

News Media Use and Perceptions of Global Threat

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Abstract: This paper explores the antecedents of perception of global threat, which previous research has shown can have an impact on people's policy preferences. We focus on four possible predictors of global threat perceptions: media exposure, global knowledge, global experience and a person's general worldview. Using the Study of Attitudes and Global Engagement, we discover that media exposure best explains global threat perceptions but that its impact is conditional. People's background characteristics also explain their perceptions of threat, but much variation remains unexplained.

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News Media Use and Perceptions of Global Threat

For most Americans, knowledge about and perceptions of the rest of the world come from the mass media. Often the images disseminated by the media are ones that depict the world beyond U.S. borders as a threatening place. People who watch the news on television or read a newspaper are bombarded with stories about terrorism in the Middle East, environmental disasters in Africa, military coups in South America or nationalist parties gaining political power in Europe. It makes sense that people with high media consumption would view the world as a threatening place. This paper examines the relationship between media use and perceptions of global threat and finds that media's impact is conditional.

Literature

Understanding the source of people's threat perceptions is important because perceptions of threat can have an impact on the public's policy preferences. People who feel threatened by terrorism are more willing to give up their civil liberties in exchange for security (Davis and Silver 2004) and are more willing to spend government resources on homeland security (Kushner 2004). Moreover, people who perceived the threat of future terrorism in the U.S. to be high following the September 11 attacks were more supportive of President Bush and his interventionist military policies (Huddy, et al. 2005).

In spite of these findings, studies examining the sources of global threat perceptions are relatively few. In an analysis of the antecedents of perceived terrorist threat in the U.S., Huddy and her colleagues (2005) find that a variety of demographic characteristics (education, gender, income, race) along with experiences, such as knowing someone missing and living in the Northeast explain increased feelings of threat. But this study examines only one particular threat

(terrorism), examines it immediately following the September 11 attacks and does not explore the possible impacts of media use.

One study that does examine media effects is Slone (2000). She found that exposing people to 12 minutes of television footage of terrorist activity increased their levels of anxiety. Although this study points to the importance of the news media in raising fears about the larger world, how far these results generalize remains a question. First, the study was conducted in Israel, where terrorism is a much more common occurrence than in most countries. Second, as with any experimental study, external validity is an issue. How similar is seeing a 12-minutes of stories about terrorism to the undoubtedly much more idiosyncratic coverage of terrorism one encounters in everyday life?

First, the study was conducted in Israel, where the threat of terrorism is validated on a scale and frequency that is uncommon to most industrialized nation states. Moreover, the external validity of the study's results are questionable when the experiment, which exposed subjects to 12 minutes of stories about terrorism, is placed in a larger context in which subjects are continually exposed to the stimuli the experiment seeks to test.

Moreover, survey-based research by Rubin and his colleagues (2003) found that exposure to television coverage of terrorism and other terrorism-related stories failed to explain people's fear of terrorism or fear for their personal safety. Media use was unimportant as a predictor. Rather it was the viewers' background characteristics, specifically gender and locus of control (whether people feel they have control over their own lives), that best explained feelings of fear and safety.

Other studies have found an impact of media use on people's broader views about the world beyond their country's borders. For instance, increased attention to television news about

a country improves people's opinions about those countries (Semetko, et al. 1992). Moreover, the salience of foreign affairs in the public tracks coverage of foreign affairs in the mass media (Soroka 2003). More coverage of other countries leads people to think that issues involving other countries are more important.

But much of the literature relating media use to threat perception focuses on the threat of crime. Several cultivation studies have examined whether heavy television viewers perceive the real world as more similar to the world portrayed on television (i.e., violent and dangerous) than light television viewers. This line of work stems from Gerbner's original studies on the topic in the 1970s (e.g., Gerbner and Gross 1976; Gerbner, et al. 1979). Empirical support for cultivation theory has been mixed. In general, studies conducted in the U.S. have found larger impacts of media exposure than studies conducted elsewhere (Kolbeins 2004; Pingree and Hawkins 1981). Moreover, studies that have examined specific parts of television viewing such as crime dramas (Holbrook and Hill 2003; Dowler 2003) or local news broadcasts (Romer, Jamieson and Aday 2003; Gross and Aday 2003) have identified stronger media effects than studies focused on television viewing in general. Effects have also been identified among specific populations (Kang, Anderson and Pfau 1996). But Uslaner (1998) finds no impact of television viewing on interpersonal trust, which although a different concept than threat, is likely related.

Theory

How are people's views of the world as threatening (or benign) developed? We offer four theories to help explain perceptions of threat.

1. As posited above, the best predictor of global threat perceptions may be exposure to media reports about the rest of the world. In essence, this argument derives from cultivation theory, which suggests that heavy television viewing has an impact on people's attitudes, making

them view the world as similar to the world presented on television. If stories about other countries are predominantly negative or about violence—and research suggests they are (Hess 1996)—then heavy, long-term exposure to such programming may lead people to view the world as a threatening place.

2. As Zaller (1992) has cautioned, however, perhaps simple exposure to media—being in the presence of a media message—is the wrong place to look. Rather, it may be the knowledge one has gained about the rest of the world (perhaps received through media use) that best explains threat perceptions. A person who watches television and sees footage of the aftermath of a bombing may perceive threat, but one who sees that same footage but is armed with contextual knowledge (e.g., such bombings are relatively rare, these bombings are specifically targeted) may not have his sense of threat moved. In short, knowledge is power—it may provide people with a sense of context that reduces perceptions of threat.

3. Alternately, people’s experiences with the rest of the world may help to explain perceptions of global threat. In cultivation research that examines the impact of the media on attitudes, authors often suggest an alternative hypothesis: that personal experiences are more important than media use in explaining people’s threat perceptions. Thus, people may fear crime not because they watch a lot of violence on television, but because their neighborhood is truly a dangerous place (Gross and Aday 2003). Likewise, people who are engaged globally—people who like visiting other countries, talking with people from other cultures, and always keep their passport within easy reach—may perceive less global threat than those for whom foreign travel is a foreign concept.¹ Those who have truly experienced the world may have the ability to put potential threats into perspective—and more so than those who merely have read a lot about the

¹ We are reminded of the 19th Century English writer, Favell Lee Mortimer, who wrote savage and stereotype-filled commentaries about various peoples around the globe despite having rarely left her own home.

rest of the world. Thus, those with global experience are expected to feel less threat than those who have not ventured outside the borders of the U.S.

4. A fourth theory posits that it is not people's knowledge of the rest of the world (gained through the mass media or directly experienced) that matters, but rather it is their underlying worldview that matters. Some people, for whatever reason, trust others and see the world as relatively benign; others see view the world as a Hobbesian state of nature where life is "nasty, brutish and short." We expect that people endowed with this latter worldview perceive more threat.

Data and Measurement

Our analysis is based on the Study of Attitudes and Global Engagement (SAGE), a comparative study conducted in Japan and the United States in the fall of 2004. To test the hypotheses outlined above, we draw on the data collected in the United States. The U.S. survey was a mail survey of 970 U.S. residents, 18 years of age or older. The sample of listed households, stratified by region, was generated by Geneys Inc. The survey was mailed to 2,650 residents of the United States with 970 respondents completing and returning questionnaires, resulting in a completion rate of 41.2%. The study was conducted by the Social and Economic Sciences Research Center (SESRC) at Washington State University and overseen by the authors.

The survey was 12 pages in length and included questions on personal, state, and international risk and perceived threats, national security, patriotism, foreign policy attitudes, media use and global engagement. The items and their wording is provided in the appendix, and a copy of the full questionnaire is available online at www.wsu.edu/sage.

In exploring the source of global threat perceptions, we must define several key concepts:

Global threat. The dependent variable in our analysis is perception of global threat, which is tapped by an index created from respondents' answers to six questions. Respondents were asked to rate on a four-point scale how much of a threat the following are to world stability: global economic crisis, major wars, global warming, population growth, religious fanaticism, and weapons of mass destruction. Answers were summed to create a scale that ranges from 0 to 18.

Table 1 reports zero-order correlations among the variables comprising the threat index. All six individual threats are positively related to each other with correlations ranging from .14 (between population growth and weapons of mass destruction) to .50 (between global warming and population growth).

Table 1: Correlations Among Threats

	Econ. Crisis	Major War	Global Warming	Population Growth	Religious Fanaticism	WMDs
Econ. Crisis	1.00					
Major War	0.48	1.00				
Global Warming	0.37	0.28	1.00			
Pop. Growth	0.28	0.20	0.50	1.00		
Rel. Fanaticism	0.24	0.14	0.19	0.34	1.00	
WMDs	0.27	0.43	0.18	0.14	0.26	1.00

To test the validity of the global threat scale, we performed a principal components factor analysis, which revealed that all 6 threats loaded on the same factor, though some admittedly did so better than others. This principal factor had an eigenvalue of 2.44. The second factor identified had a much lower eigenvalue of 1.09, suggesting it may not be a “real” factor at all.

Table 2 shows the factor loadings of each threat on the first two components.

Table 2: Individual Threat Factor Loadings

	Factor 1	Factor 2
Econ. Crisis	0.71	-0.17
Major War	0.68	-0.50
Global Warming	0.67	0.39
Population Growth	0.64	0.58
Religious Fanaticism	0.52	0.25
WMDs	0.58	-0.52

Media exposure. We measure media use through six questions that ask respondents how many days in the past week they engaged in the following: watching national television news, watching local television news, watching cable news, reading news on the internet, reading a newspaper and listening to news on the radio. We summed the number of days that respondents used each medium, creating a total media exposure index that ranges from 0 to 42. Mean exposure is 19.9 with a standard deviation of 8.2.

Global knowledge. Three questions were combined to create an index of global knowledge. Respondents were asked to identify the location of the United Nations headquarters, to name the Prime Minister of Great Britain, and to identify the Secretary General of the United Nations. Scores on the index range from 0 to 3, with respondents receiving 1 point for each correct answer and 0 points for each incorrect or “don’t know” answer. About five percent of respondents gave no correct answers, 17 percent answered one correctly, 27 percent answered two correctly, and just over half of the respondents gave correct answers to all three.

Global experience. We created an index tapping global experience based on answers to three questions, which included an indicator of whether the respondent holds a current passport, an indicator of whether the respondent has been outside the U.S. for more than 5 weeks in the past 5 years, and an indicator of whether the respondent has a friend or acquaintance who speaks a language other than English. We summed each 0-1 indicator to create an index ranging from 0 to 3. The mean level of global experience was 1.3 with a standard deviation of 1.

Hobbesian worldview. To tap respondents' worldviews, we asked them which of the following statements most closely represented their view: "Wars are inevitable" or "Wars can be avoided through more cooperation and understanding." Fifty-seven percent of respondents chose the more optimistic answer, while 43 percent were pessimists.

Finally, we include several other control variables in our model predicting perceptions of global threat. These include background factors such as the respondent's age, gender (Davis and Silver (2004) speculate that males are less likely to admit feelings of threat than women); and the respondent's level of education, which Huddy, et al. (2005) demonstrate is inversely related to perceived terrorist threats. We also included an indicator whether the respondent has served in the military overseas, believing such people are more likely than private citizens to have been directly exposed to global threats. And because threat perception may depend on who is in the White House (e.g., I feel safer (less safe) knowing George Bush and his team are in charge of foreign policy), we also controlled for the respondent's political ideology and partisanship.

Results

We use ordinary least squares regression to predict the index of global threat perception. The estimates obtained from this initial analysis (Table 3) do not strongly endorse any of our theories, but there is some evidence in support of the media exposure theory. The coefficient on the total media exposure variable flirts with significance ($p=.104$), and the sign is also in the expected direction: Greater exposure is associated with greater threat perception.

Table 3: OLS Predictors of Global Threat Perceptions

	Coef.	S.E.	p-value
Total Exposure	0.025	0.016	0.104
Global Knowledge	-0.189	0.155	0.224
Global Experience	0.144	0.140	0.303
Worldview	-0.281	0.263	0.287
Conservatism	-0.223	0.070	0.002
Age	0.006	0.009	0.482
Education	0.046	0.110	0.673
Male	-0.676	0.267	0.011
Democrat	0.132	0.330	0.689
Republican	-0.891	0.303	0.003
Military Service	-0.288	0.377	0.445
Constant	13.501	0.844	0.000
N=726, R-squared=.09			

The knowledge hypothesis is unsupported by our model estimates. The index of global knowledge is not significantly related to global threat. Likewise, having more global experience fails to predict global threat. Our fourth hypothesis, that those with a Hobbesian worldview see more threat, is also unsupported by the model estimates.

The only statistically significant predictors of global threat perceptions are gender, ideology and one's partisanship—it is the conservative, Republican man who sees fewer threats than a liberal, Democratic woman. We thus find some, albeit weak, support for the media hypothesis. Our overall findings suggest several possibilities. First, perhaps global threat perception is idiosyncratic—it just can't be predicted well. Second, perhaps different types of people respond differently to media exposure. Finally, we suggest that the antecedents of global threat may be different depending on the threat. That is, what predicts global warming as a threat may be different from what predicts weapons of mass destruction as a threat.

To explore these possibilities, we conducted some additional analyses. We hypothesized that media use and global knowledge might interact with each other. More specifically, people who have high media use but lack much knowledge of the world might see the world as more

threatening than those with high media use but more knowledge of the world. Knowledge, in a sense, may be thought to reduce people’s fears of the broader world.

Table 4 shows the results of a model predicting perceived threat that is estimated for two separate groups: those with low global knowledge (scores from 0-2) and those with high global knowledge (a score of 3).

Table 4: OLS Predictors of Global Threat by Knowledge

	Low Global Knowledge			High Global Knowledge		
	Coef.	S.E.	p-value	Coef.	S.E.	p-value
Total Exposure	0.007	0.024	0.776	0.038	0.019	0.052
Global Experience	0.183	0.216	0.396	0.095	0.179	0.596
Worldview	-0.465	0.402	0.248	-0.229	0.334	0.494
Conservatism	-0.137	0.118	0.246	-0.284	0.084	0.001
Age	0.000	0.013	0.973	0.008	0.011	0.490
Education	-0.061	0.165	0.711	0.096	0.138	0.485
Male	-0.785	0.392	0.046	-0.763	0.345	0.028
Democrat	0.834	0.518	0.108	-0.639	0.404	0.114
Republican	-0.139	0.483	0.773	-1.609	0.370	0.000
Military Service	-0.109	0.712	0.879	-0.202	0.417	0.629
Constant	13.800	1.292	0.000	13.279	1.158	0.000
N	341			416		
R-squared	.05			.16		

The data in table above indicate that the effects of media exposure do depend on one’s level of global knowledge, but not in the way we expected. Among respondents with low levels of global knowledge, total media exposure has no impact on perceptions of threat. But among those knowledgeable about the world, increased media exposure *increases* perceptions of global threat. One possible explanation for these findings is that some minimum level of knowledge is required to make sense of the news. The person with low global knowledge may be tuning out media messages about other countries, and thus they have no impact. But the person high in knowledge is able to understand the story, and thus can realize the true extent of the threat.

Examining respondents by their levels of global experience results in an opposite finding. Here findings are consistent with our original expectations: increased media exposure increases perceptions of global threat among those with low levels of global experience (a score of 0 or 1). But media exposure has no impact on threat perceptions among those with a lot of global experience (a score of 2 or 3). It seems global experience works contrary to global knowledge in mediating the effects of media exposure.

Table 5: OLS Predictors of Global Threat by Global Experience

	Low Global Knowledge			High Global Knowledge		
	Coef.	S.E.	p-value	Coef.	S.E.	p-value
Total Exposure	0.039	0.021	0.065	0.000	0.023	0.991
Global Knowledge	-0.192	0.199	0.335	-0.137	0.249	0.583
Worldview	-0.323	0.344	0.349	-0.234	0.416	0.575
Conservatism	-0.122	0.093	0.190	-0.381	0.108	0.000
Age	0.004	0.011	0.705	0.011	0.014	0.446
Education	0.009	0.141	0.947	0.101	0.178	0.573
Male	-0.778	0.340	0.023	-0.625	0.442	0.158
Democrat	0.251	0.451	0.578	-0.132	0.497	0.790
Republican	-1.218	0.401	0.003	-0.400	0.470	0.396
Military Service	-0.858	0.660	0.195	0.002	0.467	0.996
Constant	13.265	1.095	0.000	14.355	1.358	0.000
N	412			316		
R-squared	.09			.11		

Finally, we examine whether the structure of threat is different for different threats. We speculated that traditional and non-traditional global threats might have different antecedents. To see if two different types of threats might emerge, we rotated the results of the earlier factor analysis, which we report in Table 6.

Table 6: Individual Threat Factor Loadings

	Factor 1	Factor 2
Econ. Crisis	0.62	0.38
Major War	0.84	0.12
Global Warming	0.21	0.75
Population Growth	0.05	0.86
Religious Fanaticism	0.20	0.55
WMDs	0.77	0.03

Three threats that one might describe as traditional—global economic crisis, a major war, and weapons of mass destruction—loaded on the first dimension, and three threats that are more non-traditional—global warming, population growth and religious fanaticism—loaded on the second dimension. We therefore created two additive indices, one comprising traditional threats and the other comprising non-traditional threats, and estimated a separate model predicting each (Table 7).

Our global knowledge hypothesis was the only one supported by the results of the model predicting people’s perceptions of traditional threats. As knowledge of the world increased, threat perception decreased. Media use, global experience and worldview had no impact on perceptions of traditional threats. Interestingly, there was no difference between liberals and conservatives in their feelings of threat.

Table 7: OLS Predictors of Traditional and Non-Traditional Threats

	Traditional Threats			Non-Traditional Threats		
	Coef.	S.E.	p-value	Coef.	S.E.	p-value
Total Exposure	0.006	0.009	0.506	0.019	0.010	0.047
Global Knowledge	-0.192	0.087	0.028	0.011	0.097	0.913
Global Experience	0.019	0.078	0.806	0.107	0.087	0.220
Worldview	0.065	0.148	0.662	-0.363	0.164	0.027
Conservatism	-0.041	0.040	0.300	-0.184	0.043	0.000
Age	-0.003	0.005	0.536	0.009	0.005	0.102
Education	0.040	0.062	0.516	0.028	0.068	0.681
Male	-0.542	0.150	0.000	-0.112	0.166	0.501
Democrat	0.074	0.185	0.691	0.105	0.205	0.610
Republican	-0.248	0.171	0.147	-0.656	0.189	0.001
Military Service	-0.272	0.212	0.199	0.012	0.235	0.959
Constant	7.674	0.476	0.000	5.738	0.524	0.000
N	747			730		
R-squared	.06			.12		

The story, however, is a bit different for perceptions of non-traditional threats. Here, consistent with our theorizing, increased media use was associated with increased threat perception. Global knowledge and experience had no impact on the extent to which these threats were perceived, but a person’s worldview did. People who adopted a Hobbesian worldview (i.e., that wars are inevitable) were less likely to believe these non-traditional dangers were threatening. This finding runs contrary to our hypothesis for reasons that we are as of yet unable to explain.

In sum, what explains perceptions of global threat differs depending on the type of threat. For more traditional security and economic threats, knowledge of the world reduced threat perceptions. Men were also less likely than women to perceive such threats. By contrast, both media use and worldview had an impact on perceptions of non-traditional environmental and human security threats. There was also an ideological separation on this type of threat that was not evident in the model of traditional threats. Liberals, Independents and Democrats perceived more non-traditional threats than did conservatives and Republicans.

Conclusion

The theory that high media exposure leads one to view the world as threatening receives some support in our analyses here. But these media effects are not universal. They appear to be most prominent among those high in global knowledge, low in global experience and for less traditional threats like global warming and population growth. Media, then, is part of the story in our attempt to explain where threat perceptions come from, but it is not the complete story. A person's background characteristics and political views were also important in explaining threat perceptions. That said, much variation across individuals in levels of global threat perception remains unexplained.

Of course, most studies have limitations, and this one is no different. For one, we have assumed that the content of coverage across media is alike. That is, all news organizations, regardless of size or format, portray the world as threatening. Certainly, there is existing evidence to suggest that coverage of foreign affairs, in general, focuses on violence and other negative events. Yet it is possible that newspapers, for instance, may provide more positive coverage than, say, cable news networks. This deserves further investigation.

Relatedly, we have assumed that the *effects* of coverage—even if it is the same coverage—are the same, regardless of format. Yet one might explore whether exposure to different types of media might have different effects on perceptions of threat. It is possible, even, that some forms of media serve to heighten perceptions of threat while other forms of media are reassuring. For instance, dramatic television images may create a greater sense of threat, but less sensational, more detailed newspaper accounts may put a threat into perspective and may reduce threat perceptions.

Regardless of these limitations, our study points up the importance of the media in shaping the public agenda, and ultimately, we suspect, the political agenda as well.

Appendix: SAGE Questionnaire

Q4. Please indicate *how much of a threat* you believe the following are to world stability. A large threat. Somewhat of a threat. A small threat. Not a threat.

- Global economic crisis
- Major wars
- Global warming
- Population growth
- Religious fanaticism
- Weapons of mass destruction

Q13. Given human nature, which one of the following statements most closely represents your view of war?

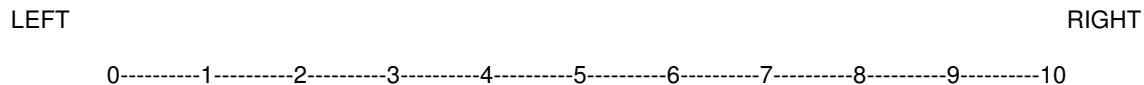
- "Wars are inevitable."
- "Wars can be avoided through more cooperation and understanding."

Q14. Would you say that any of the political parties in the U.S. represent your views reasonably well?

- Yes
- No

Q14A. Which party best represents your views? _____

Q15. In politics people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means the left and ten means the right? (*Please circle.*)



Q16. How many days in the past week did you watch the national network news (ABC, CBS, NBC) on TV?

_____ Days last week

Q17. How many days in the past week did you watch local TV news shows such as "Eyewitness News" or "Action News"?

_____ Days last week

Q18. How many days in the past week did you watch news on cable TV (CNN, FOX News, MSNBC)?

_____ Days last week

Q19. How many days in the past week did you read a daily newspaper?

_____ Days last week

Q20. How many days in the past week did you read news on the internet?

_____ Days last week

Q21. How many days in the past week did you listen to news on the radio?

_____ Days last week

Q25. How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?

- Just about always
- Most of the time
- Some of the time
- Hardly ever

The next three questions ask you about political leaders and international issues. Many people are unsure of the correct answers. Please just answer these questions off the top of your head.

Q36. The headquarters of the United Nations is in which country?

Belgium
United States
France
Austria
Don't Know

Q37. The Prime Minister of Great Britain is....?

Paul Martin
Gordon Brown
Tony Blair
Peter Soulsby
Don't Know

Q38. The Secretary General of the United Nations is....?

Jacques Chirac
Kofi Annan
Butros Butros Ghali
Marek Belka
Don't Know

Q40. Have you ever lived, worked, studied, or served in the U.S. military in another country (please check all that apply)?

Lived in another country
Worked in another country
Studied in another country
U.S. military service in another country
None of the above

Q41. Do you have a current passport?

Yes
No

Q42. How long have you been outside the United States in the last five years (please provide your best estimate)?

Not outside country in last 5 years
1-10 days
More than 10 days but less than 5 weeks
More than 5 weeks, but less than 6 months
More than 6 months, but less than 2 years
More than 2 years

Q47. What is your age?

_____Years

Q48. What is your gender?

Female
Male

Q49. What was the last year of school you completed?

Eighth grade or less
Some high school
High school graduate
Some college
College graduate
Post graduate

Q50. Are you currently...?

Married
Widowed
Divorced
Separated
Never married
Partnered, not married

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