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LEANING LEFT: A CASE STUDY OF MEDIA BIAS IN THE
2004 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

by
Adam Laşeckı

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Arts Degree
of
The Graduate School
at
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Approved by

Advisor

Date Approved

7/6/05

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Chapter 1: Introduction to Study

Statement of Problem

Long known as the “fifth estate,” the news media, especially the print media, play an important role in how American citizens receive information and how they behave once they get such information. A citizenry then must have adequate access to information to make the informed judgments needed in a republican form of government. In the last several years, access to information via television networks, internet news sites and broadcast television has exploded, with near saturation.

That being said, 85 percent of Americans still read a newspaper in a given week, with a quarter of those people reading the paper daily and ten percent reading a non-local paper, (Whelan, 2001). With newspapers rated so high among information resources, the study will focus on newspapers as a news medium.

For Americans to be informed, they must trust their news source. Most Americans have heard charges that the media is biased, despite the fact they do not agree on the nature of that bias. The question of media bias must be qualified with properties of that bias, such as willful bias, influential bias or bias threatening widely-held convictions, (D’Alessio and Allen 2000).

A special case of media bias lies in the arena of electoral politics. Partisan bias in the news attracts the most public interest and attention. Fears in this regard are not unfounded: journalism as a whole is populated by people who identify themselves as liberals or democrats. According to a 1997 Pew Research Center study, 61 percent of journalists and editors considered themselves “liberal” while only 15 percent considered themselves “conservative” and 24 percent were independent. This bolsters

the media bias argument because journalists and editors are considered “gatekeepers,” and select certain news as important compared to all other available news, and this role allows them to select stories and cover candidates, (White, 1950):

With this in mind, this study will feature a case study of print news media bias in the 2004 Presidential election between Massachusetts Senator John F. Kerry and President George W. Bush.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to determine if media bias existed in the print news media coverage of the 2004 Presidential election.

- 1) Did liberal media bias exist in the *New York Times* during the six months preceding the 2004 Presidential election?
- 2) Did liberal media bias exist in the *Washington Post* during the six months preceding the 2004 Presidential election?
- 3) Did student and adult voters detect media bias in the 2004 Presidential election?

Initial research indicates the perception of media bias limits the effectiveness of major print media to disseminate information to the electorate and to adequately inform them about the issues needed to make an informed decision about the 2004 presidential election.

Several cases of bias will be researched, including bias by commission, bias by omission, bias by story selection, bias by placement and bias by condemnation or endorsement, (Baker, 1999).

According to Baker, bias by commission incorporates not giving both sides, and in this case both candidates, equal time. Objectivity would dictate that both candidates are offered roughly similar space to respond to questions or give examples.

Bias by omission concerns ignoring facts that support or disprove positions held by both candidates. A basic knowledge of the facts must be ascertained to see such bias, but objectivity would dictate that both sides are represented.

Bias by story selection incorporates giving prominence of one candidate over another. Although giving both candidates equal time might be constrained by space allocations, this pattern would prove apparent over a period of time.

Bias by story placement concerns feature or news stories about a candidate appears in the actual newspaper. A story on the front page represents importance, where as a story on page 54 inside of the paper represents less importance.

Bias by condemnation or endorsement includes whether or not a story favors one side or another. This would include policy recommendations and a measure of success, such as "failed or successful."

Importance of Study

In elections, voters have little incentive to gather information about complex social and geopolitical issues. Instead, they rely on information provided by various news sources, including newspapers. Surveys have found that a majority of American voters regularly read newspapers and many consider them their chief source of campaign information, (Popkin, 1994).

To cast an informed vote, voters need information about policies and political parties and the desirability of both. Since the media can be held accountable for demonstrable falsehood, it has little leeway in reporting party policies, but does have ways to show its preference in the biases defined earlier, (Chan and Suen, 2004).

Whereas the media must report a party's policies truthfully, it may exaggerate or omit conditions surrounding that policy, thus showing bias.

For a republic like the United States to survive, the people, who elect those who run this country, must receive objective coverage of political parties, the campaign and the candidates. Bias in one candidate's direction could unjustly influence public opinion in that candidate's direction. Thus, media bias remains unhealthy for the republic in its influence.

This study will help political consultants and public relations practitioners to determine the extent of media bias present in print news publications during a specific presidential campaign. Especially important to political consultants, this study could show how to counter media bias to benefit a particular candidate.

Assumptions

The researcher also assumes that *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* strive for objective reporting and do not intentionally insert bias into their publications.

Limitations

Limitations of this study include the length of time allotted to complete the study. The limit of coverage on the 2004 Presidential election also limits the study, with more than half of the articles used for analysis written one month prior to the election.

Further limitations include the fact that only *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* were used for analysis. This researcher limited the study size by using articles from every fourth day for six months prior to the election, leaving out articles before June 1, 2004 and all others between then and the elections.

The limitation of the ingrained bias of the researchers and coders also limits the study.

Hypotheses

- 1) It is expected that political coverage in headlines, leads, and placement of stories will show significant liberal media bias in favor of Senator John Kerry in the 2004 presidential election (Rosen, 2004)
- 2) It is expected that focus panels will show the prevalence of media bias perception. (Rosen, 2004)

The public at large views the media as biased toward liberal candidates and usually expects the coverage of politics to be slanted in that area. (Rosen, 2004)

Procedure

The plan of study includes a content analysis and several focus groups. The researcher will conduct a content analysis of articles appearing in *The New York*

Times and *The Washington Post* for a period of six months, between June 1, 2004 and Election Day, November 2, 2004. Because several hundred articles appear during this time, the researcher randomly selected those articles published every fourth day starting from June 1, 2004 and ending on October 31, 2004.

The researcher will also conduct several focus panels on issues regarding the election and media bias. These panels will involve student-aged participants (age 19-24) and adult participants (age 25 and over).

The researcher will tabulate the results from both analyses to determine the existence and extent of media bias in the 2004 Presidential election.

To understand why media bias remains an important topic of research to public relations professionals, a look at the pertinent literature will be done.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined as used throughout the thesis:

Objectivity- judgment based on observation and uninfluenced by emotions or personal prejudices.

Bias- To influence in a particular, typically unfair direction; prejudice.

Bias by commission- not giving both sides equal time.

Bias by omission- ignoring facts that support or disprove positions held by one side or another.

Bias by story selection- giving prominence to one side over another by selecting more stories about that side.

Bias by story placement- giving prominence to one side over another by placing the story in a more convenient place for readers to read.

Bias by condemnation or endorsement- whether or not a story favors one side over another such as recommendations and demeaning criticism.

Lead- The first sentence or paragraph in a news story that sets the tone of the article.

Nut-graph- The second through fifth paragraphs in an article where the majority of background information is presented.

Stuffed- An article that is pushed off of the first page and into the newspaper due to perceived unimportance.

National newspaper- Referring to a newspaper that claims to write for a national audience rather than for a specialized local audience (examples: *USA Today*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Los Angeles Times*.)

Times- refers to the *New York Times*

Post- refers to the *Washington Post*

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter will discuss all of the available literature the researcher believes that is relevant to this topic. The researcher used the university library, including on-line databases and other on-line sources. Main sources included the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Relevant journals that were used by the researcher include: *American Demographics*, *Journal of Communication*, *Journalism Quarterly*, *European Journal of Communication*, *Harvard International Journal of Press/politics*, *Public Relations Quarterly*, *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, *Foreign Affairs*, *The American Behavioral Scientist*, *Columbia Journalism Review*, *Federal Communications Law Journal*, *The St. Louis Journalism Review*, *Cato Journal* and *Communications Research*.

The researcher also used books and on-line resources.

Each topic in the literature review discusses print media bias and its effect on the 2004 presidential election. This chapter is separated into several sub-topics for ease of reading. These subtopics are communication in political campaigning, objectivity and bias and liberal media bias in print news.

Literature Review

Communication and Media in Political Campaigning

The beginning of this study will focus on politics in the media during presidential campaigns. The media obsessively cover presidential campaigns to the point of exhaustion, (D'Alessio, 2004). The media often represents, other than

advertising, the main source of communication between the candidate's campaign and the public, (Chan and Suen, 2004).

The founding fathers of this country set up a free press as a way to disseminate news and ideas freely among people in order to elect leaders in our republic. The whole idea of free press centers on politics and informing voters, (Trent, 2001).

Recently, the press has rabidly covered the presidential campaign. Superficial horserace coverage and attention to personality rather than substance are seen as the new way to cover politics, (Hellinger, 2004) Media also tend to turn the "spotlight inward" when covering campaigns, thus spending time covering how the media cover politics, (Watts, 1999).

How a candidate fares in the media spotlight has sunk presidential campaigns, such as Richard Nixon sweating during a television debate or Howard Dean screaming after a campaign rally, (Bennett, 2004).

Boylan challenged preconceived notions of media coverage of politics. "SoundBits are worthless. Politicians don't keep their promises. Campaigns are increasingly negative. Attack is the dominant form of campaign discourse. The public can't learn from campaigns because they are vapid and vacuous; debates contain no new information. Both advertising and attack drive voters from the polls. Newspapers have lost their impact." While casting a more favorable light on the country's political condition, they avoid over optimism, suggesting merely that the American political system, with all its faults, is resilient and self-correcting, (Boylan, 2000).

Trent contended that image through the media represented the lasting image the electorate brought to the polls when selecting a political candidate. People make

decisions through easy to digest sound-bites and flattering remarks, and not so much through issues and truth, (Trent, 2001).

Chan and Suen, Whalen, Bennett all listed print news media as an important type of media that Americans get their information. Although television became the most popular destination for news consumption some time ago, newspapers represent an area for more thoughtful and careful digestion of news, (Whalen, 2001.)

Objectivity and Bias

D'Alessio and Allen state that bias occurs because of the situation under which journalists report the news during campaigns. They are kept in the dark most of the time, only allowed to follow in packs, they must stay with the same candidate the entire campaign season and must report the same boring facts over and over, (D'Alessio and Allen, 2000).

Baker argues that bias comes in several packages and on a whole can be seen as either liberal or conservative depending on the news medium. The elite national media represent mostly liberal-slanting campaign news while talk radio and some cable television represent a more conservative brand, (Baker, 1999).

Chan and Suen think the media serve a watchdog function and thus are biased towards the public rather than government. This bias reaches across party lines and signifies that the media will look for the worst in public figures and "beat them while they are down," (Chan and Suen, 2004).

According to Watts, the "elite media" gave the public "clues" that led them to believe one dogma or another. His theory said that most Americans like their news

“on the fly” and don’t want to think too much. The media bias presented then remains liberal in nature because the elite media is considered liberal and thus the liberal media attempts to tell people how to think, (Watts, 1999).

Schmitt disagrees, saying that each side sees truth through the lens of its own ideology. A partisan, someone who identifies with a particular ideology, will ignore facts and aspects of the opposition that are negative and absorb facts and aspects of their own ideology that are positive. Through this lens, all media is biased because the partisan only wants to see media coverage sympathetic to their own cause and damning of the opposition. If the media tried to portray a fair and balanced view of a situation, both sides would call the story biased for now focusing exclusively on them, (Schmitt, 2004).

Johnson portrayed bias according to controversial issues. Depending on the issue, (abortion, the death penalty, foreign relations) the media treats candidates differently. If a candidate has a particular view on an issue, if the media outlet agrees or disagrees with that position dictates whether or not it will show bias towards that particular candidate. She argues that there is no singular liberal or conservative viewpoint, so bias must be assigned according to issue, (Johnson, 2003).

Harwood sees this bias as a tool to alienate voters. He says the competing claims of lies and bias confuse the American voter and induce stalemate and apathy. Mundy says this contributes to the rise of the divided nation, where two super regions of ideological voters control national politics.

Liberal Media Bias

While most researchers see bias in political reporting, it remains unclear what this bias constitutes and whom it favors. Some see bias as subject orientated while others say the bias depends on what medium the news comes from or who receives the news.

This researcher believes that the media reports news with a biased slant. Liberal bias in this case is known as bias supporting the candidacy of Senator John F. Kerry and the viewpoints associated with his campaign.

Sutter complains the liberal media bias comes from corporate ownership of major media outlets, including newspapers. He claims the editorial slant comes from the top down and influences all aspects of the newspaper. A liberal newspaper is more likely to hire like-minded reporters. Sutter cites that most reporters are indeed liberal and whereas businessmen tend to be conservative, liberals may find journalism and political campaign coverage their right, (Sutter, 2001)

Badaracco claims the influence of religious entities in and around Capitol Hill have influenced members of congress and members of the Washington elite. Since their influence has not reached most of the national print media, she claims the media sees itself as a watchdog to this movement and counteracts with a liberal, anti-religion slant. This only covers most social issues, (Badaracco, 1992).

D'Alessio contends that media bias, although a minor problem, remains more of a fascination of the news media itself and that of political pundits. His research shows that most public opinion on the matter of media bias depends on whether or not the person strongly identifies with one ideology or another.

Most Americans consider themselves moderate or independent, with the Democratic and Republican parties only taking a 40 percent share of the electorate. Sixty percent of Americans thus do not see a significant media bias, either from middle-of-the-road viewpoints or from apathy, (D'Alessio, 2003).

Finally, Hall counters the liberal bias argument with a character bias that is decidedly biased towards uncouth behavior. Using the 2000 election as a backdrop, she shows how the "liberal media" negatively portrayed former Vice President Al Gore during his campaign for president. Al Gore had viewpoints that should align with those of a liberal media, but after the media tore into President Bill Clinton for eight years, they couldn't help but associate Gore with him.

Hall says the early coverage of then Governor George W. Bush was that of "a fresh air" or a "new candidate." Hall concedes that as the Election Day drew closer, its analysis of the election fell into line with liberal media expectation, but only after, she says, the damage had been done to Gore.

Conclusion

After a thorough review of the literature available and pertinent to this topic, evidence exists that, while media bias has been well covered, the media bias exhibited in the 2004 presidential election between Senator John F. Kerry and President George W. Bush has not been fully covered.

After gaining knowledge on the various theories associated with media bias and how that bias is perceived, the researcher concludes that an analysis of print media related to the 2004 presidential election should be conducted. The next logical

step includes a content analysis of this material and focus groups designed to gain knowledge of the public's perception of media bias.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This researcher used two general sources when researching information for this thesis: 1) online databases provided by the Campbell Library at Rowan University and 2) publicly available search engines, such as Yahoo! and Google, on the Internet.

The databases searched at the above mentioned library included ABI/Inform (ProQuest), Academic Universe (Lexis-Nexis), Digital Dissertations, JStor, the *New York Times* and EBSCO. All issues of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* for this thesis were available online and were obtained from the library databases.

In addition to online databases, the researcher read *Foreign Affairs* and the *Columbia Journalism Review* in print form.

Selection of the Sample

This researcher will administer two focus panels, one consisting of eight participants ages 27 to 52 and another consisting of eight participants ages 19 to 23. Participants will be selected because they belonged to two groups, college students and adults no longer in college. There will be no requirements other than willingness to participate.

A focus panel will be used for qualitative face to face responses. A focus panel will also provide responses for the content analysis.

The incentive to participate for the “college age” group will be food provided by the researcher. The incentive to participate for the “not in college” group will be their willingness to participate.

Content Analysis

This researcher also will conduct a content analysis of articles in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. The articles were published during a period of six months, between June 1, 2004 and Election Day, November 2, 2004 and dealt exclusively with the presidential election between Senator John Kerry and President George W. Bush.

Because several hundred articles were published during the period, the researcher will limit the articles to ones published every fourth day during the designated six month period. The result will produce 238 *Post* articles and 264 *Times* articles.

Focus Panel Protocol

The protocol for the focus panel includes a 15-question instrument with multiple choice and open-ended questions. Demographic questions were also included on the protocol.

The protocol was designed in a way to elicit information to answer the original research question as stated in chapter one, to determine if media bias existed in the print news media coverage of the 2004 Presidential election.

The content analysis will evaluate and categorize the data selected. Categories were selected and when an article meets the requirement of that

category, the article will be listed under it. An article could be listed under multiple categories.

The categories are:

- Biased placement in the paper
- Biased headlines
- Biased leads
- Various biased code words

Once all of the articles were listed, tables and tabulations will show what percentage of articles each category contained.

Procedures

This researcher first tested a draft of the protocol on a practice focus group of four people. Considerations from the practice focus group were taken and a final questionnaire was produced. The researcher then made two copies of the protocol with all the questions and possible answers. Then several copies were made with just the questions to be distributed to the participants.

Both focus groups will consist of eight participants, who will be assured of confidentiality. Two recorders will also be present at each focus group. The questionnaire will be read and answers recorded for each answer. The first focus group consisting of "college age" participants will last approximately 45

minutes, the second focus group consisting of "not in college" participants will last approximately 75 minutes.

This researcher conducted the content analysis over several hours in March 2005. With an assistant, every qualifying article was read and coded. Articles that were coded differently were discussed and ultimately given a code that was agreed upon by the researcher and the assistant.

Analysis of Data

After the completion of the focus groups, the recorders will give the researcher all of the answers given by the participants. After evaluation, the recorders will rectify any discrepancies with answers from the participants. The answers will be typed and displayed in a report.

After the completion of the content analysis, this researcher will tabulate all of the results and create a coder sheet. The results will then be recorded on charts.

Upon completion of all data analysis, a summary report will be produced. This report will include an original copy of the questionnaire along with final statistics and conclusions drawn from data analysis.

Chapter Four: Findings

Hypothesis 1: It is expected that political coverage in headlines, leads, and placement of stories will show significant liberal media bias in favor of Senator John Kerry in the 2004 presidential election

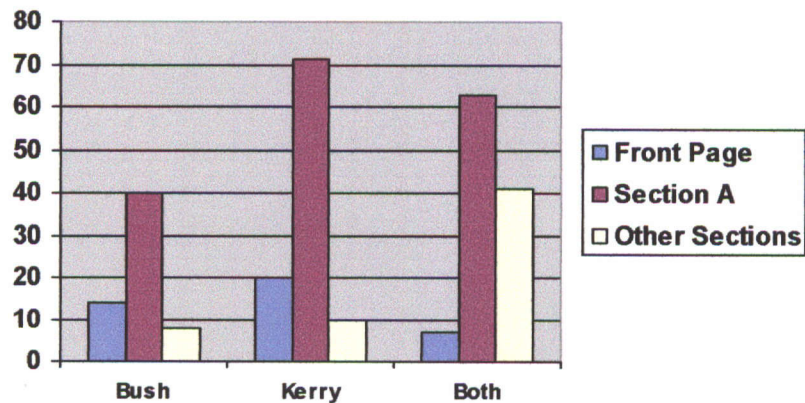
Content Analysis:

Bias by placement in the *New York Times*

The first category newspaper articles were put in was the location of the article in the newspaper. As noted earlier, it can be assumed that articles appearing on the front page of the newspaper are considered more important than articles appearing inside of the paper and in other sections of the paper. A casual reader is more likely to read a story on the front page.

Of the 264 articles collected for the content analysis, 41 appeared on the first page. Fourteen articles about President Bush appear on the front page, 20 articles about Senator Kerry appear on the front page and seven articles concern candidates or the election in general.

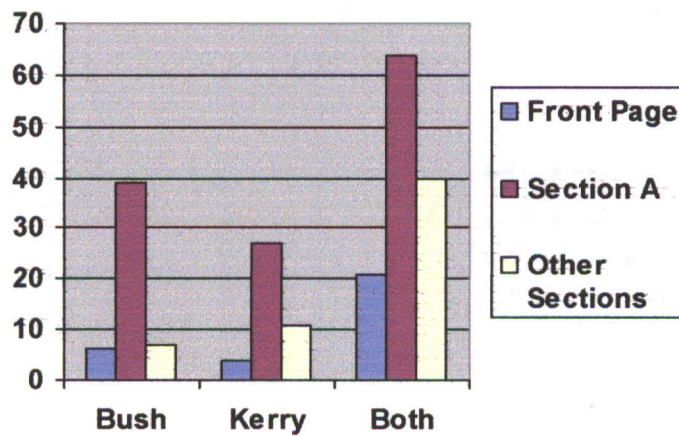
Figure 1: Placement of Articles in the *New York Times*



Bias by placement in the *Washington Post*

Of the 219 articles collected for the content analysis, 31 appeared on the front page, six about Bush, four about Kerry and 21 neutral. A similar evenly divided tone continues throughout the other sections with Kerry and Bush having an equally small number of articles about them and most articles about both.

Figure 2: Placement of Articles in the *Washington Post*



Bias by headlines in the *New York Times*

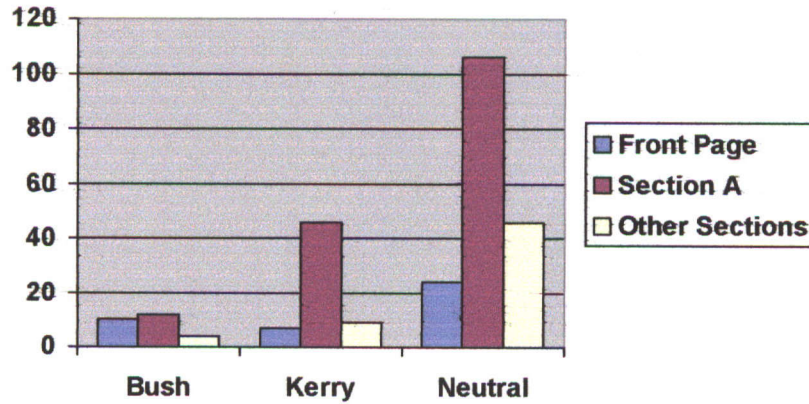
Another form of bias is inclusion or exclusion from the article's headline. If an article features one candidate in the headline but excludes the other candidate, bias by placement in the headline occurs.

Of the 264 articles about the election, the candidates appear in 88 headlines. President Bush appears in 26 of those headlines and Senator Kerry appears in 62 of those headlines.

Broken down even further, of the 26 headlines President Bush appears in; 10 are on the front page, 12 are in section A and four are in other sections. Of the 62

headlines Senator Kerry appears in; seven are on the front page, 46 are in section A and nine are in other sections.

Figure 3: Bias by Headlines *New York Times*

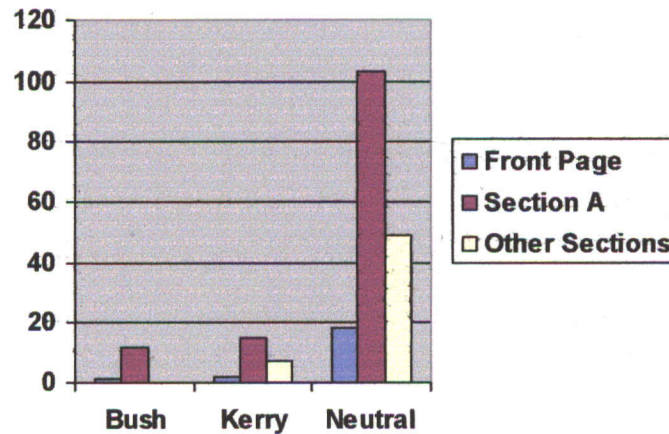


Bias by headlines in the *Washington Post*

Of the 219 articles about the election, the candidates appear in 72 headlines, with Bush appearing in 13 and Kerry appearing in 27. Broken down even further Bush appears on the front page once, section A 12 times and not at all in other sections. Kerry appears in headlines on the front page twice, section A 15 times and other sections 10 times.

They both appear in headlines 32 times.

Figure 4: Bias by Headlines in the *Washington Post*



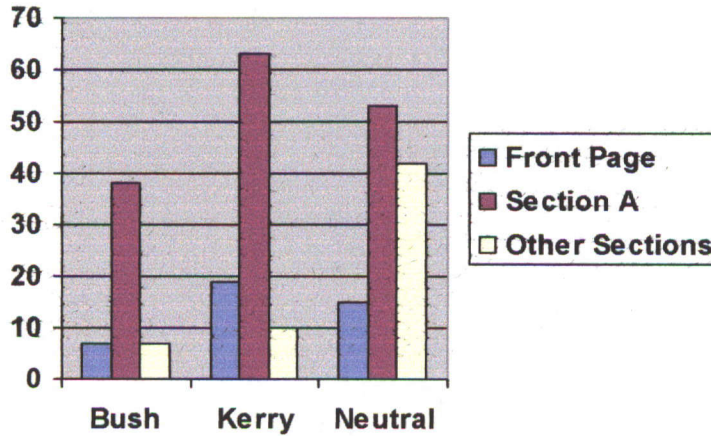
Bias by leads in the *New York Times*

Bias by leads occurs when an article mentions one candidate more often in the first or second paragraph. Whereas placement and headlines are obvious, bias by leads is more subtle, mentioning one candidate first and thus showing his position first.

Most times, an article will mention the other candidate and his position, but once the other candidate's position has been stated, the other candidate's position appearing second will appear as a rebuttal.

Of the 264 articles appearing about the election, President George Bush was mentioned first 52 times and Senator Kerry was mentioned first in the lead 82 times. Broken down further, Bush was mentioned first in the lead, seven times on the front page, 38 times in section A and seven times in other sections. Kerry was mentioned first in the lead 19 times on the front page, 63 times in section A and ten times in other sections.

Figure 5: Bias by Lead in the *New York Times*

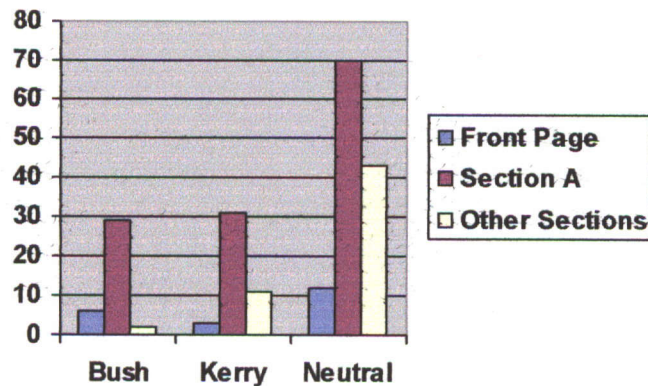


Bias by leads in the *Washington Post*

Of the 219 articles appearing about the election, the candidates appear in the lead 133 times, with Bush appearing 37 times and Kerry appearing 45 times.

Broken down further, Bush appears in 6 leads on the front page, 29 leads on section A and twice in other sections. Kerry appears in 3 leads on the front page, 31 in section A and 11 times in other sections.

Figure 6: Bias by Leads in the *Washington Post*



Bias by code words in the *New York Times*

Bias by code words is even more subtle than bias by leads. Whereas the first three measurements concern where the article appeared and who the article talked about first, bias by code words examines exactly what the author of the article says.

During the content analysis, the researcher wrote down words and phrases that appeared over and over again in articles about the election. The top six words and phrases appearing repeatedly were “flip flopper,” “weak on economy,” “soft on terrorism,” “special interests,” “tax breaks for the rich” and “out of touch with Americans.”

These words and phrases were not tested for their connotation, but the researcher assumes these words and phrases are negative.

The researcher then wrote down how many times these words or phrases appeared next, referring to or appearing in the same sentence as the two candidates.

Findings include no mentions of “flip flopper” and President Bush, but 114 such mentions and Senator Kerry. Bush only registers four links to ‘soft on terrorism,’ but Kerry registers 167 such links. “Tax breaks for the rich” is mentioned with Bush 97 times, but only 17 times with Kerry. They both have comparable mentions with “special interests” and “out of touch with Americans.”

Figure 7: "Flip Flopper"

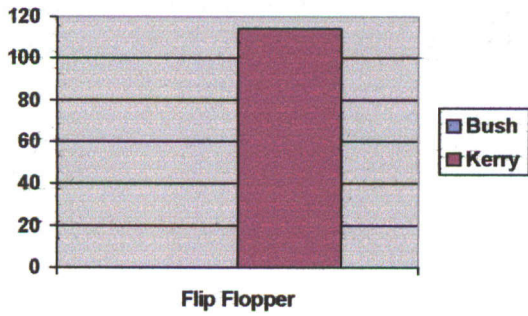


Figure 8: "Weak on Economy"

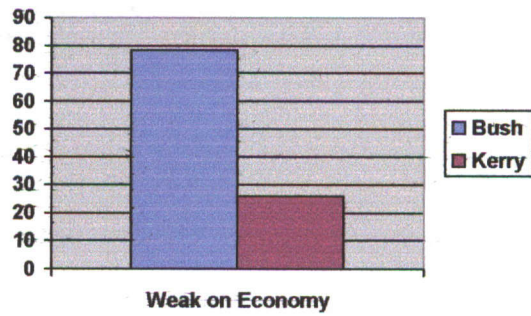


Figure 9: "Soft on Terror"

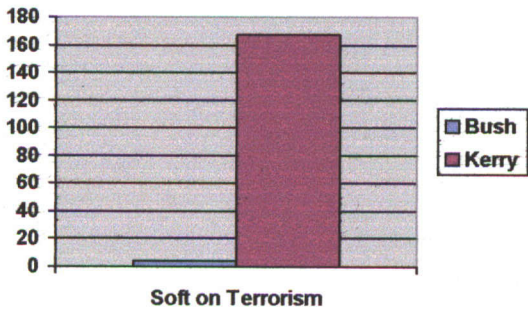


Figure 10: "Out of Touch"

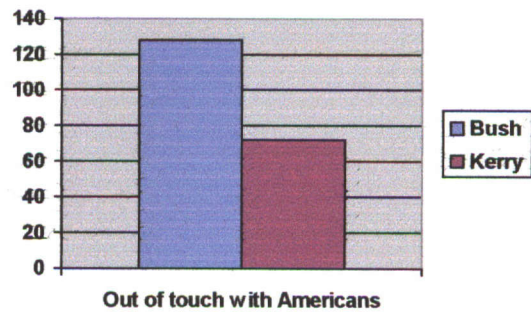


Figure 11: "Special Interests"

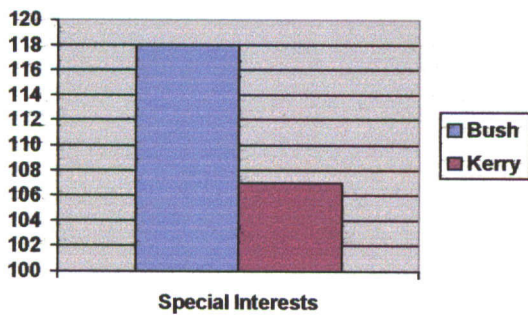
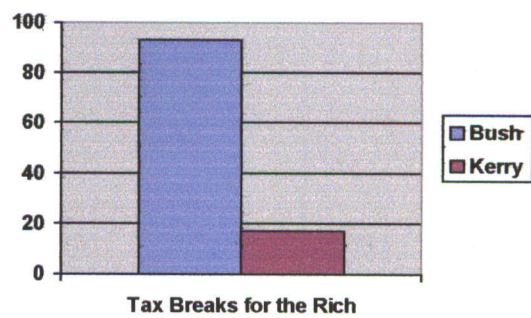


Figure 12: "Tax Breaks"



"Weak on Terrorism" and "Out of Touch" showed more mentions to Bush and were consistent with most data collected.

Bias by Code Words in the *Washington Post*

Just as in the *Times*, Kerry is exclusively linked with the word “flip flopper” in the *Post* with 78 mentions to Bush’s none. Kerry also gets 68 links with the phrase “soft on terrorism.” The other key words are linked relatively equally to both candidates.

Figure 13: “Flip Flopper”

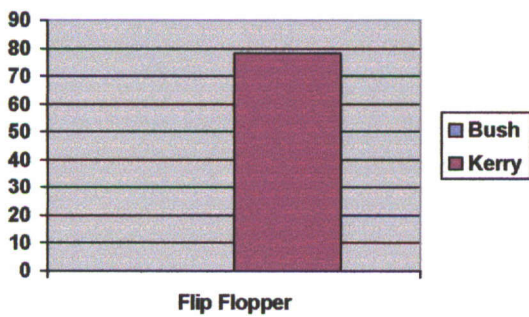


Figure 14: “Weak Economy”

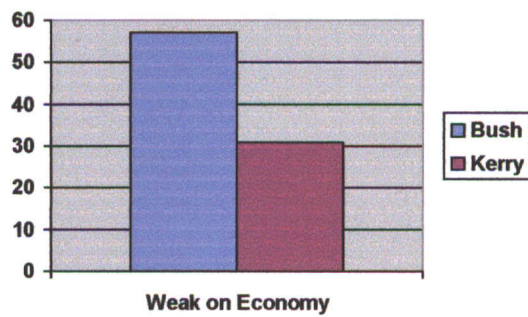


Figure 14: “Soft on Terrorism”

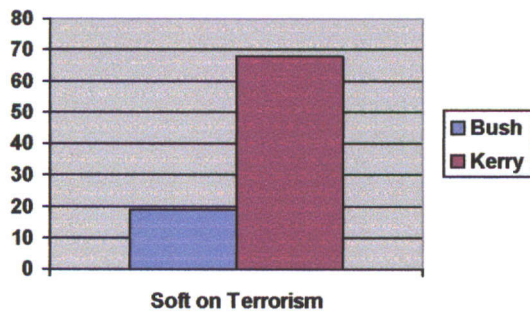


Figure 15: “Special Interests”

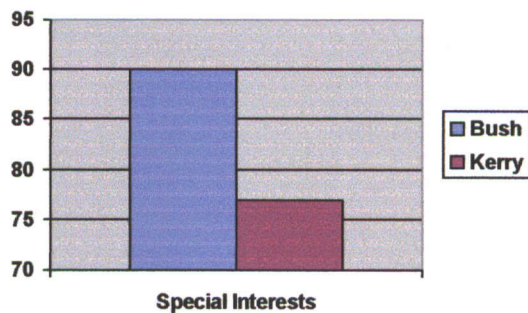


Figure 16: “Tax Breaks”

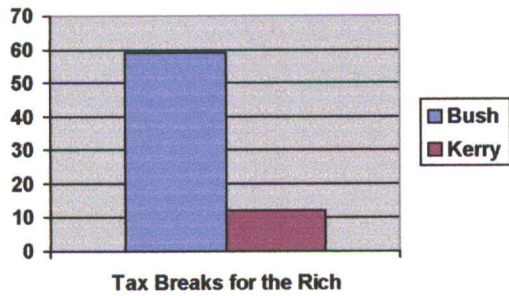
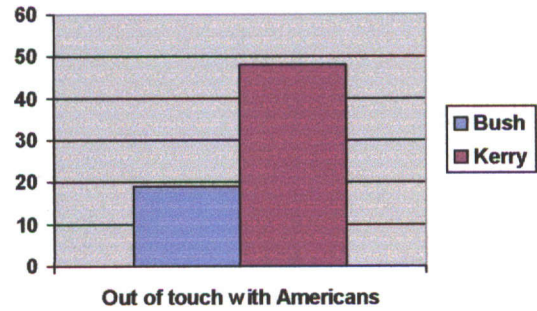


Figure 17: “Out of Touch”



Hypothesis 1: Supported and Not Supported

The *New York Times* shows significant liberal bias in all facets examined toward Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry, but the *Washington Post* does not show significant liberal bias toward Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry.

Hypothesis 2: It is expected that focus panels will show the prevalence of media bias perception.

College Age Focus Panel

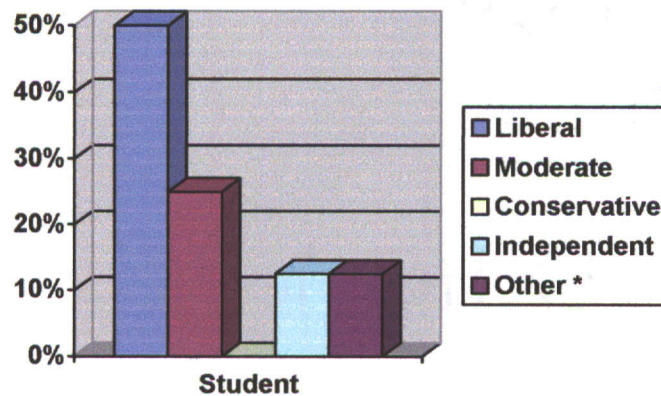
1. Have you been following the 2004 presidential election closely?

Every one of the participants followed the election as of the day of the focus group, but only a few had followed it “closely.” Most had listed the debates as a time when they had followed the election closely

2. Political orientation

The political orientation of the participants varied. The college age group featured no conservatives and mostly liberals, independents and moderates.

Figure 18: Political Orientation



* The “other” in the student group is a radical left-wing anarchist socialist

3. Media Sources

While this study focuses on media bias in print news, the majority of college age participants received their election coverage from cable news channels such as CNN, MSNBC and FOX News.

Table 1: Media Sources

Newspaper	Broadcast TV	Cable News	The Internet	Other
12.5%	0%	75%	12.5%	0%

4. Other Media Sources

Of the eight college age participants, six received their election news coverage from more than one source. Newspapers, the Internet and broadcast news were listed as major sources of election news coverage, while the two participants who reported to receive their information from only one source, both listed cable news channels as their only source.

5. Decision on 2004 Election

Regardless if the participants voted, five had chosen their favorite candidate prior to January 2004 and three had decided right before the election. Of the eight participants, only two actually voted on Election Day-- both for Senator John Kerry, the democrat.

6. Media Influence

Of the eight participants, only one said the media influenced his or her decision on the 2004 election and cited the debates on broadcast television as the

influencing factor. The other participants stated that either the media played no role in their decision or that it informed them on issues, but was not a determining factor in how they voted. Others cited their ingrained partisan or independent beliefs as to why the media had failed to influence them.

7. Republican Sources of Information

When asked their opinion of where republicans received information, the college age group showed significant bias and contempt toward republicans. While many cited conservative pundits such as Bill O'Reilly or Rush Limbaugh and their television or radio stations, others used this question to mock republicans.

“Republicans are not informed,” “a hick outside of a general store in Louisiana” and “young republicans don't understand why they are conservative” were some of the reported answers given. One participant said that both republicans and democrats received their information from the same source.

8. Democrat Sources of Information

When asked their opinion of where democrats received their information, the participants mostly agreed that democrats watched or listened to mainstream newspapers and were generally informed. Examples cited were CNN, the *New York Times*, and broadcast news.

9. Media Perceptions

The participants provided a wild array of answers to what they perceived as the media's political orientation. Two participants called it “outright liberal,” two considered the media “moderate,” but the other four answered other.

Two participants regarded the media as “center-left” and said that while most media is liberal, there remains a conservative counterbalance through radio and Fox News.

Another said the media was “subjective” and could be either conservative or liberal depending on the subject matter. This participant saw social issues covered in a liberal fashion, while other issues seemed moderate or conservative.

Finally, another said the media were only concerned with money and were “capitalist and profit based,” saying that while many would call the media liberal, they are owned by large corporations that are mostly conservative.

10. *New York Times* Perceptions

The college-age perception of the newspaper fell into two camps. Half of the participants have never read the *New York Times*, and said their perception of the newspaper was shaped by Jayson Blair. The other half had read the paper and viewed it favorably, citing it as “well respected,” “the nation’s newspaper” and “essential.”

11. *New York Times* Coverage of the Election

All eight participants said the newspaper had covered the election “effectively” with praise ranging from “they do a decent job” and “people seem to like it” to “better than most” and “most credible news source.”

12. *Washington Post* Perceptions

Again the respondents fell into two groups; three either think of nothing or have never read the *Post* and five had read it and had opinions. Two respondents cited Woodward and Bernstein and their Watergate investigations and two others saw it as second fiddle to the *Times*. The consensus view was that the *Post* was more conservative than the *Times*.

13. *Washington Post* Coverage of the Election

Some of the participants couldn't answer whether or not the *Post* covered the election effectively. Some said that since the *Post* was located in Washington, it was more geared toward politicians and wasn't concerned with influencing national opinions. One said it had done a better job than the *Times*.

14. Perceptions of Corporate Ownership of the Media

All eight respondents said the corporate ownership of the media either influenced or exasperated the bias seen in the media. The need to attract viewers, listeners or readers leads the media to exaggerate facts, take sides and make the election out to be a horse race were cited as prime examples. This included with the ingrained ideologies of reporters at large and exactly who owns the media.

While the respondents said this was a problem, most agreed that government ownership or control of the media would only make it worse.

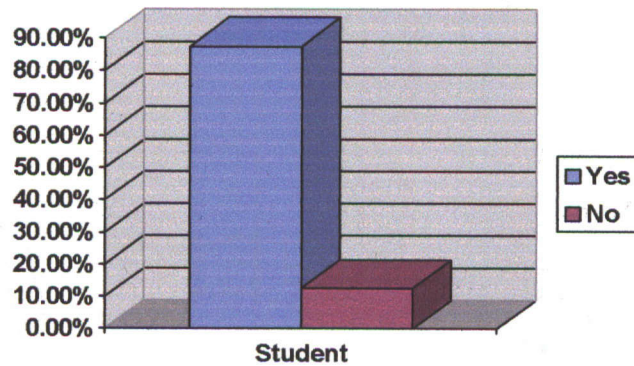
15. Effects of the Last Four Years on Media Election Coverage

The main effect of media coverage seems to be the media have become too cautious. Many cited the rise of Fox News as a force to moderate the other networks and conclude that media members are not asking hard enough questions.

The media is also seen as afraid of being wrong and middle of the road. The attacks of September 11, the legal battles resulting from the 2000 election and perceived media bias were seen as reason for this move.

16. Media Bias During 2004 Election

Figure 19: Media Bias



Seven of the participants said there was media bias during the 2004 election, with one person saying that it was no worse than it usually is and that Americans make up their minds absent the media anyway.

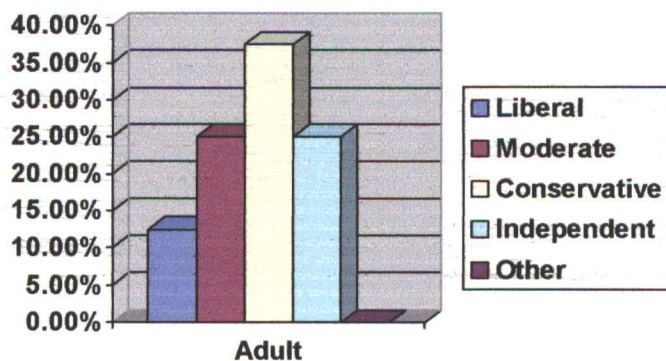
Adult Focus Panel

1. Have you been following the 2004 presidential election closely?

All eight participants said they had followed the election closely, but no more closely than earlier elections. No one described this election as the most important in history and predicted that whoever won would do just fine.

2. Political orientation

Figure 20: Political Orientation



The Adult Group was more conservative than the college age group, with three conservatives, two moderates, two independents and one liberal. The liberal participant considered themselves a “Kennedy democrat” while the others stated current social and economic reasons for their political orientation.

3. Media Sources

Table 2: Media Sources

Newspaper	Broadcast TV	Cable News	The Internet	Other
50%	12.5%	25%	12.5%	0%

Half of the participants said the newspaper was their main source of information and that they read the paper everyday. One participant said they watched ABC Nightly News nightly. Two participants watched Fox News during the day and the last participant followed the news on the internet at their office.

4. Other Media Sources

All of the participants said they watched some form of local evening news or cable news as their secondary source of information. The four participants that did not cite the newspaper as their primary source of information said they rarely read the paper and do not subscribe to any.

5. Decision on 2004 Election

Table 3: Election Decisions

Before Jan '04	Jan '04-June '04	After DNC Convention	After RNC Convention	Right Before the election
12.5%	0	25%	25%	37.5%

One participant was voting “democrat all the way” and made up their mind “the night after the 2000 election was decided.” The others said they wanted to weigh the facts. The two participants who decided after the DNC convention said that Sen. John Kerry’s speech made them more inclined to vote for President George Bush.

One participant was upset at some of the speeches at the RNC convention and decided not to vote afterwards, while another saw the RNC convention as “inspirational.”

The three participants decided to vote after the televised debates. Seven of the eight participants voted- six for President George Bush, the republican, and one for Sen. John Kerry, the democrat.

6. Media Influence

All eight participants said the media had influenced their decision somewhat, with the debated and the convention having the most effect. Others cited the advertisements as a determining factor. Since most of their minds were made up late in the election year, they said the media informed them where each candidate stood on issues important to them.

7. Republican Sources of Information

Self-described conservative participants said that republicans get their information from a variety of places and couldn't be pigeon holed in to the popular perceived "radio-Fox News" niche. Others said that most people get their information the same and decide their point of view on issues based on personal experience and what is most important to them.

8. Democrat Sources of Information

The participants seemed to agree that democrats get their information from bias news sources and make up their opinion based on what the media tells them. Some said democrats had it "easier" when disseminating information that was "tailor-made" for them.

9. Media Perceptions

Seven participated responded that, for better or for worse, the media was liberal and has always been. One participant said that the media had been moderated

from a swing in power from democrats to republicans and that the trend would continue as long as people continued to vote republican.

10. *New York Times* Perceptions

Most of the participants in the Not in College group did not read the *New York Times* favoring the *Philadelphia Inquirer* or *Daily News* and local papers. This being said, the consensus opinion was the *Times* was a liberal newspaper for people in New York City

11. *New York Times* Coverage of the Election

While only one of the participants had an opinion on the coverage (“very good”) others speculated that the paper displayed a liberal bias.

12. *Washington Post* Perceptions

Most of the participants cited the Watergate scandal or Woodward and Bernstein, but admitted to not reading the *Post* either. One participant said that it was an “insiders rag” for people in Washington and had nothing to do with people in the Philadelphia area.

13. *Washington Post* Coverage of the Election

No one had a strong opinion on the subject, but some speculated that the coverage “should be good” because of the paper’s location.

14. Perceptions of Corporate Ownership of the Media

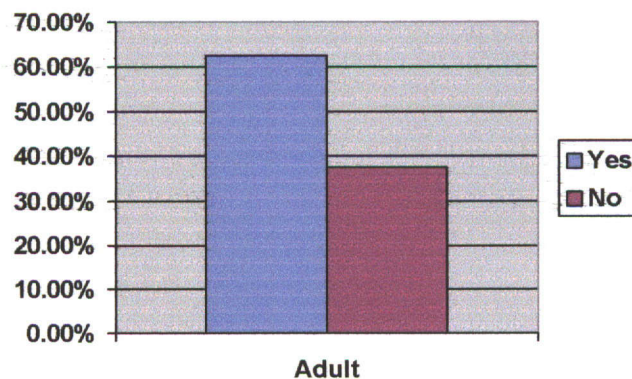
Most of the participants were unaware that large corporations owned most media outlets. But others were resigned saying “they own everything anyway.” All were vehemently against government control of the media.

15. The effects of the Last Four Years on Media Election Coverage

Most of the participants answered this question personally. Most said since September 11, they have been more “in tune” with the world and more inclined to listen, watch or read news. One participant expressed fatigue over the “never ending cycle of bad news.”

16. Media Bias During 2004 Election?

Figure 21: Media Bias



Five of the participants cited the continuing trend of media bias in this election and every election before this. The other three said that media bias was actually a lot less prevalent this election cycle and cited recent republican and “values” victories and September 11 as contributing factors.

Hypothesis 2: Conclusions

The idea that focus panel participants would see liberal bias in the 2004 presidential election was supported by both the college students and adults.

Chapter Five: Conclusions

Conclusions

At the conclusion of this study, one main point has been proved very true: the *New York Times* is a predominately liberal newspaper. Although this study only focused on the six months prior to the 2004 presidential elections, the reputation that the *Times* had a liberal slant to its reporting had long been rumored and had once again held true.

The surprising fact concerned the *Washington Post*. Although the paper showed somewhat of a liberal bias, it was by far more even handed than the *Times*. This would counter the argument that all newspaper journalism has a strong liberal bias, but that would need to be studied further.

The reason behind this fact begs a few questions. Although both newspapers enjoy a wide audience outside of their respective subscription bases, they are both predominately written for New York and Washington, respectively. The idea that one of those metropolitan areas is more liberal than the other is not true.

In the 2004 election, New York voted for John Kerry over George Bush by a margin of 74 percent to 22 percent, only outmatched by the Washington metropolitan area that voted for John Kerry over George Bush by a margin of 78 percent to 18 percent.

Another interesting fact was how exactly the *Times* showed liberal bias. On the surface, both candidates were mentioned somewhat on par on front pages and in headlines, but once the articles in section A and other sections, John Kerry shows up more frequently and in more prominent placements, such as headlines and leads.

The *Post* on the other hand showed a similar mentions of both candidates in all sections of the newspaper and actually mentioned Bush more in the inside of the newspaper.

The *Times* was more interested in the election earlier than the *Post*. Although most of the articles from both newspapers were published in the 45 days before the election, the *Times* had more articles about the election before October.

The *Times* also seemed to talk about the election in the “red state-blue state” divide more than the *Post*, thus perpetrating the idea of a divided country.

To public relations specialists working on a political campaign, the idea that print news from major metropolitan areas are biased remains an important piece of information. Knowing that a bias exists against a campaign when entering an area of the country, the specialist may want to change the message or channel to reach their intended audience.

Obviously, a conservative republican will want limited contact with the *Times*, in order to avoid a misrepresentation or difficult questions that a specialist would need to avoid in a high pressure campaign.

Speaking again to the red state-blue state divide, a conservative republican most likely would not schedule events in New York or Washington, since that candidate has little or no chance of winning that area. In that sense, the liberal bias presented broadly in the *Times* and subtly by the *Post* would then seem to have little effect on the overall outcomes of presidential elections, since their audiences are mostly in the Northeast, which historically votes for the liberals regardless.

The track record of elections since 1968 also speaks to the ineffectiveness of the liberal media bias presented in the papers. Other than the post-Watergate 1976 Carter victory and the 1992 and 1996 victories of moderate southern democrat Bill Clinton, republicans have won every election.

Perhaps a moderating influence on both papers would serve readers better and would reflect the current realities in the political landscape. Also, because the changing nature of political media, with an emphasis on talk radio, 24-hour news networks and Internet web logs, perhaps newspapers would be best served to function as bastions of truth and fair reporting, since none of the other aforementioned outlets profess to such lofty goals.

The most unfortunate aspect of the focus groups was the fact that only two college age participants actually voted. All college age participants were knowledgeable about the election, had opinions, and emotionally responded to questions about their orientation and media activities. The unfortunate part of this equation is that if these participants had voted, along with millions of people their age across the country, the outcome more than likely would have been different.

If only half of eligible voters register and then only half of those registered actually vote, the country is run by 25 percent of the electorate and usually by those driven by special interests.

It is understandable why someone working a 12-hour shift the day of the election or someone very disenchanted with either candidate will not vote. These young participants have no excuse.

It was no surprise that the adult participants were more conservative, more likely to be effected by events in the last four years and more likely to want to protect what they've achieved. The amount of newspaper readership among the adults was also higher than their college counterparts, mostly because this age group relies more heavily on traditional media while college students have been brought up on the Internet and cable television.

The most important fact separating the college group and the adult group was not knowledge, they both seemed to be aware of the election and what was going on, the difference was action. The adults voted and the college-age participants did not.

Recommendations for Further Study

With more time and resources, this study would be complete with the inclusion of a few aspects. First, the sample could be much larger. This study only used 500 articles for the content analysis, a small fraction of the articles actually written about the election. Also this study only collected articles from six months prior to the election until the day of the election. A more comprehensive study would include all articles about the election two years prior to the study.

This inclusion would lead to a significantly larger sample and a more accurate portrayal of exactly how biased the *Times* and *Post* were throughout the entire election process, including the primaries and conventions.

Another recommendation would be to see how biased newspapers are in general and sample newspapers from a list of major cities or select newspapers from different regions of the country. The fact that the Northeast remains a liberal area is

well documented, whereas other areas of the country are changing or are considered traditionally conservative.

More focus groups would be used in a larger study, to see how attitudes and opinions change between several demographic categories. This study only focused on the difference between college-age and adult potential voters, but the categories could be expanded to see how different sexes, races, economic strata and cultural subsets react to media bias and election coverage.

Any future study may need to tweak the protocol to reflect the realities of a future elections and the researcher recommends rewriting several questions, such as questions five and 15.

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Appendix

Media Bias Focus Group Protocol

1. Did you follow the 2004 Presidential election closely?
2. What ideology do you most consider yourself?
 - a) Liberal
 - b) Moderate
 - c) Conservative
 - d) Independent
 - e) Other
3. From which media source did you get most of your information on the 2004 elections?
 - a) newspapers
 - b) broadcast television news
 - c) 24-hour new networks
 - d) Internet sites
 - e) other
4. Do you get your information from many sources or only one?
5. When did you make your decision on the 2004 election?
 - a) before Jan. 2004
 - b) Jan 2004-June 2004
 - c) after the DNC National Convention
 - d) after the RNC National Convention
 - e) right before the election
6. How has the media influenced your decision on the 2004 election?
7. Where do you think the majority of REPUBLICANS get their information about the election?
8. Where do you think the majority of DEMOCRATS get their information about the election?

9. What ideology most described the media as a whole?
- a) Liberal
 - b) Moderate
 - c) Conservative
 - d) Independent
 - e) Other
10. When I say the *New York Times*, what is the first thing that comes to mind?
11. Do you think the *New York Times* covered the national presidential election effectively?
12. When I say the *Washington Post*, what is the first thing that comes to mind?
13. Do you think the *Washington Post* covered the national presidential election effectively?
14. To what extent does the ownership of major media outlets by large corporations play in media coverage?
15. Have the events of the four years preceding the election changed the way the media is covering the 2004 presidential election? How?
16. Yes or No, was there media bias during the 2004 presidential election?