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A Different Kind of Inter-media Agenda Setting: How Campaign Ads Influenced the Blogosphere in the 2008 U.S. Election

Sumana Chattopadhyay and Molly Greenwood

Campaign 2008 was a historic campaign that relied strongly on both traditional and non-traditional media sources. Among non-traditional media sources, the Internet is unique because it enables multiple users to engage in political information exchange, implying that control is distributed to all users who have relatively equal opportunity to contribute content. Kaid and Postelnicu (2005, p. 268) argue that it is not at all surprising that political observers see the Internet as a medium that might help reengage young citizens in the political process—a fact that was clearly demonstrated during the 2008 presidential campaign.

Further, the Internet features highly ideological media sources, such as partisan blogs, which were very popular during campaign 2008. Understanding partisan blogs is important because “While political partisanship is by no means the only dimension upon which niche-marketing strategies might be based, in the realm of political information, partisanship is one of the key lines of demarcation allowing Web sites to attract a relatively loyal audience” (Baum & Groeling, 2008, p. 3). Also, the Internet is unique because the user actively selects what Web sites he or she will visit, often based on his or her political leanings.

Political campaigns today recognize the significance of the Internet, which is why they employ broadcast advertising as well as advertising on Web sites (Bimber, 2000, p. 330). Political ads increase issue salience among voters and serve as a major source of information for voters (Benoit & Airne, 2005, p. 493); ads are more likely to inspire people to make decisions based on issue appeals—compared

to newspapers or TV news content (Brazeal & Benoit, 2001); and political ads also have measurable effects on voter cognitions, attitudes, and voting behavior (Kaid, 1981, 1999). In short, a broad range of effects has been attributed to ads, which helps explain why \$2.5 to \$2.7 billion was spent on political ads during the 2008 campaign alone (Atkinson, 2008).

One particular non-traditional outlet for political advertising that became very popular during campaign 2008 was YouTube. Recent statistics indicate that 51 percent of users visit YouTube at least weekly or more often, and 52 percent of 18–34 year-olds share videos often with friends and colleagues (YouTube Fact Sheet, n.d.). Recognizing the popularity of this information channel, both Barack Obama and John McCain both developed and broadcast YouTube-only ads and also established their own YouTube channels, which has now quickly become a common practice for campaigns at all levels.

Political campaign debates also have a significant role in informing voters during the campaign season, and campaign 2008 was no exception. Carlin (1992) notes that presidential debates, often occurring late in a general-election campaign, offer a convenient summary of campaign issues for voters at the very time when the largest numbers of citizens are just starting to follow the campaign with greater interest in order to confirm or make their vote selection. Also, as McKinney and Carlin (2004, p. 204) document, presidential debates typically generate the largest viewing audience of any single televised campaign event. Furthermore, Pfau (2003) observes that debates, with their media hype and extensive coverage by journalists, may be the only televised political event capable of attracting the attention of citizens who are “marginally attentive” to political news—a fact that was confirmed by the Obama-McCain and the Biden-Palin debates during the 2008 campaign season each of which drew more than 50 million viewers in the U.S. For these reasons, televised presidential debates have long been perceived as capable of setting the agenda of salient campaign issues among voters (Katz & Feldman, 1962). Debate viewing has also been shown to increase viewers’ interest in the ongoing campaign (Chaffee, 1978; Wald & Lupfer, 1978), encourage citizens to seek out additional campaign information (Lemert, 1993), inspire greater campaign participation through activities such as conversing with others about one’s preferred candidate and increases in the reported likelihood of voting (McLeod, Bybee, & Durall, 1979; Patterson, 2002). Hence, debates should be seen as a key information source for voters and a key campaign event that influences other media.

Another political medium that first gained prominence during the 2004 U.S. presidential election was the partisan blog (Scott, 2007, p. 39). Smith (2009) reports that 26% of online political news consumers visited blogs that covered news, politics or public affairs media during the 2008 presidential campaign as an additional source for political commentary. Also, nearly a fifth of Internet users

(18%) contributed to the online political debate by posting original campaign-related content in online forums such as blogs, online discussion groups or social networking sites (Smith, 2009). Cooper (2006) therefore argues that bloggers represent a “Fifth Estate” acting as a watchdog of traditional news media, and he further claims that blogs affect the agenda-setting process by discussing issues ignored by the traditional media and by directly criticizing traditional media outlets for ignoring these issues.

As discussed thus far, campaign YouTube advertisements, independent (non-candidate) partisan blogs, and presidential debates have all been shown—or argued—to play the role of agenda-setters in a political campaign. The agenda setting process is an ongoing competition among issue proponents to gain the attention of media professionals, the public, and policy elites (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, pp. 24–25), and the development of an issue agenda results from channels of political communication that influence the establishment of a hierarchy of issue salience at a particular point in time (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). However, a much less understood and studied form of influence in this process is that of the media’s agenda-setting influence upon other media, an area of investigation usually referred to as “inter-media” agenda setting.

Based on the preceding discussion, non-traditional media like YouTube ads and partisan Internet blogs, as well as traditional channels of media information like political debates all seem to contribute to the shaping of public opinion and served as active media agenda-setters during campaign 2008. Examination of inter-media agenda setting can help us better understand the synergies between different types of political media. Researchers like Sweetser, Golan, and Wanta (2008) have studied inter-media agenda setting and have looked at how candidate blogs and political ads influence each others’ agendas. But no research to date has examined whether blog agendas are shaped by political campaign debates or vice-versa. Nor has inter-media agenda setting research examined media such as non-candidate partisan blogs that were very popular sources of information during the 2008 campaign. The focus of this study, therefore, is to better understand the phenomenon of inter-media agenda setting during campaign 2008 between non-candidate partisan blogs, YouTube candidate ads, and televised presidential debates.

Purpose

As previously noted, past research on non-candidate partisan blogs (which will henceforth be referred to as independent partisan blogs) is quite limited since these channels of political information are relatively new in the public sphere. Also, although our knowledge of campaign debate effects and the role of debates as agenda setters for voters have been studied extensively, hardly any research is available that examines how debates set agendas for non-traditional media

sources. The current study seeks to address these gaps in the literature by examining the relationships between agendas set by campaign YouTube advertisements, presidential debates and independent partisan blogs during the 2008 presidential campaign, analyzing if inter-media agenda setting effects exist between these key channels of political information.

Since a relatively large number of independent partisan blogs are currently available, two popular blogs, including a liberal-leaning website—www.salon.com (Salon)—and a conservative-leaning website—www.nationalreview.com (National Review Online)—were chosen for this study due to their known partisan agendas, high number of monthly page views, and high number of unique visitors per month. Salon enjoys 60 million page views monthly and 6 million unique visitors monthly (Salon, 2009). Also, National Review Online enjoys 20 million page views per month, with 2.1 million unique visitors per month (National Review Online, 2009).

Within these respective Websites were blogs devoted specifically to the 2008 presidential election. The liberal blog within the Salon site is entitled *War Room*. The conservative blog within the National Review Online site is entitled the *Campaign Spot*. This study will specifically examine the issue agendas displayed by the two partisan blogs and how these agendas compare with the issue agendas of the two candidates' YouTube ad channels and the issue agenda of the presidential debates.

Based on inter-media agenda-setting research, this study posits the following research questions and hypotheses:

RQ 1: What are the top issues covered by:

- a) Obama ads; b) McCain ads; c) *War Room* blog; d) *Campaign Spot* blog; and e) 2008 presidential debates?

This study also predicted the following:

H 1: The issue salience of the independent partisan blog *War Room* will show a significant positive correlation with the issue salience of:

- a) the Obama campaign's YouTube advertisements; and b) the 2008 presidential debates

H2: The issue salience of the independent partisan blog the *Campaign Spot* will show significant positive correlation with the issue salience of:

- a) the McCain campaign's YouTube advertisements; and b) the 2008 presidential debates

H 3: The issue salience of the 2008 presidential debates will show a significant positive correlation with:

- a) the issue salience of the Obama campaign's YouTube advertisements; and b) the issue salience of the McCain campaign's YouTube advertisements

Since inter-media agenda setting research has yet to closely examine how partisan media sources seen as aligned with a particular political party might influence the issue agendas of outlets partial to the opposing party, the following is posited as a research question:

RQ 2: What is the correlation between the issue salience of:

- a) liberal independent partisan blog the *War Room* and the conservative partisan blog the *Campaign Spot*; b) the McCain campaign's YouTube advertisements and the Obama campaign's YouTube advertisements; c) the McCain campaign's YouTube advertisements and the independent partisan blog the *War Room*; d) the Obama campaign's YouTube advertisements and the independent partisan blog the *Campaign Spot*?

In order to answer the research questions and test the hypotheses posited above, thematic content analysis was used as the study's method of analysis. The next section discusses the methodology used in this study for the gathering and analysis of data.

Method

Description of Sample

YouTube campaign ads from the 2008 presidential general election were selected for this study. These ads were generated by Barack Obama's and John McCain's presidential campaigns, respectively. Debate transcripts for the three Presidential debates and the single Vice Presidential debate obtained from the CNN website were also analyzed. Finally, blog posts from the *War Room* and the *Campaign Spot* were selected during campaign flashpoints.

Flashpoints were selected for this study to capture inter-media agenda relationships during key points during the fall general election. Scott's (2007) content analysis of political blogs during the 2004 U.S. presidential election also utilized campaign flashpoints to capture heightened activity of bloggers, as blogging posts spiked around the time of the Democratic and Republican national conventions, the presidential debates, and on Election Day (p. 49). Along the same lines, flashpoints were adapted for this study as well. The first flashpoint selected is the day

of Barack Obama's remarks to the 2008 Democratic National Convention, which took place on August 28, 2008. Blog posts were compiled during the two available days preceding Obama's remarks and the two available days following Obama's remarks. The second flashpoint is the day of John McCain's remarks to the 2008 Republican National Convention, which took place on September 4, 2008. Blog posts were compiled during the two available days preceding McCain's remarks and the two available days following McCain's remarks. The other four flashpoints are the three Presidential debates (September 26, 2008; October 7, 2008; October 15, 2008) and the Vice Presidential debate (October 2, 2008), and the two available days preceding and following each of the debates. The final flashpoint consists of the two days prior to Election Day, November 4, 2008.

These flashpoints were selected for a number of reasons. The time periods selected were chosen due to the similarity and prominence of events for both Democrats and Republicans alike, including the two parties' respective conventions and during the presidential debates that featured both major-party candidates. The blog post content around conventions is important because both events took place just before Labor Day, the point in time when a greater proportion of the general public began to pay attention to the general election. Also, many of the remarks made by the candidates themselves, as well as other speakers at the two conventions, assist in setting the respective campaigns' issue agendas. Televised debates represent yet another major media event of the campaign season and generate much discussion in the mainstream media and in the blogosphere. Further, the candidates' YouTube ads were sometimes crafted using clips of remarks made during the party conventions and also the presidential debates to promote the candidates' issue agendas. Finally, partisan bloggers frequently post clips and quotes from the candidates' remarks—including moments from the party conventions, the debates, as well as re-posting and linking to the candidates' YouTube campaign ads. Therefore, the days surrounding each presidential candidate's remarks at the DNC and RNC and in the presidential campaign debates are particularly relevant in exploring the inter-media agenda setting that takes place as a result of these messages.

Additionally, the final flashpoint of two days leading up to Election Day is included to examine how each campaign used the final two-day "closing argument" period that occurred just before the election took place. This time period would have been especially crucial for those voters who were still undecided, and therefore examining this period helps to illuminate the specific messages and issues the campaigns sought to emphasize just before voters cast their ballots.

Data Analysis

In this study, issue themes were coded using a method of *thematic* content analysis. Content analysis is a research method or technique that involves the system-

atic study and the quantification of the content or meaning of communication messages (Hocking, Stacks & McDermott, 2003). Holsti (1969) defines content analysis as any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of the messages. It is used in this research study to analyze the textual content of campaign YouTube advertisements, presidential debate content and blog posts.

The focus on *issue agendas* is crucial to presidential campaigns today as the creation of a desired issue agenda prompts the creation of desired voter perceptions, which results in opinion formation. Over time, the aggregation of opinions about a particular topic solidifies into an attitude, ultimately forming a core belief that is hard to unravel by competing or dissonant images and appeals (Hobbs, 2001, p. 407). This study examines the creation of such *issue agendas* within media that include the influence of political information sources outside the mainstream press—such as campaign YouTube advertisements and independent partisan blogs. Our study analyzes the inter-relationships—inter-media agenda setting—among these non-traditional news sources with the more traditional information source of televised presidential debates. In examining each of our major sources or channels of political information, an aggregate issue agenda is generated for each source.

Our sample of campaign advertisements, presidential debates and blog posts were analyzed according to individual issue themes featured in these messages. A theme can consist of any utterance or phrase ranging from a word to several sentences and is defined as “the smallest unit of discourse capable of expressing an idea; themes are statements, assertions, claims or arguments about a single point” (Benoit, 2005, p. 495). This study classified themes by type of *issue*. An *issue* is defined as a category that “involves political issues that are mentioned in relationship to candidates.” The campaign *issues* used to conduct this analysis were adapted from Tedesco, McKinney and Kaid (2007, p. 1292). The *a priori* list of issues used in our study included the following: *health care, war, economy, crime, terrorism, education, environment, elderly issues, foreign policy (not specifically war), children’s issues, taxes, welfare, moral values, deficit, energy, and change*. *Change*, which represents a new issue category added for the current study due to its prominence during campaign 2008, captured the candidate’s expressed desire to bring about change in the political process. An ‘*other*’ *issues* category captured all other additional issues. Issue rankings for each of our political information sources were compiled and compared.

The YouTube advertisements, presidential debate transcripts and blog posts were all coded based on a detailed codebook that defined each issue category. The content data were distributed among four coders, with 10% of the entire sample of content coded by each of the four coders to verify inter-coder reliability. Inter-coder reliability is a statistical tool that measures the extent to which indepen-

dent coders analyze a characteristic of a message and reach the same conclusion. Cohen's Kappa (κ) was used as the statistic to compute inter-coder reliabilities, a test of reliability that is considered a more robust measure than simple percent agreement because κ takes into account the agreement that is occurring by chance. The value of inter-coder reliabilities for each pair of coders was found to be above 0.80 which, according to Landis and Koch (1977), is considered good agreement among coders. The issue themes, as well as sub-categories, were then compiled across the three media sources to produce a frequency count, and these frequencies were then tabulated to compare the issue themes covered by the different media sources.

Table 1: Top five issues by media source¹

	Issue Rank: 1	Issue Rank: 2	Issue Rank: 3	Issue Rank: 4	Issue Rank: 5
Obama Ads	Change (51)	Economy (42)	Taxes (41)	Health Care (24)	Crime (11)
McCain Ads	Taxes (35)	Change (26)	Energy (20)	Economy (18)	Terror (17)
War Room	Economy (168)	Change (106)	Taxes (87)	Foreign policy (66)	War (55)
Campaign Spot	Economy (350)	Taxes (135)	Foreign Policy (105)	Terror (98)	Change (83)
2008 Presidential debates	Economy (277)	Energy (276)	Deficit (269)	Terror (221)	War (192)

Note:

1. Number of issue mentions listed in parentheses

Description of How Agendas Are Compared Using Spearman's rho

After the results of the thematic content analysis were tabulated and numbers of issue themes were compared, a Spearman's rho statistical computation was conducted for comparison of the entire list of issue agendas (comprised of all 17 issues) for the two candidates' ads, the conservative and liberal blog Websites and the 2008 presidential debates. Spearman's rho is a statistical measure of the linear relationship between two variables. It is different from Pearson's correlation in that the computations are done after the numbers are converted to rank orders.

Spearman's rho is often used as a statistic to capture the ordering and changes due to agenda-setting effects.

Results

Top Issues

Research questions 1a–1e focused on the top issues featured in the different media examined in this study. As listed in Table 1, the top five issues for the Obama *YouTube* ads included *change* with 51 mentions, *economy* with 42 mentions, *taxes* with 41 mentions, *health care* with 24 mentions and *crime* with 11 mentions (RQ 1a). For the McCain ads, the top five issues were *taxes* with 35 mentions, *change* with 26 mentions, *energy* with 20 mentions, and *economy* and *terror* with 18 and 17 mentions, respectively (RQ 1b).

Analyses of RQs 1c and 1d revealed that for the liberal *War Room*, the top five issues in order were *economy* (168 mentions), *change* (106 mentions), *taxes* (87 mentions), *foreign policy* (66 mentions), and *war* (55 mentions); while for the conservative *Campaign Spot* the issues were *economy* (350 mentions), *taxes* (135 mentions), *foreign policy* (105 mentions), *terror* (98 mentions) and finally *change* (83 mentions).

The issue rankings were somewhat different for the presidential debate content (RQ 1e), with the top five issues being *economy* (277 mentions), *energy* (276 mentions), *deficit* (269 mentions), *terror* (221 mentions) and *war* (192 mentions).

For the different media sources, there were certain issues which were included among the top five issues in one source category but were not among the top issues in other media sources. Also, while some issues were among the top list of issues across all media sources combined, several of these issues were not among the top list of issues for specific media sources. For example, while the issue of *budget deficit* only made it in the top-five issue list of the 2008 presidential debate content, this issue was not among the top-five issues for the three other media sources—it was ranked as the sixth most salient issue discussed by McCain's *YouTube* ads (16 mentions) and both independent partisan blogs, including the liberal *War Room* (47 mentions) and the conservative *Campaign Spot* (75 mentions). Similarly, though *terror* was not a top-five issue for the liberal *War Room* blog, it was the 7th most salient issue for blogs overall (with 44 mentions). Though *foreign policy* was a top-five issue for both the two independent blogs, it was the 9th most important issue for the 2008 presidential debates with 109 mentions. Also, while the issue of *health care* achieved top-five status only in Obama's *YouTube* ads, it was the 6th most salient issue (with 178 mentions) in the 2008 presidential debates issue agenda. In a similar fashion, though *war* was a top-five issue for both the liberal *War Room* blog and for the presidential debates, it was the 8th most salient issue for

Obama's YouTube ads (5 mentions), the 9th most salient issue for McCain's YouTube ads (6 mentions), and the 7th most salient issue for the conservative *Campaign Spot* blog (66 mentions). Finally, while the issue of *energy* achieved top-five status only for presidential debates, it did show up as the 9th most important issue (59 mentions) in the agenda presented by the conservative *Campaign Spot* blog. The next section captures the inter-media agenda setting element of this study by discussing comparisons between the different media agendas.

Issue Salience

As reported in Table 2, Spearman's rho comparisons reveal the presence of inter-media agenda setting effects across the different media. First, hypothesis 1a predicted a correlation between the issue agenda of the liberal blog *War Room* and the issue agenda of Obama's YouTube campaign ads. As shown in Table 2, this hypothesis was supported as a significant Spearman's rho correlation was found between the two media sources ($r=0.4747$, $p<0.05$).

Hypothesis 1b predicted a positive relationship between the *War Room* issue agenda and the 2008 presidential debates agenda. This hypothesis too was supported as a very strong positive, and significant correlation was observed between these two media sources ($r=0.715$, $p<0.01$). Further, hypothesis 2a was supported as a significant relationship between the conservative *Campaign Spot* blog's issue agenda and McCain's YouTube ads was found ($r=0.6937$, $p<0.01$); and, finally, hypothesis 2b was also confirmed as a significant correlation between the *Campaign Spot* blog and the 2008 presidential debates issue agendas was found ($r=0.7569$, $p<0.01$).

Among the relationships between the presidential debates issue agenda and the Obama and McCain YouTube ads (hypotheses 3a and 3b, respectively), a partial inter-media agenda setting effect was found with a strong positive and significant correlation between the overall presidential debates issue agenda and McCain's YouTube ads ($r=0.5414$, $p<0.05$), but a very low and non-significant correlation was found between the presidential debates issue agenda and Obama's YouTube ads ($r=0.1894$, n.s.).

The focus of this study was to better understand the synergies across different partisan and non-partisan political information sources. These relationships were explored through RQs 2a–2d. Results of these research questions reveal proof of an inter-media agenda setting effect as the issue salience of the liberal blog *War Room* showed a very strong correlation ($r=0.946$, $p<0.01$) with the issue salience of the conservative blog *Campaign Spot* (RQ 2a), as did the issue salience of the *War Room* blog and McCain's YouTube ads ($r=0.6259$, $p<0.01$). Analysis of other research questions (2b and 2d) showed no evidence of inter-media agenda setting

Table 2: Inter-media agenda setting (Spearman's rho comparisons for top 17 issues)

Issue Salience/Agenda comparisons	Spearman's rho (r)
Comparison of Issue Salience between <i>War Room</i> and Obama ads	0.4747*
Comparison of Issue Salience between <i>War Room</i> and the 2008 presidential debates	0.715**
Comparison of Issue Salience between the <i>Campaign Spot</i> and McCain ads	0.6937**
Comparison of Issue Salience between the <i>Campaign Spot</i> and the 2008 presidential debates	0.7569**
Comparison of Issue Salience between the 2008 presidential debates and the Obama ads	0.1894
Comparison of Issue Salience between the 2008 presidential debates and the McCain ads	0.5414*
Comparison of Issue Salience between <i>War Room</i> and McCain ads	0.6259**
Comparison of Issue Salience between <i>Campaign Spot</i> and Obama ads	0.1932
Comparison of Issue Salience between Obama ads and McCain ads	0.4053
Comparison of Issue Salience between <i>War Room</i> and <i>Campaign Spot</i>	0.946**

Note:

*significant at $p < 0.05$; ** significant at $p < 0.01$

between Obama and McCain YouTube ads ($r=0.4053$, n.s.), or between Obama's YouTube ads and the conservative *Campaign Spot* blog ($r=0.1932$, n.s.).

Discussion

Top Issues in Ads and Blogs

Four out of the five media sources (both the Obama and McCain YouTube ads, the *War Room* and the *Campaign Spot* blogs) all included *economy*, *taxes* and *change* among their top-five issue agendas. However, for the 2008 presidential

debates, among these three issues, the *economy* was the only issue featured in the top-five debate issues agenda. The issues of *energy* and *terror*, however, were two issues that were featured among the top-five presidential debate issues, and these two issues were also a part of the top issues addressed by McCain's YouTube ads. Further, *terror* was an issue that showed up in the top-five issue list for the conservative *Campaign Spot* blog. Among other issues, *foreign policy* was considered a top issue by both the independent partisan blogs, while *war* was discussed both by the liberal *War Room* blog and in the combined top-five issues agenda of the 2008 presidential debates.

It is interesting that the issue of *change* was a campaign issue featured in the top-five list for four of the five media sources examined. The fact that Barack Obama campaigned as a *change* candidate throughout the entire campaign season explains why this issue was the highest ranked issue in Obama's YouTube ads, and the second-most salient issue of the liberal blog the *War Room*. However, the fact that this "signature" issue for Barack Obama was a highly salient issue for the other three media sources as well is worth further discussion. Given the political climate in Washington, DC, with a somewhat unpopular incumbent president, and the economic climate throughout the nation, *change* seemed to be an important theme across political parties and media sources. Also, the fact that *economy* was the most salient issue of the liberal *War Room* blog, and the second-most salient issue of Obama's YouTube ads, ties in very well with the overall top Obama issue of *change*—namely, economic change; and also supports the general perception that Democrats, rather than Republicans, are typically viewed as the party most equipped to handle issues relating to the *economy*. However, the fact that the conservative *Campaign Spot* blog and McCain's YouTube ads also included *economy* as a top-five issue, as did the 2008 presidential debates issue agenda, demonstrates that like the mantra of *change* in the 2008 campaign, both parties and candidates frequently addressed matters related to the *economy* as part of their issue agenda.

Much like the issue linkage of *change* and the *economy*, a similar argument can be made regarding the issue of *taxes*. While *taxes* are typically considered a prime issue for conservatives, it makes sense that this issue was among the most frequently discussed issues among McCain's YouTube ads and the second-most salient issue for the conservative *Campaign Spot* blog. However, the issue of *taxes* was also featured as a top-five issue for the other three media sources. Here, much like *change* and the *economy* seemed to be conceptually linked, the McCain campaign frequently framed its discussion of the *economy* within the broader lens of *taxes*, frequently requiring Obama—and other media—to also address the issue of *taxes*.

The presence of *foreign policy*, *war* and *terror* as top issues in the 2008 campaign may be best explained by the fact that the U.S. was electing its first post-9/11 president, and also electing a commander-in-chief who would inherit two ongoing wars. Also, John McCain's life-story as a war hero added even more sa-

lience to these three issues, with frequent discussion of his biography raising issues of *war* and *foreign policy*. Finally, Barack Obama was often eager to discuss these issues, especially during the presidential debates, in order to not be outmaneuvered—or out-talked—by John McCain on these matters.

Three perplexing results illustrated in Table 1 particularly stand out which merit further discussion. One of the most surprising results is that *health care* is only the 4th most frequently discussed issue among Obama's YouTube ads, and was only the 6th most frequently discussed issue during the presidential debates—while this issue was not even among the top-ten issues for any of the other three media sources. Its absence is particularly perplexing in relation to the liberal blog the *War Room*, since *health care* reform is normally seen as a topic of great relevance to liberals and was also a very big part of Barack Obama's campaign agenda. What factors might account for this finding? Inter-media agenda setting may perhaps play a role here as blog posts reflect issues that are featured in a wide variety of media and issues that are deemed important to both sides of the political spectrum rather than focusing only on those issues important to the candidates or the major political parties. Also, we might need to account for the age group of those individuals who are accessing and posting to the blogs. It is not unreasonable to conjecture that Salon.com, the liberal website containing the *War Room* blog, has a much younger audience compared to more traditional media sources, and perhaps *health care* is not a pressing issue for these liberal bloggers vis-à-vis other issues such as the *economy*, *change*, *tax*, *war* and *terror*.

Two other rather interesting but somewhat perplexing findings reported in Table 1 include the salience given to *energy* by a couple of media sources (the conservative *Campaign Spot* blog and presidential debates), and the salience given to the issue of *crime* by Obama's YouTube ads. First, while the *energy* issue has not been a salient campaign issue in the past, and especially among Republicans, its prominence in the 2008 campaign cycle—particularly in McCain's YouTube ads and in the debates issue agenda—is most likely related to the fact that Republican Vice-Presidential candidate Sarah Palin, governor of the energy-rich state of Alaska, was often touted as a candidate with expertise in dealing with *energy* concerns. What is also surprising is that the issue of *crime* was featured as the 5th most salient issue in the Obama's YouTube ads, though this issue did not show up in the top-ten list for any of the other media sources. Yet this finding may be more clearly understood when one realizes that crime is defined in the codebook as not just including crime rates but also such crime-related matters as the building of prisons, capital punishment, victim's rights, etc. Therefore, given that the Obama campaign frequently spoke of his position regarding capital punishment and victim's rights, one can better understand how *crime* was among Obama's top issue appeals.

Despite the few puzzling findings discussed here, it is evident from the top issue agendas across the various media sources that candidates, campaigns and

their supporters make strategic choices as to the specific issues they will champion based on such factors as a particular campaign's features (e.g., discussion of *economy* during difficult economic times, or need for *change* when electing a leader to replace a somewhat unpopular incumbent president, etc.), or specific issue appeals that are in line with one's particular political ideology (e.g., *health care* is an issue that appeals to Democrats, while *taxes* is an issue that appeals more to Republicans), or perhaps discussion of issues that is prompted due to the salience placed on particular issues by one's opponent (e.g. Democrats were forced to address *taxes* and *energy* during campaign 2008 because Republicans were talking about these).

Inter-media Agenda Setting and Issues

As shown in Table 2, there are several interesting findings that have implications for understanding the process of inter-media agenda setting. For example, when comparing the issue agendas of particular media sources, we see significant rho correlations between the liberal blog *War Room* and Obama's YouTube ads ($r = 0.4747$, $p < 0.05$), the liberal blog *War Room* and the presidential debates issue agenda ($r = 0.715$, $p < 0.01$), the conservative blog *Campaign Spot* and McCain's YouTube ads ($r = 0.6937$, $p < 0.01$), the conservative blog *Campaign Spot* and the presidential debates issue agenda ($r = 0.7569$, $p < 0.01$), the presidential debates issue agenda and McCain's YouTube ads ($r=0.5414$, $p<0.05$), the liberal blog *War Room* and McCain's YouTube ads ($r=0.6259$, $p<0.01$), and between the liberal blog *War Room* and the conservative blog *Campaign Spot* ($r=0.946$, $p<0.01$).

Of these correlations, it is particularly interesting that the Obama ads may well have had an agenda-setting effect on the liberal blog *War Room's* issue discussion, while the McCain ads' issue agenda is significantly correlated with the conservative blog *Campaign Spot's* issue discussion. These two results suggest a very strong synergy exist between candidate messages and partisan media such as the two political-leaning blogs. Also, the fact that both partisan blog agendas were highly correlated with the overall presidential debates agenda is worth noting as this finding confirms past research which shows that debates play a strong role in setting the media's agenda—even non-traditional media such as partisan political blogs. It is also interesting to note that although McCain's ads' issue agenda is significantly correlated with the liberal blog *War Room's* issue agenda, Obama's ads are not correlated with the conservative blog *Campaign Spot's* issue agenda. This difference is somewhat difficult to interpret, but may relate to our previous observation that often times one candidate will be forced to discuss issues raised by an opponent, with the results here suggesting that John McCain—in his YouTube ads—and liberal bloggers were discussing similar issues. In fact, there is some evidence in our analysis of the postings from liberal bloggers that they were

frequently criticizing McCain and his ads, thus perhaps bringing these two issue agendas into closer alliance.

A very interesting agenda setting result that emerged from this study was the relationship between the liberal blog *War Room's* issue agenda and the conservative blog *Campaign Spot's* issue agenda. The extremely high value of the Spearman's rho correlation between these two issue agendas ($r=0.946$) indicates that partisan bloggers may very well be following each other in terms of the issue topics being discussed. Much as candidates need to respond to each other and defend themselves when their opponents are attacking them, liberal and conservative blogs might also communicate in a way in which the partisan bloggers are responding to each other, thus explaining why their issue agendas are so closely aligned. This finding suggests future research to help us better understand the process of inter-media agenda setting between partisan media sources.

Conclusion

As discussed in earlier sections, it is clear that there were strong similarities and differences in how the five different media sources assigned salience to various issues during the 2008 campaign season. Issues like *change*, *economy* and *taxes* were particularly important throughout the campaign across media sources. However, in some ways the different sources were also unique in the way they assigned more salience to one issue vis-à-vis another (e.g., Obama ads highlighted *crime*, presidential debates and McCain ads focused on *energy*, etc.), which made the campaign issue environment an even more interesting focus of study.

The way in which particular media sources influenced other agendas can be viewed as a process of synergistic relationships among different media sources. For example, partisan blogs like the liberal *War Room* and the conservative *Campaign Spot* were strongly influenced by the candidates' ads that were aligned with the blog's particular partisan views. Also, not only did the presidential debates issue agenda influence the candidates' ad issue agendas, but the debates also influenced the partisan blogs. Further, the partisan blogs also relied on each other in developing their issue agenda discussion, indicating that strong links exist between media sources even when they lie on different ends of the political spectrum. These kinds of results strengthen the need for continued research of new forms of media like partisan blogs and their interplay with more traditional media sources, all of which serve as vital sources of information for voters during political campaign seasons.

Some future directions to extend this line of research would include looking at embedded links within blog sites such as the *War Room* and *Campaign Spot* which were not included in this analysis. These embedded links often lead either to older blog entries, or to other Web sites (e.g., ABCNews.com), YouTube advertisements, or other video generated by the blog editors. Such content should

be carefully analyzed as Dunn, McCollough and Martin (2007) argue that the important part of many blog posts is not the blogger's comments but the linked Web sites (p. 11). Furthermore, the amount of material available from new media sources is vast, which makes studies of media content much more difficult than ever before (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001, p. 372). In fact, Internet content is literally unbounded, and when traditional media migrate online, comprehensive analyses of content may be all but impossible. To further exacerbate this difficult problem, each individual experience with content may differ in the new media environment, as interactive technologies allow for users to select a subset of the available content on a given web site and also follow different hyperlinks from page to page (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001, p. 372). Political communication affects research, thus ought to examine the maze of embedded links within political blogs, or the frequency with which users click on particular embedded links, neither of which this study was, unfortunately, able to do. Therefore, while the data analyzed in this study revealed several interesting findings, one limitation was that the content from the embedded links was not included in the analysis.

Another limitation of this study that should be addressed through future research was that there was no way of knowing exactly which citizen demographic was viewing the campaigns' YouTube advertisements. While YouTube says that its greatest number of viewers is in the 18–55 demographic, it is not known who exactly these viewers are (Anthony, 2008, p. 55). Even though this study was conducted with the knowledge that 49% of video viewers age 18–29 say they regularly access YouTube videos (The Audience for Online Video, n.d.), we have very little knowledge of viewers' habits specifically regarding political advertisements. Such knowledge would have provided us with a better idea of who was viewing the Obama and McCain web advertisements that appeared on YouTube. As Anthony (2008) points out, "The exact age, group, gender, income level and education level of these viewers would be a huge benefit to the campaigns in the future, as this information could help them tailor their messages to a particular voting block, thus making it more persuasive in nature" (p. 55). Certainly, better knowledge of these YouTube viewers, as well as of blog posters and readers, would have been helpful for the current study.

Finally, another future direction for research would be to analyze other partisan blog websites and see how their agendas match the agendas set by the other types of media sources like candidate ads and debates. While it was beneficial to examine one liberal blog and one conservative blog for the purposes of this study, a total of two blogs is not a very large sample when considering the entire partisan blogosphere. There were many other popular independent partisan blogs that unfortunately could not be included in this study, which need to be examined in the future to broaden our understanding of inter-media agenda setting.

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