean of three different 4-point survey items that asked respondents (1) how often they read news while on the Internet, (2) how often they use mobile phones for reading news, and (3) how often they use the Internet to read news about current events ($M = 2.0$, $SD = 1.1$, $\alpha = .86$). The three items loaded on one factor with an eigenvalue of 2.65 that accounted for 88.5% of the variance. Measures of *newspaper news use* ($M = 3.6$, $SD = .79$, $r = .92$) were constructed by taking the average of two 4-point items that asked respondents (a) how often they used each medium generally and (b) how often they used the medium for following news about current events.

Similarly, the survey also asked respondents how often they watched local TV channels and satellite TV channels for (a) general use and (b) getting news about current events, on a scale from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*every day*). We conducted an exploratory factor analysis of the four exposure measures using a varimax rotation. The four measures loaded on two different factors, which we labeled *domestic satellite TV news exposure* ($M = 3.6$, $SD = 0.79$, $r = .89$) and *transnational satellite TV news exposure* ($M = 3.3$, $SD = 0.90$, $r = .65$). The eigenvalue for the local TV news was 1.99 and accounted for 49.4% of the variance. The eigenvalue for the transnational satellite TV news was 1.57 and accounted for 39.2% of the variance. Beyond frequency of media use, single-item measures of *attention to domestic news* ($M = 3.3$, $SD = 0.85$) and *attention to international news* ($M = 2.9$, $SD = 0.95$) were also included in the model.

The last independent variable entered into the model was an indicator of the *perceived credibility gap* between DSTV and TSTV. This variable was created by subtracting the perceived credibility of DSTV news, measured on a 4-point scale ($M = 2.7$, $SD = 0.91$), from the perceived credibility of TSTV news, measured on the same scale ($M = 2.3$, $SD = 0.95$). The resulting measure ranges from -3 to $+3$ ($M = -0.41$, $SD = 1.1$), with negative values indicating that respondents perceive domestic satellite TV news as more credible than transnational satellite TV news (31.5% of respondents), zero indicating they perceive the credibility of each medium as equal (56.4% of respondents), and positive values indicating they

perceive transnational satellite TV news as more credible than domestic satellite TV news (12.2% of respondents).

The dependent variable was an indicator of *anti-American sentiment toward the United States* ($M = 3.0$, $SD = 0.84$, $\alpha = .82$) with negative evaluations coded high. This variable was constructed by taking the mean of four survey items that asked respondents on 4-point scales (a) whether the United States had a positive or negative impact on Lebanon ($M = 3.0$, $SD = 1.1$); (b) if the United States treated Lebanon with respect ($M = 3.2$, $SD = 0.94$); (c) whether the United States helped Lebanon's economy ($M = 3.1$, $SD = 0.98$), and (d) whether the respondent had an overall favorable or unfavorable opinion of the U.S. government ($M = 2.8$, $SD = 1.2$). To confirm that these four measures loaded on one factor, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis of the four exposure measures using a varimax rotation. The four items loaded on one factor with an eigenvalue of 2.58 that accounted for 64.6% of the variance.

Data Analysis

Our data analysis assessed the mediating role of a perceived credibility gap between transnational and domestic Arab satellite TV and anti-American sentiment, as well as whether religious identity moderated the effects of media exposure on perceived credibility and/or public opinion about the United States. This conceptualized moderated mediation model was tested by employing *conditional process modeling* developed by Hayes (2013, see model 8). This computational tool is used for path analysis-based mediation and moderation analysis and employs sequential ordinary least squares regression to estimate model coefficients.

This particular form of conditional process modeling offers the advantage of simultaneously examining the moderation effect of religious identity on the mediated relationship between media exposure and public opinion about the United States through a measure of relative credibility of competing news sources. The model was fit with our focal independent variables of exposure to domestic and transnational TV news predicting anti-American sentiment and the perceived credibility gap between transnational and domestic news entered into the model as a mediating variable. Furthermore, the model tested whether our indicators of religious self-identification (Shia, Sunni, Christian, and Druze) moderated the relationships between exposure to each category of Arab satellite TV channels when predicting (a) the perceived credibility gap and (b) public opinion about the United States. The other independent variables of sociodemographics, religiosity, and media consumption were all entered into the model as covariates. The model was bootstrapped using 5,000 samples to estimate confidence intervals for the total direct and indirect effects of transnational and domestic TV exposure on negative evaluations of the United States.

Results

Our analysis explored the mediating role of a perceived credibility gap between transnational and domestic TV as well as the moderating roles of religious identity. Table 1 presents the results of this moderated mediation model in two parts (with unstandardized coefficients reported). The first equation in Table 1 predicts the mediator, perceived credibility gap, and tests whether religious identification

moderates the relationship between transnational and DSTV exposure and the perceived credibility gap. The second equation illustrates the model with anti-American sentiment as the dependent variable.

Table 1. Moderated Mediation Analysis.

Variable	1. Equation predicting perceived credibility gap	2. Equation predicting negative evaluations of the United States
	<i>b</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>b</i> (<i>SE</i>)
Constant	.37 (.38)	3.25 (.28)***
Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation TV	.11 (.11)	-.14 (.09)
Murr TV	.07 (.12)	-.26 (.09)**
Al-Jadeed	-.22 (.12)	.06 (.09)
Al-Manar	-.24 (.14)	.14 (.10)
OTV	-.49 (.16)**	.51 (.12)***
Future TV	.05 (.18)	-.26 (.13)*
Al-Arabiya	.50 (.23)*	-.24 (.17)
Al-Jazeera	.29 (.26)	.13 (.19)
Sunni Muslim	.22 (.17)	.13 (.12)
Shia Muslim	.79 (.56)	-.11 (.41)
Christian	-.15 (.55)	.77 (.40)
Religiosity	-.07 (.05)	.02 (.03)
Social media use	.01 (.04)	.00 (.03)
Newspaper use	-.01 (.04)	-.05 (.03)*
Domestic TV news exposure	-.32 (.06)***	.04 (.04)
Transnational TV news exposure	.23 (.04)***	-.09 (.03)**
Attention to domestic news	-.02 (.06)	-.06 (.05)
Attention to international news	.07 (.06)	.03 (.04)
Shia × domestic TV news	-.35 (.14)**	-.15 (.11)
Christian × domestic TV news	-.15 (.55)	-.23 (.10)*
Perceived credibility gap		-.09 (.03)***
Variance explained (total R^2)	28.3%	27.0%

Note. Unstandardized coefficients and standard error reported. Controlling for age, gender, educational attainment, rural resident, and household income in the model.

* $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$.

This analysis reveals that TSTV news exposure influences the perceived credibility gap between transnational and domestic TV news ($b = .23, p < .001$) in favor of TSTV news, as hypothesized in H1.

Therefore, H1 was supported. However, in partial answer to RQ2, the effect of TSTV was not moderated by religious identification. In contrast, DSTV news exposure increases the perceived credibility gap in favor of domestic TV news relative to transnational TV news ($b = -.34, p < .001$), as hypothesized in H2, among non-Shia. Consequently, H2 was supported. Furthermore, and also in answer to RQ2, Shiite religious identity, but not any other identification, significantly moderates the relationship between domestic TV news consumption and perceived credibility ($b = -.44, p < .01$), amplifying the perceived credibility of DSTV news as compared with TSTV news, as illustrated in Figure 2. In fact, the effect size of domestic TV news consumption on the perceived credibility gap is approximately double for Shiite viewers than for other viewers on average.

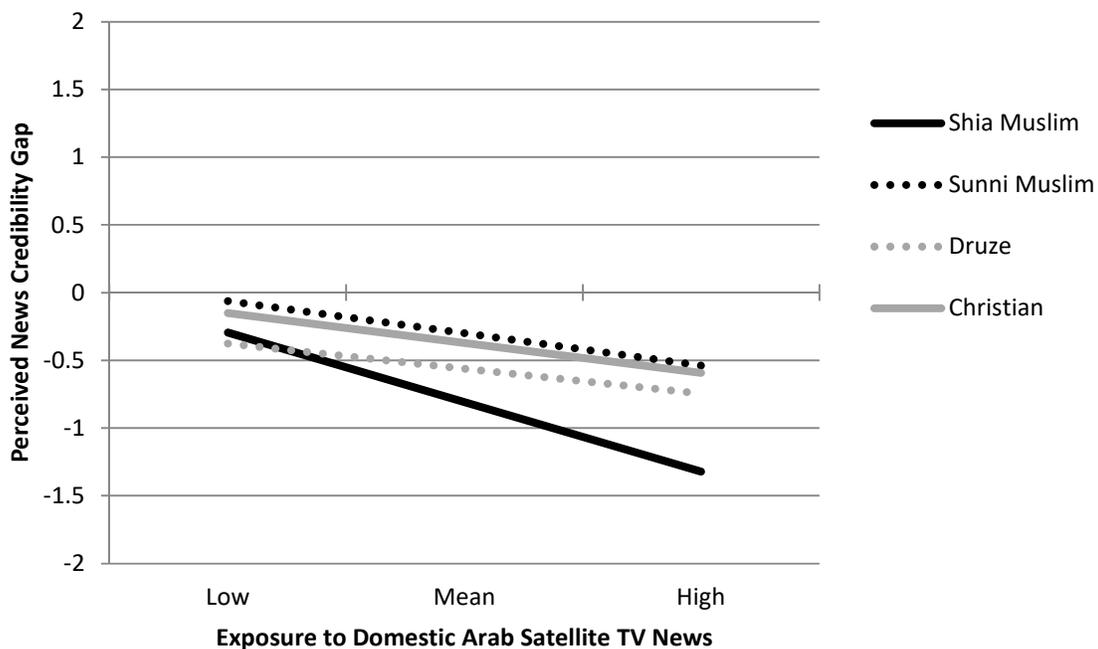


Figure 2. Domestic Arab satellite TV news use predicting perceived credibility gap by religious identification.

Equation 2 in Table 1 is the second half of the model with anti-American sentiment as the dependent variable. In this equation, TSTV news exposure has a negative direct effect (H3) on negative evaluations of the United States ($b = -.09, p < .01$) as well as a total indirect effect through the perceived credibility gap ($b = -.02, p < .01$). This implies that people who are exposed to TSTV tend to have less negative evaluations of the United States. Therefore, H3 was supported.

Results show the perceived credibility news gap partially mediates the relationships between transnational TV and domestic TV news exposure and anti-American sentiment, with audiences who

perceive TSTV as more credible expressing less negative sentiment toward the United States ($b = -.09, p < .001$). Thus, H4 was supported.

DSTV news consumption is completely mediated for non-Christian viewers by the perceived credibility gap, with a significant indirect effect ($b = .05, p < .001$) on anti-American sentiment. In other words, for non-Christian viewers, there is no direct relationship between exposure to domestic satellite TV news and anti-American sentiment—only indirect through the perceived credibility gap between transnational and domestic channels. However, in contrast to TSTV news, DSTV news consumption directly influences ($b = -.18, p < .05$) anti-American sentiment among Christian viewers (answering RQ1 and RQ3, as illustrated in Figure 3). Greater exposure to domestic satellite TV news reduces anti-American sentiment among Christian viewers without the perceived credibility gap mediating its effects on public opinion.

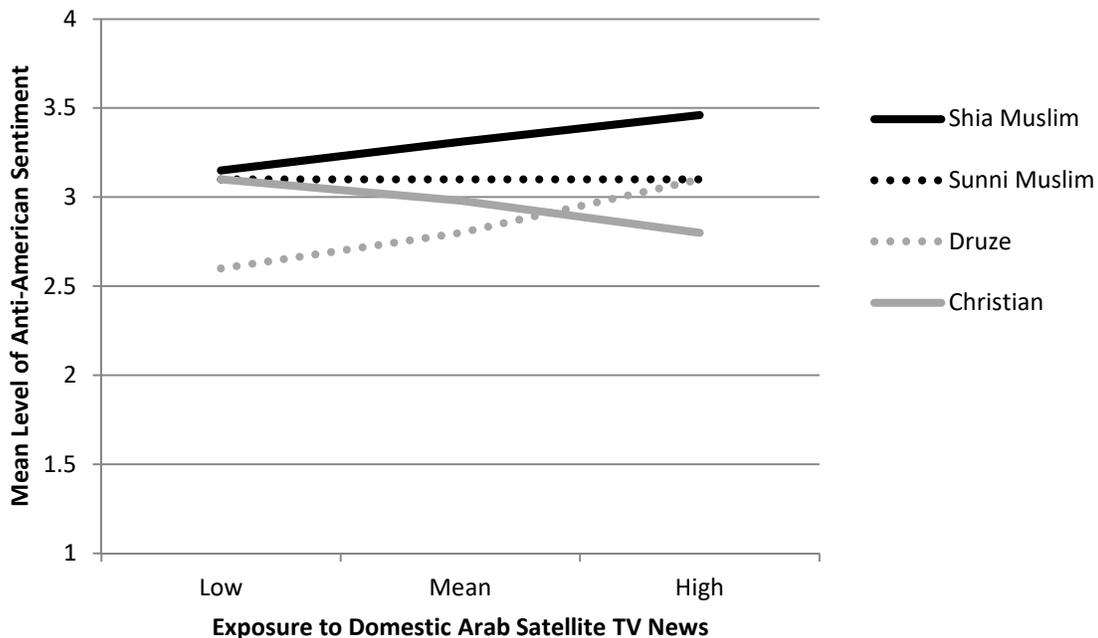


Figure 3. Domestic Arab satellite TV news use predicting anti-American sentiment by religious identification.

Discussion

As argued by Kohring and Matthes (2007), though scholars have examined media credibility for decades, it remains a complex and multidimensional construct. Media credibility typically is examined as the dependent variable in most studies, and rarely is it considered as an independent, or mediating, variable of interest when investigating opinion or attitude formation. This study expands our

understanding of media credibility by examining *how it mediates the influence of news exposure on opinion formation* and how individual differences such as identity schema may moderate its role.

In the model, exposure to both domestic and satellite television news is directly related to the credibility of those news networks. This finding is consistent with previous studies that argue that exposure to (Bucy, 2003; Johnson & Kaye, 1998) and reliance on (Johnson & Kaye, 2000, 2004) a news source are key predictors of its credibility. However, our study moved one step beyond by demonstrating that differences in the perceived credibility of competing news sources either partially or completely mediates their respective influence on public opinion. These findings highlight the need for additional communication scholarship examining how media credibility may mediate media effects and/or influence opinion formation.

In addition, our results show that some audience cognitions, such as religious identity, may amplify the perceived credibility of a news source and thus indirectly amplify its effect on public opinion. In this sense, among a highly polarized public such as in Lebanon, news exposure is likely to provide audience members with group-identification cues that increase selective exposure and reinforce media effects on opinion. However, though the analysis suggests that Shia audiences were likely to selectively expose themselves to domestic television channels aligned with the Shiite political movement in Lebanon (e.g., Almanar), the same pattern was not found for other religious identities. As such, our study supports previous literature indicating that the relationship between religious identity and media credibility can be significant but also inconsistent (Golan & Baker, 2012; Golan & Kiouisis, 2010; Shim et al., 2015).

The second contribution of this article is to apply our theoretically informed moderated mediation model of media credibility and public opinion formation to an international context of great import. Building on previous research that has examined media credibility (e.g., Golan & Kiouisis, 2010; Johnson & Fahmy, 2008) and media effects (e.g., Nisbet & Myers, 2011; Nisbet et al., 2004) among Arab audiences, our examination of media credibility and opinion formation is applied to the question of anti-American sentiment in Lebanon. The competitive media environment and religiously fractured public of Lebanon provide a natural laboratory to examine media credibility of competing news sources and their effects outside the United States. This is an important factor because most media credibility studies to date have been conducted in Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic countries whose citizens are not representative of the larger global population in terms of psychological and behavioral processes (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010a, 2010b). Thus, expanding our empirical scholarship to examine contexts outside the United States is an important step in generalizing communication theory.

Beyond the theoretical and conceptual contributions of this study, this article also contributes substantially to our knowledge about Arab media and anti-American sentiment. Previous research on Arab media and anti-American feelings has almost solely focused on transnational satellite channels rather than domestic TV channels (e.g., Nisbet & Myers, 2011; Nisbet et al., 2004). Often this scholarship is motivated by policy makers and others blaming transnational Arab TV channels such as Al-Jazeera or Al-Arabiya for promoting anti-Americanism among Arab audiences (Nisbet & Myers, 2011).

However, our study demonstrates that the relationship between anti-American sentiment and Arab media is much more complicated than previous scholarship suggests, at least in the case of Lebanon. Exposure to TSTV news was directly and indirectly associated with *less* anti-American sentiment. In contrast, among Muslims, exposure to DSTV news was associated with *more* anti-American sentiment, especially for Shia audiences. At the same time, the relationship between domestic TV news exposure and anti-American sentiment was different for Christians, with greater exposure to domestic TV news reducing anti-Americanism among Christian audiences. These findings add a great deal of nuance to our understanding of how Arab media, both transnational and domestic, may be influencing public opinion about the United States.

Our findings suggest some strategies for direct and mediated public diplomacy toward Arab audiences by foreign governments. Over the past decade, government-sponsored news channels have become central tools of mass persuasion in the modern-day international relations field (Nisbet & Myers, 2011; Nisbet et al., 2004; Stoycheff & Nisbet, 2016). As a reaction to the so-called Al-Jazeera effect (Seib, 2008), in addition to the United States, many leading nations around the world, including China, Russia, France, Iran, and Israel, have set up global satellite news networks aimed at shaping global public opinion and gaining support for their foreign policies (Samuel-Azran, 2013; Youmans & Powers, 2012). They have also attempted to influence Arab media content indirectly and increase positive framing of their foreign policies through mediated public diplomacy (Entman, 2008; Sheafer & Gabay, 2009).

The results of our study detail the potential influence of both exposure and news media credibility on public opinion. As such, the practical implications of this study point to exposure and media credibility as key predictors of shifts for influencing attitudinal outcomes. In this sense, our study suggests that broadcasters who hope to shape public opinion need to focus on building credibility among audiences relative to their competitors, because the perceived credibility gap between competing news sources will attenuate any effects from exposure to their content on opinion formation.

In this context, the lessons of this article apply to public diplomacy efforts well beyond the Middle East and Arab audiences. For instance, consider the extensive “media war” between Western broadcasting (e.g., BBC, Radio Free Europe, Voice of America, CNN) and Russia media (e.g., RT, Sputnik) to define foreign policy narratives for Russian-speaking audiences inside and outside Russia (e.g., Stoycheff & Nisbet, 2016). The relative perceived credibility of competing Western and Russian information sources most likely determines which competing news narratives are accepted, and which are rejected, by audiences. We can also conjecture, in this competition, that national identity, as a preexisting cognition, may moderate media exposure’s influence on perceived credibility and opinion formation, as religious identity did in Lebanon. Therefore, we argue that, although the empirical dimensions of our study were focused on Arab media and Arab audiences, our theoretical model has a more universal application for understanding mediated public diplomacy and its outcomes—especially in so-called media wars in which competing media outlets present vastly different narratives that seek to influence public opinion about foreign policy conflicts and crises.

Limitations

Before we conclude, we need to mention some important limitations to our study. First, though the survey data in the analysis was a robust, generalizable sample of the Lebanese population, the study relied on an analysis of cross-sectional survey data, and thus we cannot make strong causal statements regarding the direction of the explicated relationships presented in our model. Optimally, a longitudinal survey panel over time or an experimental design could be employed in the future to explore these explicated relationships and make stronger causal claims.

A second limitation to the study was the lack of specificity in survey measurement. Unfortunately, neither news exposure to specific transnational and domestic satellite TV channels nor media credibility of specific channels was measured in the survey. Instead, we had to rely on broader general categories of transnational and domestic TV news exposure and perceived credibility. More finite measurement of exposure and credibility of specific TV channels would allow a more nuanced analysis of how Arab media influences opinion formation as well as how identity schemas may moderate the linkages between exposure and credibility through selective exposure processes.

In conclusion, this study not only expands our understanding of media credibility and its relationship with opinion formation, but it does so within a very important contextual domain of Arab media and anti-Americanism. Moving forward, whether in the United States, the Arab region, or elsewhere, future communication scholarship is needed to further unpack how media credibility may attenuate the influence of media exposure on attitudes and opinions—and how preexisting cognitions such as identity may interact with these communication processes.

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