

People's reactions to government censorship depend on their views of President Bush

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How people respond to the U.S. government's attempts to censor some war-related images comes down to whether or not they are supporters of President Bush, a new study suggests.

Researchers at Ohio State University surveyed 600 people and asked them if they were interested in viewing photos or videos of the caskets containing dead U.S. soldiers arriving in the United States from Iraq and Afghanistan .

The catch was that, prior to being asked whether they wanted to view the images, half of the survey respondents were told about a U.S. government policy which prevents the widespread dissemination of such images through the media.

One prominent psychological theory suggests that when people are told they can't see something, they want to see it even more.

“This is not at all what we found,” said Andrew Hayes, an associate professor of communication at Ohio State University and one of the authors of the study.

In general, Bush supporters expressed less interest in viewing these images than respondents who didn't support Bush in the 2004 election. However, how Bush supporters responded was affected by whether they were first told about the policy.

Among Bush supporters first told about the policy, only 28 percent expressed some interest in viewing the images, after adjusting for the influence of such factors

as the respondent's age, sex, and education. However, among Bush supporters who were not first told about the policy, 49 percent expressed some interest. So being told about the policy reduced rather than increased Bush supporters' interest in seeing the images, Hayes said.

In contrast, 70 percent of people who didn't support Bush in the 2004 election expressed interest in seeing the images, regardless of whether or not they were told about the policy.

“In essence, the influence of information about the policy depended on their views of President Bush,” Hayes said. “When the president creates a policy, it can act as a form of persuasive message. As with any message, how a person reacts will depend on how they view the credibility of the source.”

Hayes conducted the study with Jason Reineke, a graduate student in communication at Ohio State. Their results appear in the current issue of the journal *Mass Communication & Society*.

The study involved telephone interviews with 600 Ohio residents in November 2004, after the presidential election of that year.

The researchers said that, in the strictest sense of the word, the Bush administration policy is not censorship. All the policy does is limit the access of journalists to locations where caskets can be photographed when the remains of soldiers are brought to the United States. Publication of photos is not prohibited or punished. However, restricting access to places where the photos can be taken has the same effect as censorship, in that it limits the dissemination of information to the

public, Hayes said.

The fact that Bush supporters who were told about the policy were less likely to report wanting to see the images suggests that they believe Bush to be credible and are persuaded by his message, Reineke said.

“Bush supporters who learn about the policy will likely agree with the policy and then be less likely to show interest in seeing the images,” Reineke said. “A Bush supporter may be particularly reluctant to let other people see the images because of the way it might influence perceptions of the president and his policies.”

But why didn't being told about the policy affect those who didn't support Bush? One likely explanation is that they don't find Bush credible, so they won't be influenced one way or the other by his pronouncements or policies, Hayes said.

The researchers said that, while they only told half of the participants about the government policy, it is likely that at least some of them already knew about it. But this shouldn't influence the results dramatically, as people were randomly assigned to be told or not told about the policy before asking about their interest in the images. Being told about a policy you already know about would just make the policy more relevant when answering later questions, the researchers said.

Source: Ohio State University

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