

## PRIMING OR FRAMING

Media Influence on Attitudes toward Foreign Countries

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**Abstract** / This study examines two routes for media effects on the standards by which people evaluate foreign countries. The first is indirect: a news story about an issue in a domestic context may heighten the cognitive accessibility of thoughts about the issue, thereby priming audience members to base their evaluations of foreign nations on those thoughts. The second is direct: a news story that presents a frame linking an issue to a foreign nation in a way that suggests a particular evaluative implication may shape how audience members judge that nation. An experiment revolving around media coverage of two issues and attitudes toward four nations found evidence for media influence along the second route but not the first.

**Keywords** / attitudes toward foreign countries / cognitive accessibility / media effects / news frames / priming

Most people are heavily dependent on the mass media for information about international affairs. As a result, the media can play an important role in shaping mass perceptions of other nations. Studies have found that exposure to news coverage increases knowledge about and can significantly influence public opinion toward foreign nations (Albritton and Manheim, 1983, 1985; Manheim and Albritton, 1984; Perry, 1985, 1987). Such perceptions, in turn, have important implications in a number of areas, ranging from the nature of personal interactions among people of differing nations to mass attitudes about foreign policy to the practice of public diplomacy (Bartels, 1995; Manheim, 1991, 1994; Peffley and Hurwitz, 1992). Thus, it is not surprising that actors in the international arena often undertake considerable efforts in order to mold the content of media coverage.

But how, exactly, do the media influence attitudes toward other nations, and under what specific circumstances will they do so? To date, there has been relatively little research into the mechanisms that govern media influence on these attitudes. The present study takes a step to fill this gap by testing whether news stories help determine which standards of judgment citizens use to form attitudes about foreign nations. Specifically, it tests for evidence of two different sorts of media effects. First, can the media prime standards for judging foreign nations by highlighting issues on the domestic agenda? Second, can the media alter the judgment process by providing news frames that directly link issues to specific foreign nations? The evidence for answering these questions comes from

an experiment conducted in the US that revolved around two prominent issues – terrorism and drugs – and four countries that American media coverage has linked to one issue or the other: Libya, Iran, Colombia and Mexico.

## Two Routes for Media Influence

Our theoretical account begins with the associative network model, the dominant framework within cognitive social psychology for understanding human information processing and judgment. According to this model, memory consists of an organized network of concepts (or nodes) that are linked through associative pathways (Anderson and Bower, 1973; Collins and Loftus, 1975). Individual nodes within memory can be more or less accessible (i.e. easy to recall); similarly, the associations between nodes can be strong or weak. Studies grounded in this model suggest two routes by which the media might influence how citizens form judgments about foreign nations.

First, research on media priming raises the possibility that news stories may influence such judgments indirectly. The notion of priming is built on the assumption that a stimulus can activate previously learned cognitive structures, thereby influencing the judgment process (Fiske and Taylor, 1984). Most research on priming points to accessibility as the key mediator of priming effects (Higgins and King, 1981; Wyer and Srull, 1986, 1989). According to this view, a concept's accessibility within memory is determined in part by the frequency (Higgins et al., 1985) and recency (Herr et al., 1983; Higgins et al., 1977; Srull and Wyer, 1980) with which it has been used in the past. When a node is activated in memory – or primed – it becomes more accessible and thus more likely to play a role in the formation of subsequent evaluations.

Through a series of experiments, Iyengar and Kinder (1987) demonstrated that news coverage of an issue can prime viewers to give that issue more weight in their overall evaluations of public officials and political candidates. The experiments showed, for example, that exposure to media coverage of national problems such as energy, defense and inflation boosted the weight that Americans assigned to US President Jimmy Carter's performance on these particular issues in forming their general evaluations of his performance. The authors explained these effects by arguing that ordinary people, when facing complex political issues or events, do not base their judgments on all of the relevant knowledge stored in their memories. Instead, they adopt a shortcut strategy, making evaluations based on the pieces of information most easily retrieved from memory (see also Krosnick and Brannon, 1993). Since people typically rely on the mass media for information about political events (Iyengar and Ottati, 1994), the accessibility of such information is determined partly by which stories the media choose to cover (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Krosnick and Kinder, 1990). Exposure to media coverage of an issue tends to make that issue more accessible in people's minds; this heightened accessibility, in turn, increases the likelihood that people will base subsequent evaluations on their thoughts about the issue.

One implication of the accessibility-driven view of media influence is that news coverage need not draw a direct association between an issue and a specific

target of judgment in order to influence how people form evaluations of that target. In the associative network model, the activation of concepts follows the principle of spreading activation (Collins and Loftus, 1975): once one node is activated, activation spreads along the associative pathways to other nodes in the mental network. Thus activation may expand from one political concept to other, indirectly associated concepts (Domke et al., 1998). This raises the possibility that news stories about issues on the domestic agenda may affect how citizens evaluate foreign nations. For example, a story about domestic terrorism may prime the issue of terrorism in citizens' memories, thereby heightening the impact of attitudes about terrorism on judgments of foreign nations previously associated with terrorism.

Yet there are plausible rationales for questioning the likelihood of such indirect influence. One revolves around the role of applicability or relevance in mediating the effects of primed thoughts on judgments. Price and Tewksbury (1997) argue that accessibility of a concept is determined in part by its applicability to the current stimulus. Along similar lines, Miller and Krosnick suggest that 'the impact of accessible attitudes may be great or negligible depending on their perceived relevance to the judgment at hand' (Miller and Krosnick, 1996: 82; see also Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). If these authors are correct, then news stories may have to pass an additional hurdle in order to produce priming effects on attitudes toward foreign countries: they may need to prime an issue that people see as relevant or applicable toward the country in question. When people do not or cannot draw associations between the issue and the nation, there will be no route along which activation can spread.

It may also be that media priming effects are not, in truth, mediated by accessibility. Miller and Krosnick (2000) conclude that such effects are instead the result of learning from the media about what news reporters think are the most important problems facing the country and thus merit focus in forming political evaluations. The implication of their argument is that spreading activation does not produce media priming effects. If that is so, audience members will not automatically apply their thoughts about an issue in one realm of judgment to other realms.

Finally, there is the potential for ambiguity in the link between the issue and the target of judgment. Oftentimes citizens can draw multiple connections between one concept and another. For example, Americans could draw a negative association between the 'war on drugs' and the nations of Mexico and Colombia (with the thought in mind that these nations are prominent sources of illegal drugs that reach the US) but also a positive association between the 'war on drugs' and the same nations (with the thought in mind that these nations are key US allies in that war). In such instances, news stories may activate contradictory associations and thus fail to guide citizens' judgments in any consistent direction even when they do make thoughts about an issue more accessible or induce learning about an issue's importance.

A second route by which the media could influence attitudes toward foreign countries is through framing. A frame, according to Gamson (1992: 3), is a story line or 'organizing idea'. Framing, in turn, consists of 'select[ing] some aspects of a perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient in a communicating text,

in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation' (Entman, 1993: 52). In short, frames may guide how people understand the world and thus form judgments.

Studies of framing and public opinion offer two psychological mechanisms for explaining framing effects. As with priming, some argue that framing works through an accessibility-driven process (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Iyengar, 1991). In this explanation, frames influence the accessibility of associations in memory, thereby increasing the likelihood that audience members will follow those associations when thinking about the issue. The other explanation posits that framing works through a more thoughtful process than the accessibility model suggests. According to Nelson et al. (1997), framing works by telling people which associations should receive greater weight and which should matter less. The authors' experiments showed that issue frames affect importance judgments and that these importance judgments mediate the effects of frames on opinion, whereas accessibility does not. Both accounts, however, conclude that exposure to frames can shape which standards of judgments people use to evaluate the subject of the frame.

Given that citizens are heavily dependent on the mass media for information about the world, one might expect the media to play an important role in framing foreign nations for the public. Indeed, previous research has shown that news frames come in many forms and influence public opinion in a number of domains. The media can frame political campaigns in terms of policy or strategy, with the latter frame fostering public cynicism about the political process (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997). Similarly, the media can frame social problems in episodic or thematic terms, thereby shaping audience members' attributions of responsibility for those problems (Iyengar, 1991). Particularly relevant in the case at hand, however, are news frames that explicitly associate a specific issue with a specific nation and suggest an evaluative implication for that association. For example, a news story could frame a particular country as a supporter of terrorism, thereby suggesting that if one supports a 'war on terrorism' then one should evaluate that nation negatively.

How might audience members respond to frames of this sort? In the associative network model, exposure to such a frame could activate and thus heighten the accessibility of a particular association (be it positive or negative) between a stance on an issue and a foreign nation (Iyengar, 1991; Price and Tewksbury, 1997). This, in turn, could produce a framing effect on judgments of the nation. Alternatively, such exposure could shape the importance attached to the association in the evaluation process. Exposure to the frame could also create an association where none previously existed, thereby producing the same effect.

Note, then, that this form of influence is not dependent on the existence of a previously learned and unambiguous association between an issue and a nation. Nor is it necessarily contingent upon the mediation of accessibility and spreading activation (Nelson et al., 1997). Thus, it may be that media framing effects on attitudes toward other countries can take place in cases when priming along an indirect route does not.

With all of this in mind, we have two goals. One is to test whether spreading activation can produce priming effects along indirect routes, as the simple accessibility-based model of priming suggests. The other is to test whether the media will influence how citizens form judgments about other nations when – and perhaps only when – they provide news frames that explain why one should evaluate a specific country in terms of a particular issue and how one should connect them.

## Cases and Hypotheses

To investigate the effects of news stories on attitudes toward foreign countries, this study tests whether newspaper stories about illegal drugs and terrorism can shape how Americans evaluate four nations that have played important roles in US foreign affairs: Libya, Iran, Mexico and Colombia. Although we focus here on a specific population, a specific medium, specific issues and specific target nations, our central concern is the process by which people, regardless of their own nationality, form evaluations of nations that are foreign to them, rather than the nature of public opinion toward any particular nation. Although the medium, the audience, the issues and the target nations may differ in other circumstances, the psychological process underlying judgments of foreign nations should follow general principles of human cognition.

Moreover, the cases at hand seemed to be particularly promising ones for examining media influence. Throughout the past two decades, the American public has been exposed to a steady stream of stories linking Libya and Iran to allegations of state terrorism. An examination of *New York Times* coverage, for example, reveals that Iran was mentioned in 831 stories in 1999 and that 94 of those stories (11 percent) contained references to terrorism. Libya was mentioned in 180 stories in 1999 and 49 of those stories (27 percent) mentioned terrorism. In January and February 2000, shortly before our experiment took place, 27 of 173 stories that mentioned Iran (16 percent) and four of 20 stories that mentioned Libya (20 percent) included a reference to terrorism.<sup>1</sup> It is also worth noting that a particularly common story line within the media coverage for each nation was one that framed it as a sponsor of terrorism.

Media coverage of Mexico and Colombia, meanwhile, has often portrayed these nations as major battlefields in the war on drugs. The *New York Times* mentioned Colombia in 530 stories in 1999 and 182 of those stories (34 percent) mentioned illegal drugs. For Mexico, 312 of 2516 stories in 1999 (12 percent) included a mention of drugs. As before, this tendency persisted in the first two months of 2000: 31 of 92 stories that mentioned Colombia (34 percent) and 56 of 391 stories about Mexico (14 percent) also included a reference to drugs. Many of the stories that included such references framed Mexico and Colombia as US allies in the war on drugs. Some stories, however, framed these nations as sources of illegal drugs without mentioning their efforts to fight the drug trade.

Given the nature of the media coverage, it may be that audience members among the American public have learned to associate terrorism with Iran and Libya and illegal drugs with Colombia and Mexico. If so, then the logic of spreading activation suggests that exposure to news about terrorism and illegal

drugs – even news within a domestic context – could influence how accessible thoughts about these issues are when these audience members evaluate foreign nations. Thus, exposure to media coverage of domestic terrorism and domestic illegal drug use may *prime* audience members to use their attitudes about terrorism and drugs to form judgments of the four target countries. Accordingly, we suggest the following priming hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1: Compared to people not exposed to any news about terrorism, people primed with news stories about domestic terrorism should be more likely to judge Iran and Libya based on associations with anti-terrorism efforts.*

*Hypothesis 2: Compared to people not exposed to any news about illegal drugs, people primed with news stories about domestic illegal drug use should be more likely to judge Colombia and Mexico based on associations with the war on drugs.*

In the case of Hypothesis 1, participants who read news stories about terrorism in the US should be more likely to evaluate Libya and Iran based on their attitudes toward terrorism than participants who did not read any stories about terrorism. Given the nature of prior media coverage, this would be reflected in the activation of associations between terrorism and the target nations (with citizens seeing these countries either as supporters of state terrorism or targets of anti-terrorism efforts). In the case of Hypothesis 2, stories about illegal drugs in the US might activate associations between the war on drugs and the target nations (with citizens seeing these countries either as drug traffickers or allies in the war on drugs).

A second set of hypotheses revolves around whether exposure to stories that directly link the issues to the target nations will influence the judgment process. More specifically, they center on the effects of media coverage *framing* Iran and Libya as sponsors of terrorism or Colombia and Mexico as allies in the war on drugs. Note that these frames not only suggest which issue audience members should consider in forming their judgments of the target nations; they also suggest particular evaluative implications. Consequently, we state the following framing hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 3: Compared to people not exposed to any news about terrorism, people exposed to news stories framing Iran and Libya as sponsors of terrorism should be more likely to judge these nations based on negative associations with anti-terrorist efforts.*

*Hypothesis 4: Compared to people not exposed to any news about illegal drugs, people exposed to news stories framing Colombia and Mexico as allies in the war on drugs should be more likely to judge these nations based on positive associations with the war on drugs.*

It should be noted that unlike Hypotheses 1 and 2, Hypotheses 3 and 4 specify the direction of the expected effects, allowing the use of one-tailed tests for these hypotheses.

## **Method and Measures**

The study is based on a pretest/post-test experiment with four test groups. The experimental treatment and post-test took place about two weeks after the

pretest was administered. A total of 199 students enrolled in undergraduate classes at a large, private university on the East Coast of the US completed the experiment in early 2000. Our use of such a sample raises questions, of course, about the external validity of our findings – a point we address further in the conclusion.

Both the pretest and the post-test contained questionnaire items that asked for the participants' general evaluation of each nation and their assessments of US foreign policy toward these nations. Participants were first asked to evaluate on a seven-point scale 'how favorably or unfavorably' they felt toward each of the four target nations (1 = favorably, 7 = unfavorably). Similarly, participants were asked whether they 'favor or oppose diplomatic relations' with Iran and then Libya 'in the near future' (1 = strongly favor, 7 = strongly oppose) and whether they 'favor or oppose US aid' to Mexico and then Colombia (1 = strongly favor, 7 = strongly oppose). The questions regarding the four nations were interspersed throughout various unrelated questions about politicians and political parties.

Measures of *attitudes toward Libya* and *attitudes toward Iran* were created by adding the scores from the questions about how favorably the participants saw each nation and how strongly they favored diplomatic ties with each nation. For Libya, the correlation between the items was .46 in the pretest and .53 in the post-test; for Iran, it was .39 in the pretest and .51 in the post-test (all significant at  $p < .001$ ). Measures of *attitudes toward Mexico* and *attitudes toward Colombia* were created by adding the scores from the questions about how favorably the participants saw each nation and how strongly they favored US aid to each country. The correlations between the items in each index were more modest here (for Mexico, .31 in the pretest and .24 in the post-test; for Colombia, .40 in the pretest and .29 in the post-test) but nonetheless significant at  $p < .001$ . All four resulting indices were transformed to range from 1 (the most favorable attitude possible) to 0 (the most unfavorable).

The pretest also contained a series of items designed to assess students' general attitudes toward terrorism and illegal drugs. Attitudes toward terrorism were assessed by asking students to judge on a seven-point scale (ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree') whether (1) 'The spread of terrorism is the greatest threat to our national security', (2) 'The US should do all it can to eliminate terrorism, even if that means war with terrorist nations' and (3) 'People who resort to terrorism sometimes have legitimate grievances'. A measure of *support for a war on terrorism* was created by summing the responses to these three questions (after reverse-coding the third) and then transforming this index so that it ranged from 0 to 1, where 1 indicated the strongest possible support for fighting terrorism. The reliability of the scale was .50 (Cronbach's alpha); its mean was .51.

Attitudes toward illegal drugs were assessed by asking students to evaluate on an identical seven-point scale whether (1) 'It is not really a big problem if people occasionally use marijuana', (2) 'The war on drugs should be a high priority in the United States' and (3) 'The federal government should do more to end illegal drug use'. A measure of *support for the war on drugs* was created by summing the scores for these three questions (after reverse-coding the first)

and transforming the resulting index so that 1 indicated the maximum possible support for the war on drugs and 0 indicated the minimum. The reliability of the scale was .81 (Cronbach's alpha); its mean was .51.

In addition, the pretest measured students' gender and foreign affairs knowledge. The inclusion of controls for these variables did not influence the results of the analyses and they are therefore not reported.

Participants were randomly assigned to a control condition or one of four experimental conditions. The treatments were based on actual newspaper articles, though these were rewritten to be between 400 and 500 words long. Care was taken in making the articles appear as real as possible, and they were presented with *New York Times* bylines. The participants were told that the project dealt with student opinions toward the news; to further disguise the purpose of the study, the post-test began with a set of unrelated questions about how interesting, credible and objective the articles were.

Some participants were randomly assigned to read two articles about terrorism; others read two articles about the war on drugs. More specifically, some participants read stories that explicitly framed Libya and Iran as sponsors of terrorism (framing group 1) or Mexico and Colombia as US allies in the war on drugs (framing group 2), whereas other participants read stories about domestic terrorism (priming group 1) or the domestic war on drugs (priming group 2). Participants in the control condition read stories about computer use and the Euro, topics presumably unrelated in citizens' minds to either the issues at hand or the target nations.

## Findings

To reiterate, this study tested for two types of media effects on how participants evaluated the target nations: effects produced by stories that focused on issues within a domestic context without mentioning a foreign nation (media priming) and effects produced by stories that linked the foreign nations to issues through news frames (media framing). In the first analysis, which examined the impact of the terrorism stories on post-test evaluations of Libya and Iran, the participants who read articles about drug use or the control articles were grouped into the control condition. Table 1 reports the means and standard deviations for the pretest and post-test measures of attitudes toward Iran and Libya by condition. As the table shows, these attitudes tended toward negativity across the board, although the post-test attitudes of participants who read the stories that directly linked Libya and Iran to terrorism were particularly negative.

According to Hypothesis 1, participants who read news stories about domestic terrorism should have been more likely to evaluate Libya and Iran based on their attitudes toward terrorism than participants who did not read any stories about terrorism. This should have led to interactions between exposure to the domestic terrorism treatment and support for a war on terrorism (presumably negative interactions, given the likely nature of any previously learned associations). Hypothesis 3 points to another expectation: compared to participants in the control condition, participants who read the stories framing Libya and Iran as sponsors of terrorism should have been more likely to draw



TABLE 1

Pretest and Post-test Attitudes toward Libya and Iran, by Condition

| Condition   | Libya        |              | Iran         |              |
|---|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
|   | Pre          | Post         | Pre          | Post         |
| Stories about domestic terrorism<br>N = 43            | .45<br>(.18) | .45<br>(.19) | .46<br>(.20) | .43<br>(.22) |
| Stories linking Libya and Iran to terrorism<br>N = 42 | .40<br>(.18) | .32<br>(.19) | .40<br>(.20) | .35<br>(.21) |
| Control<br>N = 114                                    | .43<br>(.19) | .41<br>(.20) | .41<br>(.20) | .41<br>(.21) |
| Total<br>N = 199                                      | .43<br>(.19) | .40<br>(.20) | .42<br>(.20) | .40<br>(.21) |

Note: Table entries are means within conditions. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

negative associations between anti-terrorist efforts and these nations. Thus, one would expect negative interactions between exposure to this treatment and support for a war on terrorism.

The following ordinary least square regression model provided a test of both hypotheses:

$$\text{Post-test Attitude toward Libya/Iran} = \text{Support for war on terrorism} + \text{Exposure to stories about domestic terrorism} + \text{Support for war on terrorism} \times \text{Exposure to stories about domestic terrorism} + \text{Exposure to stories linking Libya and Iran to terrorism} + \text{Support for war on terrorism} \times \text{Exposure to stories linking Libya and Iran to terrorism} + \text{Pretest Attitude toward Libya/Iran} + \text{Constant} + e$$

*Exposure to stories about domestic terrorism* was coded as 1 if the participant read this treatment and 0 otherwise. A similar procedure was used to create *exposure to stories linking Libya and Iran to terrorism*. The model also included terms for pretest attitudes toward the country and *support for a war on terrorism*. The crucial terms in the model, however, were the interaction terms, created by multiplying participants' *support for a war on terrorism* score and each of the condition variables. The first of these interactions captured the degree to which the impact of anti-terrorism depended on whether participants read the stories about domestic terrorism. The second captured the degree to which the impact of anti-terrorism depended on whether participants read the stories that explicitly linked Libya and Iran to terrorism.

As Table 2 shows, the results produced no support for Hypothesis 1. Exposure to the stories about domestic terrorism did not alter the impact of attitudes about terrorism on either attitudes toward Libya or attitudes toward Iran. In other words, priming along an indirect route did not seem to take place here:

TABLE 2

**The Impact of Terrorism Stories and Attitudes about Terrorism on Attitudes toward Libya and Iran**

| Independent variable   | Libya       | Iran        |
|--|-------------|-------------|
| Support for war on terrorism                                       | -.14 (.07)  | -.10 (.08)  |
| Stories about domestic terrorism                                   | -.01 (.07)  | -.003 (.07) |
| Support for war on terrorism × stories<br>about domestic terrorism | .07 (.12)   | -.04 (.14)  |
| Stories linking Libya and Iran to terrorism                        | -.11 (.08)  | .07 (.09)   |
| Support for war on terrorism × stories<br>about Libya and Iran     | .09 (.15)   | -.28* (.16) |
| Pretest attitude   | .69** (.06) | .62** (.06) |
| Constant   | .19 (.05)   | .21 (.06)   |
| <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>  | .52         | .46         |
| <i>N</i>   | 193         | 194         |

*Notes:* Table entries are unstandardized regression coefficients. Standard errors are in parentheses. Significance tests are based on two-tailed tests except where noted in the text.

\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$ .

participants who read these stories did not differ discernibly from control participants in the way that they used their attitudes about terrorism to form evaluations of the nations.

On the other hand, the results produced partial support for Hypothesis 3. Exposure to news stories that explicitly portrayed Libya and Iran as sponsors of terrorism significantly altered the impact of anti-terrorist attitudes on participants' evaluations of Iran ( $p < .05$ , one-tailed test). Moreover, the interaction had the anticipated negative sign. In this instance, participants did seem to adopt the frame of reference provided by the media in evaluating Iran. The same did not hold true in the case of Libya: here, the effect of support for a war on terrorism did not significantly differ as a result of exposure to the stories linking Libya and Iran to terrorism. In sum, for Libya and Iran there was little evidence of priming along the indirect route and mixed evidence of influence produced by news frames for the nations at hand.

The picture became clearer in the second analysis, which examined the effects of the stories about illegal drugs on post-test attitudes toward Mexico and Colombia. In this analysis, the participants who read articles about terrorism or the control articles were grouped into the control condition. Table 3 reports the means and standard deviations for the pretest and post-test measures of attitudes toward Mexico and Colombia by condition. Participants in all three conditions tended to rate Mexico rather favorably and Colombia slightly unfavorably both before and after the experimental procedure.

By the logic of Hypothesis 2, participants who read news stories about the domestic drug war should have been more likely to base their post-test evaluations of Mexico and Colombia on their attitudes about the war on drugs than

TABLE 3

**Pretest and Post-test Attitudes toward Mexico and Colombia, by Condition**

| Condition  | Mexico       |              | Colombia     |              |
|--|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
|  | Pre          | Post         | Pre          | Post         |
| Stories about domestic war on drugs<br>N = 46                    | .62<br>(.18) | .59<br>(.17) | .47<br>(.18) | .44<br>(.17) |
| Stories linking Mexico and Colombia to<br>war on drugs<br>N = 42 | .61<br>(.19) | .56<br>(.19) | .48<br>(.20) | .47<br>(.20) |
| Control<br>N = 111   | .61<br>(.14) | .59<br>(.15) | .46<br>(.17) | .43<br>(.17) |
| Total<br>N = 199   | .61<br>(.16) | .58<br>(.16) | .47<br>(.18) | .45<br>(.18) |

*Note:* Table entries are means within conditions. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

participants who did not read any stories about drugs. This could have produced interactions between exposure to the domestic treatment and support for a war on drugs. Hypothesis 4 leads to another expectation: compared to participants in the control condition, participants who read the stories framing Mexico and Colombia as allies in the war on drugs should have been more likely to draw positive associations between this war and the two nations. Here, then, one would specifically expect positive interactions between exposure and support for a war on drugs.

A second regression model tested Hypotheses 2 and 4. Again, dichotomous variables captured the effects of the treatments. The index for *support for the war on drugs* was also included in the model, as were its interactions with the two treatments. The pretest measure of the dependent variable completed the model:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Post-test Attitude toward Mexico/Colombia} = & \text{Support for war on drugs} \\ & + \text{Exposure to stories about domestic war on drugs} + \text{Support for war on} \\ & \text{drugs} \times \text{Exposure to stories about domestic war on drugs} + \text{Exposure to} \\ & \text{stories linking Mexico and Columbia to war on drugs} + \text{Support for war on} \\ & \text{drugs} \times \text{Exposure to stories linking Mexico and Columbia to war on drugs} \\ & + \text{Pretest Attitude toward Mexico/Colombia} + \text{Constant} + e \end{aligned}$$

The results of the model appear in Table 4.

The first thing that stands out is that the stories about the domestic war on drugs failed to produce discernible priming effects in either direction for either target country. In each case, the interaction between exposure to these stories and support for the war on drugs fell well short of statistical significance. Thus, priming effects that followed indirect paths failed to emerge in any of the four tests in this study.

TABLE 4

**The Impact of Drug Stories and Attitudes about Drugs on Attitudes toward Mexico and Colombia**

| Independent variable   | Mexico      | Colombia    |
|--|-------------|-------------|
| Support for war on drugs                                       | -.10 (.05)  | .001 (.06)  |
| Stories about domestic war on drugs                            | -.03 (.07)  | .04 (.06)   |
| Support for war on drugs × stories about domestic war on drugs | .02 (.12)   | -.08 (.11)  |
| Stories linking Mexico and Colombia to the war on drugs        | -.14* (.05) | -.09 (.06)  |
| Support for war on drugs × stories about Mexico and Colombia   | .21** (.15) | .24** (.10) |
| Pretest attitude   | .61** (.06) | .52** (.06) |
| Constant   | .28 (.04)   | .19 (.05)   |
| <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>  | .39         | .30         |
| <i>N</i>   | 194         | 195         |

Notes: Table entries are unstandardized regression coefficients. Standard errors are in parentheses. Significance tests are based on two-tailed tests except where noted in the text.

\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$ .

In contrast, the data support Hypothesis 4. Exposure to stories that framed Mexico as an American ally in the drug war encouraged participants to draw a positive association between the war on drugs and Mexico ( $p < .01$ , one-tailed test). Exposure to stories portraying Colombia in the same way had a similar effect on how participants formed evaluations of that nation ( $p < .01$ , one-tailed test). Put simply, participants followed the connections provided by these news frames.

## Conclusion

The findings presented here show that the media can influence the standards by which people evaluate foreign nations. At the same time, the data also suggest that there are limits to this influence. When members of our audience read stories that offered a direct link between an issue and a nation that carried a specific evaluative implication, they tended to adopt this frame of reference in their own thinking. In three out of four cases, frames that provided this sort of link shaped how people formed judgments. On the other hand, none of our four tests produced evidence that priming effects work along an indirect route. When participants read about issues on the domestic front, they did not carry their thoughts over to the international realm. Influence along one route succeeded, whereas influence along the other route failed.

Some caution is warranted in drawing these conclusions. The absence of priming effects along the indirect path might be due in part to the statistical power afforded by the sample size or the imperfections of the measures used to

capture attitudes toward the target nations and attitudes about the issues at hand. The participants in the experiment also read the treatments in the context of an experiment; hence they may have behaved differently than they would have in a more natural setting. Furthermore, participants in this experiment were undergraduate students and not necessarily typical of American citizens, let alone citizens of other nations. Still, the methods that failed to capture priming effects along the indirect route succeeded in capturing influence produced by more explicit story lines. Care was taken to craft realistic treatments and to disguise the purpose of this study. And while students may differ in how they think about foreign nations compared to the general public, this study focuses on the psychological processes by which people form these evaluations – which both students and the general public should share, regardless of nationality.

What accounts, then, for the failure of priming along the indirect path? One partial explanation could lie in the power of stories to activate conflicting associations between issues and nations. It may be that audience members drew both positive and negative associations between the war on drugs and the two target nations for this issue. Such ambiguity could have interfered with the emergence of a clear, consistent priming effect for the domestic drug use stories. On the other hand, it seems less likely that the domestic terrorism stories would prime both positive and negative associations between terrorism and the target nations for that issue. Thus, this explanation, by itself, is probably insufficient.

A second explanation fits both sets of cases. It may be that audience members simply did not associate terrorism with Iran and Libya or illegal drugs with Mexico and Colombia prior to reading the stories about domestic terrorism and drug use. Thus, they may not have seen their thoughts about these issues as applicable to the target nations. This explanation would fit well with recent accounts (Miller and Krosnick, 1996; Price and Tewksbury, 1997) that emphasize the importance of applicability or relevance in mediating priming effects. It would also suggest that priming along the indirect route is generally unlikely to emerge in the realm of judging foreign nations. The examples in this study were deliberately chosen to reflect linkages between issues and nations drawn within a real-world mass media discourse. If even these associations were too weak within the minds of citizens to allow for spreading activation, then it seems doubtful that priming effects produced by stories about domestic affairs would exert a pervasive influence on mass judgments of foreign nations.

An alternative (or additional) explanation is that the study produced no evidence of spreading activation because this is not the mechanism that produces priming effects in the first place. The failure to find priming along the indirect route is also consistent with the argument made by Miller and Krosnick (2000) that priming effects result from learning about what trusted media sources see as important, rather than from the automatic machinery of cognitive accessibility. Under this explanation, one would not necessarily expect the media to influence how people think about foreign countries unless they provide stories that explain why one should associate particular issues with particular nations.

When the media provide such stories, audience members do respond to

them. Reading stories that linked Iran to terrorism led participants to judge Iran in terms of their attitudes about fighting terrorism; similarly, reading stories that linked Mexico and Colombia to the war on drugs led participants to judge both countries in terms of their attitudes about the war on drugs. Moreover, the stories led participants to use their thoughts about the issues in a particular way. In the case of Iran, the stories led them to see support for a war on terrorism as incompatible with favorable attitudes toward the nation. Meanwhile, in the cases of Mexico and Colombia, the stories led participants to see support for a war on drugs as a reason for favoring the nations. Thus, a moral of this study is that one needs to provide a clear story – a frame that explains what issue is at stake and on which side of the issue the foreign nation stands – in order to shape how a mass audience judges another country.

That lesson has important implications. One is that actors in international affairs may not need to worry too much about the impact of domestic news on how mass publics view other nations. The evidence presented in this study suggests that media audiences do not necessarily connect domestic issues such as illegal drugs to foreign nations unless the media explicitly draw that connection. Thus, nations that fear the indirect consequences of ‘guilt by association’ should rest more easily.

However, it may be in the interests of some nations to attend to – and perhaps attempt to shape – the specific frames that the news media provide for them. As our study has shown, news frames are readily adopted by media audiences and can influence their views of foreign nations. While this can have undesirable consequences for foreign nations, it also suggests that certain story lines that tie popular (or unpopular) stands to a nation could be a useful tool in public diplomacy (see Manheim, 1991, 1994).

## Note

1. The content analysis of the *New York Times* was conducted using keyword searches of the Lexis/Nexis database and included both full-length stories and news briefs. The search terms used were ‘drugs’ with Colombia and Mexico, and ‘terrorism’ with Libya and Iran. A handful of stories involving the taking of performance-enhancing drugs by athletes were ignored for purposes of this analysis.

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