

# Neutral news perceived as biased depending on who shares it

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Credit: University of Utah

Researchers at the University of Utah and Konkuk University found that news stories are perceived as biased based on who shares that story on social media, regardless if the actual story is biased. Published in *Mass Communication & Society*, "When social media become hostile media: An experimental examination of news sharing, partisanship and follower count," the study also examines how Republicans and Democrats perceive bias of a news story differently depending on how many followers a Twitter account has.

"Readers are inclined to believe that [news](#) content is unbiased, or less biased, when they share the same partisan affiliation as the source sharing the story than they are when the source does not share their partisan," said Tae Kyoung Lee, lead author and assistant professor of communication at the U.

To expand upon previous studies about the hostile media effect – which occurs when a neutral news story is perceived as biased against an individual's own viewpoint – researchers examined its impact in social media. Previous studies on hostile media

effect have focused on traditional media and the sources who produce [news content](#).

"About 62 percent of U.S. adults get news on social media, such as Reddit, Facebook and Twitter. Much of this content does not come directly from a traditional news source, but rather from an individual user who is sharing it with their social media friends and followers," said Lee.

Researchers pursued two questions in the study. First, does an ostensibly neutral story shared via a partisan social media user produce hostile media effect? Second, do overt signals about the potential size of the audience affect the hostile media effect?

To answer these questions, an online experiment was conducted where Republicans and Democrats viewed a Twitter account, in which the user was presented as a Republican or Democrat with either 21 or 503,000 followers. Then, the research subjects read a news article shared by the Twitter user, which was published by a neutral news source, The Associated Press. Consistent with the hostile media effect, both Republicans and Democrats believed that a news article shared by a Twitter user from an opposing political party was more biased than one shared by a Twitter user from the same political party. However, this effect was more prominent among Republicans than Democrats. As the Twitter account had more followers, this effect was also more prominent among Republicans.

"The different pattern between Republicans and Democrats might be due to their different interpretation of the large number of Twitter followers. That is, Democrats seem to believe that the Twitter account with many followers is a more credible source and the article shared by it is less biased. Republicans seem to believe that more followers mean more bias," said Lee.

Researchers concluded that the hostile media

effect, which has been widely studied in traditional media, can be shown in a [social media](#), and those who share the [news article](#) can influence the hostile [media](#) effect among partisans.

**More information:** Tae Kyoung Lee et al. When Social Media Become Hostile Media: An Experimental Examination of News Sharing, Partisanship, and Follower Count, *Mass Communication and Society* (2018). DOI: [10.1080/15205436.2018.1429635](https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2018.1429635)

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