

Study finds news may influence racial bias

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Temple Northup. Credit: University of Houston

A recent University of Houston (UH) study suggests that long-term exposure to news may negatively influence racial bias towards social groups.

Temple Northup, assistant professor at UH's Jack J. Valenti School of Communication, studied the influence of news coverage on an individuals' unconscious attitudes towards social groups. His study "Effects of Long-Term Exposure to News Stereotypes on Implicit and Explicit Attitudes" recently was published in the *International Journal of Communication*.

According to Northup, this research is particularly unique because it examines the effects of news coverage in two cultural contexts - in the United States and in Austria.

Three empirical studies were tested in the U.S. and Austria. Florian Arendt at the University of Munich in Germany and co-author of the study conducted the research in Austria, while Northup focused on subjects in the U.S.

"The two countries were selected due to access of available data for a comparable news stereotype that exists in both countries," said Northup. "In the U.S., a large body of research indicates crime is overrepresented on local [television news](#) relative to the actual amount of crime that actually occurs in a community. Previous content analyses conducted by researchers at the University of Michigan and the University of California, Santa Barbara have shown that that African-Americans are overrepresented as criminals on local television news when compared to their actual crime rates. In Austria, research has suggested foreigners are overrepresented as criminals in tabloid-style daily newspapers."

A total of 316 individuals participated in the first study in the U.S. Participants completed the Implicit Association Test (IAT), a tool used in psychology to measure hidden bias people may have but are unwilling or unable to report. After completing the IAT, participants answered a question about their explicit (conscious) attitudes towards African-Americans, as well as how many hours of local television news they watch per day.

"Based on the findings from the study in the U.S., long-term exposure to local television news, wherein African-Americans are depicted frequently and stereotypically as criminals, predicted increased negative [implicit attitudes](#) toward African-Americans," said Northup. "Viewers who watched more local television news demonstrated more unconscious

negative attitudes toward African-Americans."

The study conducted in Austria was intended to be a replication of the U.S. study. A total of 489 individuals participated in the study. The same data procedure was used in the Austrian study as was used in the U.S. study. Participants reported how many days per week they read the specific newspaper under investigation. The study found that exposure to the tabloid-style daily newspaper did not increase the negativity of implicit attitudes.

"Unlike with television news, though, people have much more control over a printed newspaper because they are able to selectively expose themselves only to stories of interest," Northup said. "In other words, when watching television news, one has little control over what stories are viewed."

A third study also was conducted in Austria as a post hoc explanation of the second study's findings that were inconsistent with the U.S. research. The third study investigated how much newspaper content participants are exposed to and the kinds of articles (i.e. crime articles) they read. A total of 470 individuals participated in this study. In addition to completing the IAT, participants reported how many days a week they read the specific newspaper under investigation and how often they read crime articles.

The findings from the third study found reading content specifically about crime had a significant effect on implicit attitudes toward foreigners when individuals indicated that they often read crime articles.

"The results of the studies suggest that in both these countries, regular exposure to stereotypical news coverage creates negative implicit attitudes," said Northup. "The findings from the study in the U.S. suggest individuals who consumed more local television news than others

in the study may have increased negative racial bias towards African-Americans. In Austria, individuals who read more crime-related articles in a tabloid-style weekly newspaper tended to have an increased negative racial bias toward 'foreigners.'"

Northup hopes the results of this study will contribute to a better understanding and awareness of how watching television [news coverage](#) may lead to a negative [racial bias](#), which in turn can lead to other negative outcomes, such as discriminatory behaviors.

"Given that long-term exposure to media stereotypes seems to influence evaluations of African-Americans and foreigners, more research investigating this implicit effect is needed," said Northup.

"Studying this phenomenon and its underlying mechanism is necessary. Only then will researchers be able to test different strategies to deal with these negative media effects, thereby enabling society to adequately resist the possible detrimental consequences of news media consumption.

"By further studying this phenomenon, mass media research can contribute to the maintenance and improvement of a humane and open society."

Provided by University of Houston

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