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CONSTRUCTING PUBLIC OPINION: THE USES OF FICTIONAL AND NONFICTIONAL TELEVISION IN CONVERSATIONS ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT

Michael X. Delli Carpini and Bruce A. Williams

Editor's Note

The influence of the news media on the opinions of their audiences is modulated by other opinion-shaping forces in each person's environment. Political scientists Michael X. Delli Carpini and Bruce A. Williams focus on the interplay between television viewers' established memories, their recall of information from factual and fictional television broadcasts, and their interactions with fellow focus group members. Depending on the main thrust of the conversation, these strands are combined in diverse ways into opinion-shaping forces. In the conversations on environmental issues reported here, both fiction and nonfiction mass media information played a major part, demonstrating the permeable boundary between these two informational realms.

Delli Carpini was an associate professor of political science at Barnard College when this essay was written. Williams, his coauthor, was associate professor of urban and regional planning at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Delli Carpini's most well-known study, *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters*, written with Scott Keeter, was published in the same year as this essay. Williams's study, written with Albert Matheny and titled *Democracy, Dialogue, and Environmental Disputes: The Contested Languages of Social Regulation*, had appeared a year earlier.

... Envisioning public opinion as a conversation is especially useful in understanding the political relevance of television. As the central source of

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information in the United States, television provides both the topics and the substance upon which most political conversations are based. In addition, however, our conversational metaphor points to a more active role for television in the shaping of public opinion. Put simply, we argue that the interaction between television and a viewer is similar to a conversation. Of course in an important respect this conversation is one-sided: viewers are seldom seen or heard.¹ And yet the viewer is engaged in a conversation in many important respects. The most obvious example would be when he or she "talks back" to the set or, more indirectly, when two or more viewers comment to each other about a show as it is being watched.

But even when sitting in silence, viewers are interacting with television in ways that are more analogous to conversation than to reading, to writing, or even to contemplation or deliberation. Certainly viewers interact with television in ways that are more similar to conversing than to other commonly used metaphors, such as inputting data or being inoculated. This is so because television consciously mimics the elements of immediate, personal exchange. The information transmitted is ephemeral. Messages are contained in a combination of aural and visual cues, including tone of voice, body language, and so forth. Televised conversants (whether newscasters, celebrities, or fictional characters) are often familiar to the viewer. The illusion of intimacy and dialogue is heightened by techniques such as looking directly into the camera or directly addressing the viewer through asides or stock phrases such as, "We'll be right back" or "I'll see you next time." Television, therefore, serves not only as a source of information for future conversations, but also as both a regular "conversant" in an ongoing discussion and, ultimately, as an important forum for political discourse in the United States. . . .

Focus groups are especially appropriate for exploring the social aspects of public opinion: "The hallmark of focus groups is the explicit use of the group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in the group" (Morgan 1988, 12). They are also appropriate for examining the relationship between television and politics, especially in light of the conversational metaphor presented earlier. The ubiquitousness of television; the assumption that messages and audiences interact in complex ways that allow for multiple meanings to emerge from the same broadcast; an understanding that television watching is often a social activity in which viewers converse with each other and with the TV: all of this suggests the need to think in terms of *the uses* of television rather than simply its effects. It also suggests that such uses will be subtle, varied, fluid, social, and context dependent. Focus groups, more than most quantitative methods, allow for a systematic reexamination of television and politics that is sensitive to the complexity of this relationship.

Discussing the Environment: A Case Study in the Construction of Public Opinion

The findings presented [here] are based on nine focus groups conducted in 1990–91.² . . . One group consisted of five people, five consisted of four people, and three consisted of three people. Ages varied from eighteen to seventy-two, with a median age of thirty-nine.³ Occupations ranged from student, to government employee, to full-time homemaker, to both blue- and white-collar worker (one participant was unemployed). Twenty-one of the thirty-four participants were women. Three of the participants were black. Overall our “sample” was slightly less affluent than the larger population from which it was recruited. Based upon responses to a brief telephone survey administered during the initial recruitment, as well as to a self-administered survey completed prior to the start of the focus groups, our participants varied in the strength and direction of their partisan affiliation, their ideological self-placement, and their views concerning issues such as the environment, prayer in schools, government aid to minorities and women, abortion, and defense spending. They also varied in their self-professed interest in politics, their likelihood of talking about politics with friends, and their television-viewing habits. In short, while not a random sample of either the local or the national population, our participants brought a range of backgrounds, beliefs, and opinions to the discussions.

The topic of discussion in each of our nine focus groups was “environmental pollution.” Three of the discussions (one from each age group) were preceded by viewing an edited version of the made-for-television docudrama “Incident At Dark River,” which dealt with the issue of toxic waste. Another three groups began by viewing an episode of the CBS newsmagazine *48 Hours*, also dealing with the issue of toxic waste.⁴ In both cases, the broadcasts were introduced as “a way to get us thinking about the topic.” The remaining three groups watched no television and simply began by discussing their views on environmental pollution. The focus groups without television lasted approximately one and a half hours, while those with television averaged an additional forty-five minutes.

The discussion protocol was loosely structured and designed to stimulate discussion rather than to uncover particular pieces of information. . . . The protocol was identical regardless of whether television was present or not, with two exceptions. First, in those groups where television was viewed, discussants were asked what they “thought of the show,” prior to turning to a more general discussion of the environment. And second, at the end of sessions that had begun by watching television, discussants were asked a few specific questions about the programs. Other than this, however, the broadcasts were not referred to by the moderator.

Overall, the focus groups were intended to provide three types of “data.” First, since at various points in the protocol we directly asked discussants about their reactions to the show they had seen, their views of the media more generally, their television-viewing habits, and so forth, the focus group transcripts provided information concerning people’s own perceptions about their relationship with television. Second, by asking people to engage in a public discussion of a timely political issue, we were able to directly observe how citizens converse and the role that television plays in that public conversation. Third, by having people watch television and then requiring them to talk both about the program itself and about issues touched on in the program, we were able to approximate what we argue is the ongoing, silent conversation people are regularly engaged in while watching television.

. . . [W]e have several goals. First, we provide evidence for the extensive role both nonfiction and fiction television play in public discourse. Second, we show that, based on self-reports and our own observations, citizens do interact with television in ways consistent with our “conversation” metaphor. Third, we examine the fluid, often inconsistent nature of public opinion, pointing out how people socially construct rather than retrieve their views on complex issues. Fourth, we explore the role of television in this process of opinion formation, focusing on our discussants’ surprising awareness of (and concern for) their dependence on the media. Finally, we provide examples of the real but limited autonomy individuals have in identifying and, where appropriate, resisting television’s ideological biases.

The Ubiquitousness of Television in Political Conversation

During coding, we distinguished among three types of media references made by conversants as they discussed environmental issues: references to the specific show watched at the start of the focus group (not applicable to groups where no television was shown); references to television more generally; and references to other mass media (i.e., newspapers, magazines, radio). Included in this last category are general references to “the media.” Within each category we distinguished between “direct” and “indirect” references. Direct references refer to comments in which the media were specifically mentioned (e.g., “I picked up a newspaper that had an ‘Earth News’ section” or “I saw this thing on TV, about how enough pollution could . . .”). When the specific reference was less clear (e.g., “If it’s like they showed in Mexico City where the people can’t walk down the street” or “You know, when the spotted owl was the big issue . . . they made it the owl against the lumberjacks”), the comment was coded as an indirect reference to the media. In addition, we distinguished between “prompted” and “unprompted” references. The former included any media reference made when we specifically queried

about their reactions to the show or about their general views concerning how well the media cover environmental issues. . . . The latter included only unsolicited references to the media.

. . . [M]edia references peppered the conversations: on average, 34 percent of all statements included at least one *unprompted* media reference. . . . The relative number of such references varied depending upon the presence or absence of television. In groups without television . . . the total percentage of unprompted media references was 27 percent, compared to 40 percent . . . in groups that started by viewing a television show. Most of this difference is accounted for by continued reference to the shows after we had turned the discussion to more general issues of the environment. . . .

We have argued elsewhere that understanding the impact of television on the construction of public opinion requires expanding the definition of politically relevant television to include both fictional and nonfictional programming (Delli Carpini and Williams 1994a). Our focus groups support this argument. When participants drew upon media in their conversations, they made few distinctions between fictional and nonfictional television. Unprompted references to the media were as frequent in focus groups viewing fictional as nonfictional programs, and we found little difference in the overall percentage of references to the shows themselves (32 percent in the groups viewing "Incident At Dark River" and 30 percent in those viewing *48 Hours*). Indeed, participants were more likely to make *unprompted* references to the fictional show than the nonfictional show (22 percent of all unprompted comments in the former case, compared to 13 percent in the latter).

Beyond references to these particular shows, discussants were about as likely to invoke fictional as nonfictional programs to make or refute points. For example, where possible we coded direct references to television (other than to the shows viewed during the focus groups) as to whether the programs referred to were fictional or nonfictional. There were 102 references to television that could be coded in this way. Of these, 49 were to fictional media (e.g., *The Day After*, *The Simpsons*) and 53 were to nonfictional media (e.g., *60 Minutes*, CNN). Groups were about as likely to reference fiction as nonfiction programs regardless of whether they had been shown "Incident At Dark River," *48 Hours*, or no television at all.

The political relevance of fictional media is also revealed by the specific public figures mentioned by our discussants. The following is an inclusive list of the people mentioned at least once in our groups: George Bush, Carl Sagan, Ralph Nader, Ted Turner, Dan Rather, Cher, Captain Planet (a cartoon character), John Ritter, Bill Moyers, Nadia Comaneci, Kitty Kelly, Nancy Reagan, Bette Midler, Ed Begley Jr., Bill Cosby, Jeremy Rifkin, Bob Barker, Phil Donahue, Oprah Winfrey, Sally Struthers, Tom Cruise, Clint

Eastwood, Cindy Lauper, and Al Sharpton. At least two things seem striking to us about this list. First is the frequency with which figures from the media, especially entertainers associated with environmental issues, were referenced, often as authoritative sources. Second is the almost complete absence of government representatives: other than a *single* reference to President Bush, there were no mentions of specific elected or appointed public officials.⁵

The extent to which the mass media in general and television in particular dominated our conversations about the environment is perhaps best illustrated by comparing the aforementioned numbers to the frequency with which personal experiences were referenced. Where possible, we coded all comments that referred to personal experience as a source of information. Included here were statements based on either firsthand experience or experiences of people with whom they were familiar. . . .

How often do people draw upon personal experience in political conversations about the environment? Not very often when compared to mediated sources. Overall, only 9 percent of the comments referred to personal experience. . . . This percentage varied only slightly between groups shown fictional television (7 percent), nonfictional television (8 percent), and no television (11 percent). Even when citing direct experiences, our discussants often evaluated them against information drawn from the media. . . .

. . . [A]s we shall discuss in more detail, people are ambiguous about their dependence on the media for information. Nonetheless, part of the media's power to shape political discourse comes from an underlying semiconscious belief that information provided by it is more reliable than other sources, including personal experience.⁶

As final evidence of the general influence of television on political conversation, we compared how often it was addressed, relative to references to other members of the group. The latter included both direct references to others (e.g., "I agree with her") and more indirect references in which someone seemed to be taking his or her cue from the comments of another member of the group. Among the groups shown television, we found that the specific program was addressed almost as much as all the "other" group members combined. For the groups shown *48 Hours*, 13 percent of all comments contained a direct or indirect, unprompted reference to the show . . . while 19 percent of all comments contained a direct or indirect reference to other members of the group. . . . For the groups shown "Incident at Dark River," the numbers were 22 and 26 percent respectively. . . . And this comparison underestimates the frequency of overall television or media references, since it includes only unprompted references to the specific show. Clearly, television remained an important "participant" throughout the conversations.

Conversing with Television

We have argued that citizens often “discover” their political views in the give-and-take of discussions with others. Television plays a central role in this process, in that it is engaged in an ongoing political conversation: when we turn the set on, we dip into this conversation.

Some of the strongest support for our conversational metaphor comes from the discussants’ own reports of their viewing habits. Literally all of them said they talked with others about what they saw on television, either while viewing or shortly thereafter, and almost all of them said they did this with great regularity. . . .

Viewers’ interaction with television has a conversational quality even when one watches alone. In our focus groups, it was common to see viewers smiling, nodding, groaning, and so forth as they watched television. It was also not unusual for them to gesture at the television during discussions (even though the set was off) much as they gestured at other members of the conversation. Indeed, many viewers (as we do) talk back to the tube: only three of the thirty-four participants said they never did. Of the three, one woman said that, while she didn’t, her husband did all the time. Another one of the three said: “I don’t actually verbalize, but I think, boy I’d like to be . . . like on Donahue or something . . . I’d like to be there right then just to say this. . . .” More typical was Catherine’s comment: “I scream at the TV, just like I scream at other people when I drive.” . . . [S]uch interactions were not limited to news or talk shows. . . .

The Shifting Nature of Public Opinions

One of the most consistent and telling patterns to emerge from the focus groups was the active role conversants took in attempting to make sense of the political and social world. Drawing on their own store of information and beliefs, the views of others in the group, and the views presented by television, discussants engaged in an ongoing effort to construct their opinions about environmental issues.

Key to understanding the role conversation (with both television and other citizens) plays in the formation and maintenance of public opinion is first understanding the contextual, fluid, and often inconsistent nature of opinions themselves. Freed from the forced restraints of closed-ended surveys, this aspect of public opinion becomes clear. This inconsistency in part reflects a lack of information, interest, and so forth, but more importantly also reflects the “inherent contestability” of most important public issues. An examination of all the comments made by individual discussants throughout the focus groups demonstrates that even the most thoughtful citizens express views that are contradictory. Indeed, often the most consistent views were ex-

pressed by those who were uninterested and unreflective of the issues under discussion. . . .

The Construction of Political Meaning

. . . [People’s] “true” opinions do not reside in one or the other of their statements. Rather, their opinions are to be found in the full set of statements they make about a particular issue and can be understood only in the specific context in which they are made. More important, we argue that citizens play an active, if limited, role in the construction of these opinions, and they do so in part through ongoing conversations with other people and, especially, with television.

Examples of our discussants actively using their own experiences, the comments of others, and the “comments” of television abound throughout the transcripts. Many of the examples . . . began with phrases such as “I agree with her,” or “It’s like on the show we saw.” In addition, participants often picked up on themes, topics, and so forth introduced by other members or, in those focus groups with television, by the program they had just watched. For example, the plot of “Incident at Dark River” revolved around a local company’s polluting a river with toxic waste. Similarly, one segment of *48 Hours* was devoted to toxic water pollution. In the discussions about the environment following both these shows, people were much more likely to focus specifically on industrial water pollution than were those people in groups who were without television’s immediate influence. . . .

Similarly, both programs focused attention on the human costs of pollution by emphasizing its effect on children. In the docudrama, the lead character’s daughter dies after playing in a river polluted with toxic waste, while one segment of *48 Hours* centered on parents whose young son had died of leukemia, the possible result of pesticides used in the area. Comments such as the following, found in all the discussions in which television was present, were largely absent from those discussions held without first viewing TV:

Susan: I think that [pollution] is very serious and that . . . if we don’t do something our grandchildren and their children won’t have a chance.

Ruby: I don’t have any children, but I have nieces and nephews. . . . What kind of world are they going to have? . . .

In one sense these examples simply illustrate the agenda-setting and priming effects demonstrated by mainstream research. Ruby’s comment is typical: “I never really think about [environmental issues] too much unless I happen to see something on television.” However, allowing people to speak for them-

selves, as in focus groups, also helps expand our understanding of these processes. First, our discussions suggest that the media not only shape what people *think* about, but also what they *talk* about. Second, they provide evidence that people are very much aware of this process. In some important ways, the agenda-setting function of television is not the insidious process often implied in media research.

Tania: I think people talk about [environmentalism] more now than they did before because it's brought out so much more now. . . . But, I think now you hear so much about it that it's on your mind. Whether you're talking about it or not, you are thinking about it.

Catherine: I don't think [environmental problems are] something that's a major, major concern. . . . [I]t's like . . . the war in the Persian Gulf. If you asked me about it [when it was going on], I'd say [I talk about it] every day. You know, you talk about it and so people kind of put aside other things.

Often our conversants' understanding of the degree to which they rely on the media was fairly sophisticated. Violet and Catherine, for example, noted the power of television as a visual medium to dramatize environmental issues.

Violet: I thought [the program] was real interesting. I think lots of times . . . you know, you can have all these ideas in your head then you have this visual representation of a landfill or this visual representation of a child and here's their picture and now they've died. Or, these individuals that are actively campaigning that look like very normal people that you would not normally envision as campaigning on environmental issues. I think that's real important.

Catherine: [T]hat's what the media is there for, sometimes they don't belong in people's business, but it's a good thing they're being concerned. So we can see what is going on, what needs to be done, they let us know. They're our eyes, kind of. . . . [T]hey let us see. You know, if we didn't get to see what was on TV, well, unless we went to a landfill ourselves, would we really know what it looked like? You know, in our heads, we can visualize what it looked like to have all that.

At the same time that subjects recognized their dependence on the media, they often seemed troubled and ambivalent about the potential such dependence has for selectively shaping their perception of the importance of various political issues. The public's concern over this agenda-setting process, revealed in the following quotes, is often overlooked by researchers:

Mark: I think I'm concerned, but then on the other hand, I think I spend very little time thinking about it until I see something like this [gestures to

the blank screen] or I see the oil wells burning out of control or something to bring it home . . . I think we need to have more hard facts put before us. I think we need to be bombarded with more things to make us think about it and hopefully therefore to make us act.

Hazel: I think, you know, some of the best people or the most expert people may not have an avenue to get . . . to the public . . . if the media doesn't involve themselves in that, then there's really no way to get the exposure.

Some discussants moved beyond simple ambivalence to an understanding of the reasons for the shifting nature of media coverage. Such sophisticated understandings open up the possibility of maintaining a critical distance between the media's definition of what is important, and other hierarchies of importance. Take this quotation from Paul, for example:

One problem with the media is that . . . if they talk about some issue then two weeks later if it's not changed, they really don't want to do the story again. . . . They don't want to do the same thing over and over, they think the viewers are going to get bored and change to something else. I wonder if the media's attention to environmental concerns is going to be fad like and then they're going to find something else to focus on six months from now. That can be a problem . . . when you involve the media.

The Limited Autonomy of Television Viewers

Elsewhere, after closely analyzing several programs dealing with environmental issues, including the ones we showed to our focus groups, we concluded that these shows adopted a uniform perspective, but one that varied at different levels of politics (Delli Carpini and Williams 1994b). When discussing "the substance of politics" (i.e., issues that are on or becoming part of the political agenda), such shows adopted a liberal perspective, assuming that environmental problems were worse than ever and posed a grave and immediate threat to humans and nature, while denying the need to consider trade-offs between protecting the environment and economic growth. However, when discussing "the institutions and processes of politics" (i.e., the formal channels and institutions of government and the economy), the programs took a conservative populist view. Government was painted as corrupt, incompetent, and completely inadequate to the task of dealing with the problems posed by environmental pollution, while the business sector was represented by either evasive corporate spokespersons or disreputable owners.

Most of our discussants had the ability to critically analyze the slant of these shows and, at a certain level, to resist or accept their messages based upon a comparison with their own ideology. Employing our conversational

metaphor, while dependent upon the media for information and the basic structure of political discourse, people continuously integrated and critiqued the media's side of this conversation. The following comments were fairly typical:

Mark: Well, for the purposes of the movie ["Incident at Dark River"], I guess they wanted them [presented this way] . . . but I saw it as being slanted. I think they really portrayed [the corporate executives] as not having any heart at all and, you know, being guilty. We seem to already draw the conclusion that they were guilty and they didn't care whether they were guilty or not, and if it hadn't been for the little lowly guy at the bottom there which gives us all hope that no matter how big the company, there's always somebody. . . . I thought it was biased.

Richard: I think it had a pretty liberal slant, which is OK with me because I agree with it, but still you've got to admit it wasn't exactly even-handed. . . .

Discussants also critically evaluated the reliance on sensationalism or emotionalism in both shows. Especially interesting was their ability to see the dramatic elements in *both* fiction and nonfiction. Violet criticizes one segment of *48 Hours* that dealt with a family's grief over their belief that their child had died from exposure to pesticides.

Yeah, but then like that [show], that was really too sad. . . . I'm sure the parents were really sad and I cannot imagine losing a child, but to show them sending balloons to heaven on a TV show like that, I think that's a bit much.

And Bob makes a similar comment about the emotional appeal of "Incident At Dark River."

I think it was definitely a bleeding-heart story. The underdog against the whole world. I mean, it brought up quite a few good issues, but I don't know if it was particularly objective.

Similarly, discussants often understood the need to distinguish the dramatic elements from the more factual bases of fictional programming. As Ruby commented, "[W]ith a movie, you find so much of it is factual and so much of it [is included] to make it interesting."

While recognizing the impracticality of only providing facts and figures on television, and the benefits of emotional appeals, our subjects were troubled and divided over the implications of television's use of such dramatic devices. This interrogation of the motives and the methods of the media was fairly subtle and not unsympathetic to the dilemmas of attracting and educating an audience. . . .

However, while these examples suggest the potential for citizens to critically evaluate and resist the media's agenda, other aspects of their use of information were much less accessible to conscious reflection. Consistent with research based on schema theory, we found several examples of the way people unconsciously used preexisting beliefs to interpret information provided by the media. For example, the most widely known environmental group was Greenpeace, which was mentioned several times in all our focus groups (the second-most frequently mentioned group, the Sierra Club, was brought up in fewer than half the groups). When asked to describe what they knew about Greenpeace, most subjects mentioned that the group was "radical," "extremist," or "violent." And in four of our groups, the following story (here told by Marcie) was recounted:

I mean, you see them with a little rubber dinghy between the Russian trawler and the whales and that type thing which grabs your attention, but I guess they got accused of blowing up a ship once, so . . . they also have a political activist wing.

It appears that, since the schema in which information about Greenpeace is filtered centers on images of "radical activism," the vague recollection of a ship being blown up becomes reconstructed into further evidence for this point of view: Greenpeace blew up a ship. In only one of our focus groups did someone tell the story correctly: that it had been the Greenpeace ship *Rainbow Warrior* that had been blown up.⁷

The inability of discussants to see, and so to actively use or resist, the opinions expressed by television is most apparent once one moves to what we have labeled "the foundations of politics" (i.e., the values and beliefs upon which the very ideas of politics and government are based). At this level the television programs were highly conservative, emphasizing individualism to the exclusion of any form of collective or political action (Delli Carpini and Williams 1994a). In considering such issues, discussants were largely unable to identify or critically resist the media's tendency to present individual actions as the only acceptable form of action. Possible solutions to environmental problems brought up by discussants were limited to individual activities such as recycling or shopping more wisely. . . . A similar ideology is revealed in their attitude toward government: it should do more, but without stepping on individual rights, and in general is too corrupt or incompetent to count on. . . . [C]ollective action is either viewed with suspicion, or else is simply not thought of as a serious alternative. . . .

Once the distinction between levels of politics is made, it becomes less surprising that, despite the critical treatment of government and business, both are essentially absent in discussions about how best to address environmental

problems. The closest participants came to identifying this bias in television's treatment of environmental issues was in comments like those of Mark, who saw the potential for a docudrama like "Incident at Dark River" to mobilize political action "if we knew where to go . . . after watching [it]." . . .

Notes

1. It should be noted, however, that the use of "900"-number telephone polls, the reading of viewer mail on the air, experiments with interactive television, and so forth serve to enhance this conversational aspect of television viewing.
2. Participants were residents of Lexington, Kentucky, and were recruited through a public notice placed in the local newspaper. The notice reported that two university professors were engaged in research about public opinion and asked for people interested in participating in small-group discussions about current issues. A twenty-dollar honorarium was offered, and no mention was made of either television or the particular issue to be discussed.
3. Three groups consisted of people in their late teens and twenties; three of people in their thirties and early forties; and three mainly of people in their mid-forties and fifties (though a few were older). This stratification was based on the assumption that people would be more comfortable talking with people roughly their own age.
4. For a detailed description and analysis of the messages contained in these broadcasts, see Delli Carpini and Williams 1994b.
5. In a related point, aside from isolated comments about two government agencies (OSHA and EPA), when participants discussed solutions to environmental problems, they almost always talked about what individuals, not government, could do (i.e., recycling, talking to friends, getting more information, and so forth).
6. This notion was brought home to us in our pilot focus groups conducted with students on the University of Michigan campus. When asked what she thought the Michigan campus was like in the 1960s, one older participant replied apologetically: "It's not really fair to ask me, since I'm from Ann Arbor and lived here during the sixties. . . ."
7. We found other suggestive examples of this kind of information processing regarding political activists: Rebecca's general references to "those kooks" mentioned earlier; the lumping of feminists, other political activists, even Al Sharpton into discussions of environmental activists; and so forth. As one discussant, trying to clarify who he meant by "environmental activists," said, "you know, extremists. . . . People who wear Birkenstocks."

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