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BIAS IN THE NETWORK NIGHTLY NEWS COVERAGE
OF THE 2004 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
Communication Studies

by
Stephen Arthur Shelton II

March 2006

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March 2006

Approved by:


Mary Fong, Ph.D., // Communication Studies

3/9/06
Date


Rod Metts, Ph.D.


J. Scott Rodriguez, M.A.

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the issue of a media bias in favor of the Democratic Party during the 2004 Presidential Election. What takes place in actuality, and what occurs in the media can vary greatly. As is shown through the theory of agenda setting, what the mainstream media presents is what society tends to consider significant, conversely what the mainstream media ignores, tends to be ignored by the general populace. Because the mainstream media is focused on reaching the masses, no presentation will be overtly bias, therefore, to examine the presence of a political bias in the mainstream media this study implemented the grounded theory in order to uncover bias themes and strategies that were used by the media.

To examine the most far reaching form of media in the United States, this study consisted of the three major television networks [ABC, CBS, NBC] and their weekday nightly newscasts during the entire month of October 2004. The emerging themes and strategies from these broadcasts were compared to a study conducted at Sonoma State University of the year's most underreported yet newsworthy events. The two components were then put through a discourse analysis in order to discover what messages were

being presented within the broadcasts. The analysis showed that through both what was not covered in the mainstream media, as well as through the bias themes and strategies used by the journalists; no evidence exists to support the notion of a media bias in favor of the Democratic Party in the media coverage leading up to the 2004 Presidential Election.

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

The human factor involved in mediated broadcasts leaves open the possibility of scrutiny upon bias involved in these presentations. According to Alterman (2003) many portrayals related to media bias assume that a bias rests in favor of the Democratic Party (p. 192); however upon evaluation of literature and material related to this topic it is evident that proof exists refute that assumption, and in fact show that the mainstream media may have favored the Republican Party in the coverage of the 2004 presidential election.

Democrat verses Republican

To address the aforementioned notion of bias in the media, it is important to separate the descriptive philosophies of Democratic Party, from those of the Republican Party. Although on the surface these two parties seem similar, there are several fundamental differences that distinguish them. In order to more accurately differentiate the two parties in the way for which they choose to define themselves, I utilized the 2004

platform established by both parties before their respective 2004 conventions. According to McAuliffe (2004), the Democratic Party is a party that stands on the principals of the United States being strong at home, yet respected around the world, and an America that rejoices in diversity. In their 2004 platform the Democratic Party also pledged to protect the people of America, rebuild alliances, and lead the way to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Finally, the Democratic Party emphasized the need for securing quality health care, improving education, and ensuring clean air and water (p. 1-2). On the converse, the Republican Party according to their 2004 platform is the party that, ensures the safety of Americans, defeats terrorists, spreads democracy around the world, and creates permanent tax relief for the citizens of the United States (Gillespie, 2004, p. 2).

The Democrats and Republicans do differ on numerous controversial issues outside of the previous summation of their 2004 platforms; however these descriptions are what each party chose to be the focus of their party during the election year of 2004. Although these definitions may seem brief, they will be the working definitions when referring to the parties for this study. It is important to note

that the details of their party descriptions are not at the forefront of this investigation, therefore this simple distinction between the two groups will be sufficient information to conduct the necessary components of this study.

Bias in the Network Nightly News

The mediated presentations at the focus of this project are the three major television broadcast networks, ABC, CBS, NBC, and their weekday nightly national newscasts anchored by, Peter Jennings [ABC], Dan Rather [CBS], and Tom Brokaw [NBC]. The use of the theory of agenda setting is important to this study because it speaks to the influence for which a given medium has over the consumers. Therefore, to investigate this, I will utilize the grounded theory in order to discover the themes and strategies that emerged to either confirm, or dispel the presence of a media bias in favor of the Democratic Party.

The presence of a political bias in mediated news coverage has become more debated and discussed since the passage of the 1996 Telecommunications Act. This act made changes that lessened prior restrictions on media ownership in the United States. The passage of this act also

initiated much of the research pertaining to media ownership, and has become the starting point for many topics dealing with media bias. "Taken as a whole, the Telecommunications Act of 1996 was highly favorable for corporations with [previous] interests in television and radio broadcasting" (Gilens & Hertzman, 2000, p. 374).

Influential Sources of News

Although technical information systems such as the internet and 24-hour cable news channels are fast growing industries in the delivery of news, the majority of Americans that keep up on news, still keep up on it through basic broadcast television. Research done by Rouner, Slater, and Buddenbaum (1999) found, "The primary news source for the general public was listed as television for news information [73 percent]." Therefore, this study examines the most popular source of news dissemination, network nightly news. In comparison to the cable news channels, the differentiation in the number of viewers is drastic. Goodman (2004) does an excellent job of pointing out the extremes between the network nightly news, and cable news broadcasts during their coverage of the war in Iraq. Goodman states, "The most viewed cable news channel,

FOX averaged 3.3 million viewers per day. NBC *Nightly News* was tops overall, with over 11.3 million viewers daily" (p. 198). The distinction between the number of viewers of network nightly news, and cable news, still holds steady in times when events are less intriguing to the general public. In October of 2005, Nielsen Media released the statistics for that months viewers, Nielsen noted that NBC *Nightly News* averaged 9.4 million viewers nightly, ABC's *World News Tonight* had 8.6 million viewers a night, and finally the *CBS Evening News* had an average of 7.3 million viewers per nightly broadcast (<http://www.nielsenmedia.com/ratings>). As can be seen through the statistics, the lowest rated of the one-hour network nightly news broadcasts still more than doubled that of the number of viewers attracted by FOX News during and entire day in a high peak news period.

Importance of the Study

Since it is commonly known that the news media is influential, it is important to understand what angle these mediated presentations are coming from. Herman and Chomsky (2002) affirm that in a democratic society the presumption should be that, "The media are independent and committed to

discovering and reporting the truth, and that they do not merely reflect the world as powerful groups wish it to be perceived" (p. liX).

Because of the previously mentioned prevalence of the assumption that media bias exists in favor of the Democratic Party, as well as the contrary evidence available that states that in fact the media favored the Republican Party and George W. Bush in the 2004 Presidential election, it is this study's objective to analyze the media coverage. A sample of 63 network [ABC, CBS, NBC] nightly news broadcasts during October 2004 were analyzed through the scope of the grounded theory, and compared to a 2004 study conducted by Peter Phillips and Project Censored in their book, *Censored 2005 The Top 25 Censored Stories*. This data will provide findings that can be rhetorically analyzed through a discourse analysis to reveal if there was any political bias in the coverage of the 2004 Presidential election.

Outline of Research

In order to thoroughly and meticulously examine the necessary research questions, this study will begin by establishing an historical background to the bias of

presentations in the media, most specifically in relation to the bias presentations that favorably or adversely represent the Democrats and Republicans. Omission of information is a type of bias that is notoriously overlooked by a general observer, and yet a major way in which a reporter of information can change a story. Parenti (1997) points out the idea that, "Manipulation often lurks in things left unmentioned" (p. 5). Omission will be a major aspect of this study, both during the review of literature as well as during the examination of the October 2004 network news broadcasts.

After examining the historical background of political bias in the media, and how omission of information is also a form of bias in mediated presentations, this study will specifically address current omissions taking place in the media. The 2004 study conducted by Peter Phillips and Project Censored from Sonoma State University, will be used as a barometer for what was omitted from the nationally syndicated network nightly news. The findings from the Sonoma State study will help provide me with a base of omission in order to discover if there was a bias in favor of the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, or neither

of the two major political parties in the coverage leading up to the 2004 presidential election.

Along with the discussion pertaining to omission of information by the media, this study will inspect the role of the ownership of the media conglomerates, and what function they play in how information is presented. This assessment will mostly occur during this studies review of literature, and will include information not only on control of ownership, but also how the involvement of media ownership has changed over time. This information related to the ownership will allow further evidence to support the conclusions. This examination on ownership will uncover what role this entity [ownership] of the media plays in the content that hits the network news broadcasts.

Once the literary foundation has been established, the study will direct the focus upon the procedures used to collect and evaluate the nightly network news samples. As stated earlier, this sample will be put up against the aforementioned Sonoma State study to see how the national television networks used the bias practice of omission of either particular information in the story, or a given story in its entirety. This comparison will allow further confirmation and validation for the findings of this study.

By evaluating specific events taking place, and comparing them to that of the most underreported events, a clearer picture will be created as to what direction the media was favoring during their coverage of the 2004 Presidential election. Many previous studies on media bias have not looked at specific stories presented, but rather generalized the news broadcasts and tallied the coverage related to media bias. By utilizing the grounded theory, this study will not only be able to conclude if there was a media bias, but what direction the media coverage was leaning, and what method of bias was used by the media.

Following the section on the procedures used to gather the findings of this study, a detailed discourse analysis of the results will be conducted. This is the portion of the study where the work done by Sonoma State will become most pertinent to clearly and concisely laying out the conclusions that will result from the procedures used in this research. This section will then implement the history of bias in the media, and how it is both similar and different from the sample used in this 2004 investigation.

This study will conclude by briefly summarizing every aspect involved in the gathering and analyzing of the

research. This chapter will also contain an explanation as to how this research fits into past, present, and future studies related to explaining the presence of a political bias in the media.

With the step-by-step structure that is spoken of above, this study will clearly and factually address the popular notion of a media bias in favor of the Democratic Party. The grounded theory provides a proven basis that establishes the foundation for how this sample was coded. By looking at the data through the scope of the grounded theory, I was able to categorize the themes, as well as the bias strategies that emerged from the sample, and therefore better address the research questions for this study.

Research Questions

- (RQ1) What themes emerged from the stories broadcast through the October 2004 sample of ABC, NBC, and CBS nightly news broadcasts?
- (RQ2) What bias strategies were used by ABC, NBC, and CBS nightly news broadcasts?
- (RQ3) Was there a political bias in favor of one political party over another in the network news coverage leading up to the 2004 Presidential election?

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Chapter Preview

In order to do a thorough examination of bias in network newscasts, a more extensive understanding of several key areas must be established. Therefore, this chapter along with the entire study will not only look at the content presented in newscasts, but also the ownership of the networks, and the agenda for which they desire to propagate. The first part of this chapter takes a deeper look at what exactly constitutes media bias, as well as how media bias has progressed through time. This will allow for a good foundation as to what exactly is being examined in this study. The second and third sections of this chapter look to extensively compare and contrast the Democratic Party perception of political bias, from the Republican Party perception of political bias. The fourth section of this chapter more clearly describes the components of the theory of agenda setting. Through this review, it will become evident why this study is important to the field of research revolved around political bias in the media.

Media Bias

A major area of investigation of media bias is the question of who is being biased? Sutter (2001) explores this notion by claiming, "Bias cannot merely be in the eyes of the beholder, because each of us would like news stories to confirm the validity of our views" (para. 7). Kohut (2002) supports this when he says, "...complaints about bias usually mean a self-interest, not a tilt to the left" (p. 68). That is to say, one piece of information may be considered bias to one individual, while to another individual that same information may be recognized as balanced coverage. Therefore, the most concrete way to determine the presence of a political bias presentation is to analyze specific stories and events presented by the media. Kuklinski and Sigelman (1992) note, "Only in the obvious case where news programs consistently favor one party or ideological perspective over another can one justifiably proclaim the presence of bias" (p. 816). The previous quote for all intents and purposes implies that the burden of proof is in the hands of the individual claiming the bias.

Distinctions of bias are not only limited to what is presented in the newscasts, but also what is not presented in the newscasts. Parenti (1997) notes, "The most common

form of media misrepresentation is suppression by omission. Sometimes the omission includes not just vital details of a story but the entire story itself, even ones of major importance" (p. 5). This again is where the specific news stories that were presented play a significant role. The fact that omission of information can itself be a form of bias is exemplary of the fact that a measurement of the stories that were covered, and those that were not was necessary to seek out what political agenda if any, the news producers were presenting to the viewing public.

Previous scholarly research related to bias in the media has been greatly mixed. According to Eveland and Shah (2003),

Findings in the literature that do suggest apparent bias are inconsistent regarding the direction or nature of the bias across studies or at least overtime. That is, some studies have produced evidence of a liberal bias, where as others claimed to find a conservative bias (p. 102).

This is not to imply that a political bias in the media does not exist, but simply that according to previous scholarly research related to media bias, there is not an

overwhelmingly one-sided view. And, as shown in an earlier cited study, the burden of proof is on the person making a claim of bias. Therefore, the mere repetition of the claim of a bias favoring the Democratic Party does in no way make it factual, as is implied by many political pundits.

Background of Bias in Favor of the Democratic Party

The problem with the notion of a media bias in favor of the Democratic Party according to Bozell (2002) is that, "anything that makes conservatives [Republicans] mad is sloppily defined as media bias" (p. 18). Therefore the question must be asked, is the prevalent notion of a Democratic Party bias in the media nothing more than a cover-up of inadequacies by the Republican Party? Alterman (2003) answers this question, "The liberal [Democratic] media were never that powerful, and the whole thing was often used as an excuse by conservatives for conservative failures" (p. 11). This quote adds somewhat of a different spin onto the whole idea of liberal media, that it actually could originate from covering up shortcomings by the conservatives [Republicans] rather than something perpetuated by the liberals [Democrats] to push their own political stance. If little concrete evidence exists to

demonstrate a Democratic Party bias in the media, why then does the notion of such a bias in the media continue to exist? According to McChesney and Foster (2003), it all began in the 1970s when the Republican Party waged a war against the media by claiming that it was the liberal/Democratic media that lost the Vietnam War for the United States. This view has become more popular because of the consistent and unabated promotion of this idea (p. 12). This popular belief has caused the media entities to make adjustments to their news programming simply to avoid appearing liberally sympathetic. McChesney and Foster (2003) note that former CNN head Rick Kaplan instructed massive attention be paid to the Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky situation simply to avoid the conservative label of being liberally bias, even though he believed the story was "overblown" (p. 15).

Republican Party Perception of Democratic Party Bias

As has been shown through the literature, little tangible evidence exists to support the perception of a Democratic Party bias in the media. The notion however appears to become more and more popular throughout time. In a survey conducted by Smith (2002), 43% of the general

public believes that the media is liberally bias; while only 19% believes they [media] are conservatively bias (p. 11). These are quite astonishingly different numbers, especially due to the fact as stated earlier that little academic evidence supports this idea. How does the Republican Party propagate that the media is a mere tool of the Democratic Party? Perlstein (2003) notes that much of the way the Republicans have been able to do this is by labeling anything that veers from "normal" as liberal or somehow associated with the Democratic Party (para. 12). This method makes it easy for the notion of a liberal or Democratic media bias to continue to be proliferated. The abnormal propagates chaos, thus establishing the Democrats as the party of chaos or disarray, and the Republicans as the savior from that chaos (Perlstein, 2003, para. 14). Alter (2003) also offers a suggestion as to how the Republicans have been able to breed the idea of a Democratic Party bias in the media when he writes, "For several years, they [Republicans] have succeeded not because of some right-wing conspiracy in network executive suites but because their 'production values' are simply superior to those of the liberals [Democrats]" (p.50). This abovementioned notion suggests that it is not only

content that is important to creating an idea, but also, the way in which that content is presented.

Omission in the Media

As was briefly mentioned earlier in this chapter, former CNN head Rick Kaplan made programming changes in order to avoid the stigma of a bias in favor of the Democratic Party. However, when it came to programming the shortcomings of the Republican Party, the media appears to have taken a different position. McChesney and Foster (2003) state,

George W. Bush ... had a remarkably dubious business career in which he made a fortune flouting security laws, tapping public funds, and using his father's connections to protect his backside, but news media barely sniffled at the story and it received no special prosecutor. [Even] His conviction for driving under the influence of alcohol barely attracted notice (p. 15-16).

The prior quote stated by McChesney and Foster (2003) pertaining to George W. Bush seem like fairly important to defining the character of a person, however according to

the authors, they received little media attention. Powers (2002) refers people such as Ann Coulter [conservative author] who stated that, "A totalitarian Left controls the American news business" (para. 5). It would seem if the media is as favorable to the Democratic Party as the Republican supporters tout, the aforementioned stories related to George W. Bush would be more publicized than the mere mention they appear to have gotten on the back page of the daily paper.

If one were to acknowledge that in the past there was a liberal bias in the media, very few would be able to find evidence to support that idea now. David Limbaugh (2003) gives somewhat of a backhanded admission to the fact that although maybe in the past there was a liberal bias now that is not necessarily the case when he states, "Only close-minded liberals [Democrats] would deny that they enjoyed a virtual monopoly in the major media, from the sixties until fairly recently" (p. 28). The interesting aspect here is how sure Republicans are in the idea that a Democratic bias ever existed. In writings such as Limbaugh (2003) claims of a media that favored the Democratic Party, are said with such certainty, yet followed up with little solid evidence to back up what they are claiming.

Sonoma State Study

For several years now, a research group headed by Professor Peter Phillips at Sonoma State University has compiled a list of the top twenty-five most underreported newsworthy stories from the previous year. For the purpose of this study, I employed the top ten of these underreported yet newsworthy events from *Censored 2005, The Top 25 Censored News Stories* [of 2004]. Later in this study these ten events will be put up against what was actually presented on the broadcast television nightly newscasts during the month prior to the 2004 election.

The following ten events are listed in order from one to ten most underreported news events of 2004. The number one most underreported event according to Phillips (2004) is the dramatic increase of wealth inequality (p. 40). Phillips (2004) continues, "The top 5 percent is now capturing an increasingly greater portion of the pie while the bottom 95 percent is clearly losing ground, and the highly touted American middle class is fast disappearing" (p. 41).

The second most underreported event is more directly attributable to the George W. Bush administration than the last event. According to Phillips (2004), this event is

John Ashcroft's desire to eliminate the Alien Torts Claim Act (ATCA). This law is designed to legally protect victims of human rights atrocities committed by government officials, corporations, and senior military officials (p. 43). Phillips (2004) states, "By attempting to throw out this law, the Bush administration is effectively opening the door for human rights abuses to continue under the veil of foreign relations" (p. 43).

The third newsworthy yet coverage lacking event according to Phillips (2004) is George W. Bush's control over the advancement of scientific research. The evidence claims that Bush and his administration have done this in order to benefit their pro-business philosophy. Phillips (2004) states, "When a team of biologists working for the EPA indicated that there had been a violation of the 'Endangered Species Act' by the Army Corps of Engineers, the group was replaced with a 'corporate-friendly' panel" (p. 46). Essentially the literature is saying that the Bush administration has suppressed the advancement of science in order to benefit the advancement the profit margin of major corporations, while hurting the environment at the same time.

The fourth major event that was underreported according to Phillips (2004) is that of the United States uranium drops on Afghanistan and Iraq. According to Phillips (2004), "Four million pounds of radioactive uranium were dropped on Iraq in 2003 alone" (p. 49). Most American weapons contain uranium that once discharged, release radioactive dust that can be ingested. Phillips (2004) states, "...scientists from around the world testify to the huge increase in birth deformities and cancers wherever [uranium munitions] had been used" (p. 50).

The fifth event deals with the Bush administration's Clean Skies Initiative, and the Healthy Forests Initiative. According to Phillips (2004),

The Clean Air Act of 1970 has made skies over most cities cleaner by cutting back pollution let out by major power companies. However, the Clean Skies Initiative allows power plants to emit more than five times more mercury, twice as much sulfur dioxide, and over one and a half times more nitrogen oxides than the Clean Air Act (p. 55).

As can be seen through the data above, the environmental policies of the Bush administration took an evidentially

successful environmental plan, and changed it in order to benefit corporate entities. The environmental policies of the Bush administration did not stop there; the Bush administration also enacted what they called the Healthy Forests Initiative. According to Phillips (2004), "Bush's Healthy Forests Initiative is funding projects for logging companies to gain access to old growth trees and paying them for brush clearing" (p. 55). This example of the Healthy Forests Initiative not only shows a decrease in the restrictions on major corporations, it also points that the government is paying for this to happen.

The next underreported event [sixth] deals more specifically with conflict of interest involved in the election process. According to Phillips (2004), "Election Systems & Software (ES&S), Diebold, and Sequoia are the companies primarily involved in implementing the new...voting stations throughout the country. All three have strong ties to the Bush Administration and other Republican leaders" (p. 57). Phillips (2004) notes that the media has covered instances of the voting devices experiencing technical trouble, but rarely if ever recognize the issue of who owns and operates the electronic voting devices.

The seventh underreported event according to research done by Phillips (2004) deals with the Bush administration, and the changes they made to the Judiciary Branch.

Phillips (2004) states that,

In 2001 George W. Bush eliminated the longstanding role of the American Bar Association (ABA) in the evaluation of prospective federal judges... In its place, Bush has been using The Federalist Society for Law and Public Policy Studies—a national organization whose mission is to advance a conservative agenda by moving the country's legal system to the right (p. 61).

The George W. Bush administration is also at the forefront of the next (eighth) most underreported event discussed in the Phillips (2004) study. When George W. Bush took office in 2001, one of the most important issues occurring was the energy shortage throughout the United States. Phillips (2004) states, "The energy turmoil of 2000-01 prompted Bush to establish a Task Force charged with developing a long-range plan to meet U.S. energy requirements" (p. 64). However, what was underreported in this story was not the mere establishment of the Task Force; it is that of who was involved in this Task Force,

and what this Task Force did behind closed doors. According to Phillips (2004), "With the advice of... Ken Lay, Bush picked Vice President Dick Cheney, former Halliburton CEO, to head this group" (p. 64). Once the group was created, a major effort was made to keep all issues involving the group concealed. Phillips (2004) states, "...Congress requested information in spring of 2001 about which industry executives and lobbyists the Task Force was meeting with... When Cheney refused disclosure, Congress was pressed to sue for the right to examine Task Force records, but lost" (p. 64).

The ninth underreported event in the Phillips (2004) study is also related to the Bush administration, but more specifically associated with the events leading up to 9/11, and a woman whom lost her husband on that day. Phillips (2004) explains, "Ellen Mariani lost her husband, Louis Neil Mariani, on 9/11 and is refusing the government's million-dollar settlement offer" (p. 66). Phillips (2004) continues the story of why Ellen decided to refuse her settlement offer by stating that she (Ellen Mariani),

Filed a 62-page complaint in federal district court charging that President Bush and officials, including but not limited to, Cheney, Rumsfeld,

Rice and Ashcroft: (1) had adequate foreknowledge of 9/11, yet failed to warn the country or attempt to prevent it; (2) have since been covering up the truth of that day; (3) have therefore abetted the murder of plaintiff's husband and violated the Constitution and multiple laws of the United States; and (4) are thus being sued under the Civil Racketeering, Influences, and Corrupt Organization (RICO) Act for malfeasant conspiracy, obstruction of justice and wrongful death (p. 66).

According to the Phillips (2004) study, what separates this particular situation is the amount of research that was done in order to support the claims that were made in this extensive lawsuit. Phillips (2004) most specifically discusses the level for which this lawsuit examines the forewarning the United States Government had leading up to the occurrence of the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

The tenth most underreported event discussed in the Phillips (2004) study, deals with the Bush Administrations Energy Policy Act presented to Congress in 2003/2004, and the use of tax dollars to benefit the profit margin of major corporations. Phillips (2004) affirms that, "...the

Bush Administration, is looking to give the nuclear power industry a huge boost through the new Energy Policy Act. "The...bill will give nuclear power plants a production credit for each unit of energy produced" (p. 70). This Act will utilize approximately 7.5 billion in tax dollars to construct six privately owned nuclear reactors, which is in addition to the 4 billion dollars already provided by the government to nuclear energy programs (Phillips, 2004, p. 70).

Ownership

Much research has been done pertaining to the bias amongst the reporters in television media; however what has been overlooked up until the 1996 Telecommunications Act is the amount of power and influence the television network owners have over the presentation/words said on their networks' broadcasts. Gilens and Hertzman (2000) note in regards to the Telecommunications Act of 1996,

It is clear that on average the loosening of the TV ownership caps in the 1996 Telecom bill benefited media companies that already owned many television stations, and did not benefit [even

may have hurt] companies that did not own TV stations (p. 372).

It may not seem like such a big deal that the government has loosened the restrictions upon the ownership of media entities; however several things must first be considered before making that assumption. Gilens and Hertzman (2000) state, "The Telecommunications Act of 1996 affected almost every facet of media and communications in the United States" (p. 373). Some political economists started surfacing examples of concentrated media ownership as early as the completion of World War II (Bagdikian 2000). Even more proof of such a far reaching affect starts by noting that twenty years ago, half of all media profits were generated by 46 different media corporations, while in 1997, merely one year after the 1996 bill, only ten media companies generated the same percentage of the market profit (Gilens & Hertzman, 2000, p. 370). Over half of the American public's main source of news and information is controlled by only ten different companies, leaving little if any room for a diversity of opinion to be presented to a large group of people. Fleming (1996) states,

It can be argued that the media has a particular role to play in any democratic society in encouraging and disseminating a diversity of opinions and views, and thus ought to be subject to specific regulation, in order to protect its constitutional importance (p. 379).

The problem with the idea presented in the quote by Fleming (2002) is that it would require the media owners to be less concerned about their major agenda of profit margin, and more concerned with fair broadcasting.

Other than the 1996 Telecommunications Act, there is another strong force that has taken over much of the attention given to the televised news media ownership, that force is Rupert Murdoch. Foster & McChesney (2003) write, "In the United States, Mr. Murdoch's creation of the Fox News Channel has shifted the entire spectrum of American cable news to the right." According to Linnett (2003) Fox News Channel is not only the most highly rated cable news channel, it is a major source of news for the entire country, and garners over 3 million viewers a day (p. 26). This newfound attention that the Fox News Channel has brought to the television news industry makes it necessary for the network news companies to be more cautious and pay

more attention to the presentations in which they send out, because now there is a powerful cable news network that would call them out if they were to present a slanted news story.

The presence of Rupert Murdoch in the news business has shown the power over content for which the ownership has. In the case of Murdoch the power of the owner is tremendous, possibly even greater than that of the producers and journalists. In the 1990's Murdoch set out to create Fox News Channel in order to provide a more conservative or Republican alternative to cable news television other than CNN, which Murdoch saw as too liberal or in favor of the Democratic Party (Foster & McChesney, 2003). What we know in regards to ownership power in the news presentation is that some owners, as is in the case of Murdoch, have negated quality news broadcasting in order to propagate their personal views to the general public.

History of Agenda Setting

According to Tedesco (2001), "The origin of agenda-setting theory argues that media play the leadership role in identifying topics of importance for the American public" (p. 2048). It was not put to an empirical test

though until McCombs & Shaw (1972) showed a causal relationship between the media and the public, leading to the discovery of the idea that issues of priority to the media became issues of priority to the general public. When comparing the agenda of the government, and the agenda of the media, a better perceptive of the relationship they have can be understood through the theory of agenda setting. Those in the government know the immense power the media has over shaping public perception, and the media producers know the government can give them even more power than they already have. Therefore, it would not do the media well to establish a one-sided political stance that could minimize the access to their power source.

As was briefly mentioned earlier, the problem that arises from the collaboration of these two agendas [power and profit] is not limited to only what is presented, but also includes what is not presented. According to Bernard Cohen (1963), "The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (p. 13). Knowing this, the media entities recognize that if they choose not to cover a particular story, the likelihood is that issue will be kept out of public thought, therefore

accommodating the agenda of the government [power] while meeting their agenda [profit] at the same time.

Agenda Setting

It would seem preposterous especially with the aforementioned success of the Fox News Channel that there could conceivably be a bias agenda in favor of the Democratic Party on the network television news. Sutter (2001) states, "Biased news will alienate many potential customers with centrist or right-of-center views, a smaller audience reduces advertising revenues and profits" (para. 12). There would be no purpose for the television news corporations to present information in a bias or one sided manner [either Democratic or Republican], because it would in no way be advantageous toward benefiting their profit margin. The question that arises then is how can Fox News Channel, which has already been shown to hold views favorable to the Republican Party, continue to thrive? The important thing to discern between network broadcast television and cable television, is that network television is designed to appeal to the mainstream, while cable television flourishes upon filling a niche that has yet to be filled. According to Dimmick, Chen, and Li (2004), "The

theory of the niche predicts that a new medium will compete with established media for consumer satisfaction, consumer time, and advertising dollars" (p. 22).

The amount of access for which a news corporation has to the insiders of the Bush administration has greatly coincided with the media entities that have shown support of this Republican administration. In regards to the war with Iraq that began in 2003, the media was in many ways silenced whenever it went against the United States government's negative actions.

Foster & McChesney (2003) state,

The current attack on media content is presented as an attempt to counter the alleged bias of media elites. In reality, however, it is designed to shrink still further - to the point of oblivion - the space for critical analysis in the journalism (p. 12).

This abovementioned quote refers precisely to what was spoken of in regards to the notion of the government silencing media in which they find to be negating their [governments] personal views.

A form of bias that can be and typically is overlooked is that of the stories or parts of stories of significance

that receive little or no attention by the mainstream broadcast media. This aspect of bias is where the theory of agenda setting becomes applicable. As will be later explained in further detail, the theory of agenda setting notes that casual observers of the media tend to believe that if the form of media they choose to get their news from does not cover a given topic, then that topic must not be of importance for them to know. McCombs, Lopez-Escobar, and Llamas (2000) sum up the theory of agenda-setting by noting, "Elements prominent in the mass media's picture of the world influence the prominence of those elements in the audience's picture" (p. 77).

If the media conglomerates ultimate agenda is profit margin, and profit is earned through higher numbers of viewers, why then do they allow the government to silence them [media] when they could break a huge story opposing the government? Well that answer is simple; take the situation that occurred in regards to the country music group The Dixie Chicks whom made disparaging remarks pertaining to George W. Bush at one of their musical concerts. Rossman (2004) argues that Clear Channel [the largest radio corporation in the United States] as a favor to the Bush administration conspired against The Dixie

Chicks to cut airplay on their radio networks because the Federal Communications Commission was considering further deregulation that would allow Clear Channel to expand their market (p. 62). Clear Channel may have been losing a percentage of their audience by not playing The Dixie Chicks, but they had the possibility of gaining so much more by making this gamble.

CHAPTER THREE

PROCEDURES

Chapter Preview

This chapter goes into more specific detail than previous chapters in regards to how the various procedures used in this study play into dealing with the research questions of this study. This chapter will lay out how the data was collected, what instruments were used to test the hypothesis of this study, and how the grounded theory guided in the emergence of the themes, and bias strategies present in this sample. This chapter will also provide further explanation as to the reasoning behind why this particular sample was used, as well as why it was reviewed and evaluated in the manner for which it was. The conclusion of this chapter will transition from the explanation of how this collection process was conducted, into the following chapter that will deliberate and analyze the findings from the sample.

Introduction

As was explained in the review of literature, many previous researchers studying the issue of political bias

in mediated presentation have utilized quantitative methods in order to conduct their studies of what was covered in the media. While those preceding studies were more concerned with numbers in terms of news stories either for or against a particular party, this study was designed to focus on specific instances that have occurred in reality, and compare them to what was being reported on in the mainstream media. In order to conduct this aspect of the study, a collection of news broadcasts were broken into thematic categories, and compared to the previously mentioned study conducted at Sonoma State University.

Sample

This particular investigation on media bias in the 2004 presidential election conducted an analysis of the three major networks [ABC, CBS, and NBC] weekday nightly newscasts during the entire month of October, 2004. The three major networks are broadcast on basic television, making them available to larger groups of viewers than those networks broadcast through cable or satellite subscriptions. This sample totaled over 30-hours of programming, and 63 nightly broadcasts, as well as more than 125 stories related to the 2004 presidential election.

This study used the time frame of the entire month of October of 2004 due to the fact that it was the last full month before the November 2, 2004 presidential election.

Collecting the Data

This sample was gathered by recording from three separate video home system [VHS] cassette recorders onto three separate VHS cassettes. After each daily recording, the cassettes were labeled with the date of the broadcast, as well as the network for which the broadcast appeared. This same procedure was followed every weekday during the entire month of October 2004. Labeling the cassettes with the date and network made referencing back to previous broadcasts not only easier, but more accurate. To avoid as much predisposition toward the news coverage as possible, it was not until the entire sample of 63 broadcasts were recorded and labeled that the review process began. This delay in the review process was able to condense the complete process from an entire month [October, 2004] down to five days.

As was stated earlier, the reasoning behind the selection of this sample of the broadcast network news, as opposed to that of the cable news coverage leading up to

the 2004 election is twofold. First, the number of consumers/viewers between the two mediums is markedly dissimilar, even when comparing the highest rated of the cable news channels to the lowest rated of the broadcast networks. Second, cable news as was shown earlier is designed to fill a niche as opposed to network news which is designed to appeal to a larger and broader audience. Thus, the sample selected for this study is the most authoritative source of news to the general populace.

Evaluating the Sample

The list of the top 10 of the 25 most underreported stories of 2004 was used as a guide while watching each network news broadcast. To supplement the list of most underreported events of that year, I also utilized a blank notebook in order to notate interesting trends that appeared outside of the confines of the stories in the Sonoma State University study. It was through this evaluation in which I implemented the components of the grounded theory. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), the grounded theory follows from the data, rather than preceding the data (p. 3). Glaser (1998) clears this up when he states, "The goal is not to tell people what to

find or to force, but what to do to allow the emergence of what is going on" (p. 4). Becker (1993) notes that, "A grounded theory identifies the major constructs or categories of a phenomenon, their relationships and the context and process" (p. 256). Therefore, while observing this sample, I looked for categories of emerging themes presented in the broadcasts, as well as bias strategy techniques that emerged from the sample. The evaluation of this sample took a total of five days, and did not begin until the conclusion of the entire October 2004 broadcasts. As a researcher, this method provided a more clear and concise assessment of the media's 2004 election time coverage. It also provided a shorter time in which to allow the themes, and bias strategies to emerge.

CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Chapter Preview

This chapter examines point-by-point the media coverage leading up to the 2004 presidential election. This examination will most specifically focus on the media conglomerates selection of stories, how they set the agenda, and if this agenda is politically motivated in favor of the Democratic Party, or the Republican Party. In order to achieve this goal, the chapter will begin by laying out the factual information as it pertains to the nightly newscasts, and how that sample compares to the study conducted by researchers at Sonoma State University. The analysis section of this chapter will be done through the parameters of a discourse analysis. According to Brown and Yule (1983), "The discourse analyst attempts to discover regularities in his data and to describe them" (p. 23). Frohmann (1992) notes that, "Discourse analysis is the application of critical thought to social situations and the unveiling of hidden politics within the socially dominant as well as all other discourses" (p. 370). Therefore, this chapter will begin by implementing the

themes and strategies that arose from the news broadcasts news broadcasts, as well as the Sonoma State study, and conduct an examination of their texts through a discourse analysis. This analysis is designed to address the necessary elements in order to tackle this study's three research questions mentioned in the first chapter. It is very important to note that in this chapter, a clear distinction will be made between what is factual evidence presented on the newscasts, and what are interpretations of the facts as they are produced by the analysis.

News Broadcasts

Several interesting trends related to the network news coverage of the 2004 presidential election emerged from the October 2004 sample. Although these trends are important to addressing the research questions of this study, they are merely a complement to what will be discussed later in this chapter regarding the omission of substantial information from this same network news sample. Because the mainstream media, or network news media, as it is referred to, in this study, is attempting to appeal to a larger group of people, there were no examples of blatant one-sided presentations during the entire October 2004

sample. This is the reason why the assessment [which will also take place later in this chapter] of what was not covered will be quite important to the outcome of this analysis.

Themes Presented

Quite a few fascinating observations took place outside the realm of what was omitted from the television network news broadcasts. In order to analyze specific examples of what was broadcast, I must first layout the prevalent themes which were broadcast on the three networks. Although each of the three major networks varies from one another, the overarching themes of the stories for which they present are strikingly similar. It is for this reason that I was able to establish five thematic categories pertaining to the nightly network news coverage of the 2004 presidential election. These overarching themes are related to, polls/examination of the horserace, daily campaign trail, battleground states, voter turnout, and finally the Presidential debates.

The first thematic category that emerged from the sample is that of polls/examination of the horserace pertaining to the presidential candidates, and their

political campaigns. In on October 25, 2004 report on CBS *Evening News*, Dan Rather reported on a CBS poll that looked at the confidence the American citizens have in terms of which of the two candidates could handle terrorism better. The results of this poll showed that George W. Bush had 43% while John F. Kerry had 30% of those polled believe him to be more competent in dealing with the issue of terrorism.

Another example that emerged from the news broadcasts in regards to polls pertaining to the 2004 presidential candidates was reported on October 28, 2004 *World News Tonight with Peter Jennings*. In this story, ABC conducted a poll of likely voters asking which of the two candidates they were most likely to support with their vote. The results of this poll showed a very close margin with George W. Bush leading John F. Kerry with 49% and 48% for Kerry.

The second theme that emerged from the sample of news broadcasts was that of the coverage of the daily campaign trail. This is where the story was related to both candidates and their campaign activities for that day. The best example of this occurred on October 27, 2004 on ABC *World News Tonight with Peter Jennings*. In this story, Peter Jennings tracked on a map where both candidates had traveled for the day. According to Jennings, "Bush

traveled a total of 879 miles for the day" from Wisconsin to Iowa, and back to Washington D.C. Kerry according to Jennings had a, "busy day, traveling a total of 2,764 miles" through Nevada, New Mexico, Wisconsin, and ending the day in Iowa.

The third theme that emerged from the three networks was that of profiling of specific battleground states where the two candidates were running neck and neck in the polls. Reporter Terry Moran from *ABC World News Tonight with Peter Jennings* conducted a profile of the battleground state of Wisconsin. The emphasis of this particular story was on the importance of the farmers support on the outcome of the votes in the state of Wisconsin. This story covered both candidates' town hall meetings with local farmers, and the promises they made in regards to restructuring the farming policies in the United States.

The fourth theme that emerged upon observation of this sample was that of nationwide voter turn-out. The best example of this type of story was presented on, *CBS Evening News* anchored by Dan Rather. In this story, Dan Rather reported that the voters in the state of Georgia were allowed to have early in person voting. The early numbers

suggested that the voter turn out for the 2004 election would be the highest that it had been in decades.

The fifth overarching theme that emerged upon reviewing of this sample was that of the coverage pertaining to the Presidential debates. On October 8, 2004 story on *NBC Nightly News*, Tom Brokaw covered the lead up to the town hall debate that was to take place between the candidates that night in St. Louis. The story presented the importance the town hall debate would have for both of the candidates, and their presidential bid. The story also presented what both candidates had been doing throughout the day leading up to the debate, noting that Bush kept in the public eye trying to layout what he would be covering that night, while Kerry chose to arrive in St. Louis early and prepare for that nights debate.

Omission of Information

The unashamed omission of significant information for the purpose of suppression is one of the most damaging forms of bias that exists within the media. As was explained earlier, the theory of agenda setting notes that the media does a very good job at persuading people what to think about. Therefore, if an issue of importance is not

covered by a given mainstream medium, the general public assumes the issue to be either not true, or of little if any importance to their lives. This previously mentioned notion is why the practice of omission is so dangerous to the general populace.

According to the Peter Phillips study at Sonoma State University, eight of the top 10 most underreported news events of 2004 were directly related to George W. Bush and his administration. In any given year, the response to that information may be, "so what?" However, 2004 was an election year, and therefore the events pertaining to presidential candidates are of the utmost importance to how people may choose to vote. By mere numbers alone, it would seem evident that if eight of the top ten most underreported events were relatable to one political party, that political party is somehow being protected by the media through the practice of omission for the purpose of suppression of information.

By implementing the research conducted by Peter Phillips at Sonoma State into the analysis portion of this study, as well as through the examination of the themes of the stories that were presented in the news, I was able to employ a reliable examination of the most underreported

events of 2004, and compare them to this studies sample of the weekday network nightly news broadcasts during the month of October 2004. What I found was that not a single one of the top 10 events which were presented in the Peter Phillips Sonoma State study were presented by any of the three major broadcast television networks during their nightly news coverage leading up to the 2004 presidential election. When a person takes a closer look at what those eight stories pertaining to the Bush administration, and how the knowledge of that information may have changed the way in which they voted, it is impossible to believe that the mainstream television news networks had a bias in their coverage favoring the Democratic Party. For example, George W. Bush's lack of interest in advancement of scientific research, or the Bush administrations Clean Sky's Initiative and Healthy Forests Initiative, both of which hurt the environment but benefited George W. Bush's pro-business philosophy, and finally the changes in which Bush made over the judiciary branch of the United States Government, which were designed in an effort to push the conservative viewpoint of the Republican Party. Each one of these three issues were of extreme importance to the standing policies of the United States, as were the other

seven of the top ten events in Phillips study listed in the literature review, yet not a single mention of these events occurred by any of the three television networks nightly news broadcasts during the entire month leading up to the November, 2004 election.

When evaluating the review of literature, most specifically, the section about Peter Phillips study at Sonoma State, as well as the two sections above, there is no way the network nightly news coverage during the month of October of 2004, could be construed as significantly bias in favor of the Democratic Party. In fact, the findings presented in this study suggest the antithesis of the popular notion of a bias in favor of the Democratic Party. The complete and utter suppression of this abovementioned information will be further analyzed later in this chapter.

Bias Strategies

Although the themes of the stories, as was shown above, did not differ greatly between the three networks, the way in which they were presented did fluctuate to some extent. By implementing the grounded theory, I was able to discover three bias strategies that emerged from the

nightly newscasts. These three bias presentation strategies were rationalization, minimization, and validation. The most prevalent of these strategies was the way in which the news anchors rationalized stories. This is to say, when the story was revolved around some form of negativity regarding a candidate, the news anchors or reporters defended, and attempted to legitimize what had taken place. The second most commonly used strategy by the three networks was that of minimization. This strategy was used in the conclusion of the presentation of a story in order to lessen the importance, or consequence the story they just presented will have. Finally, the third emerging strategy used by the news anchors when presenting their stories was that of validation. This strategy, although used rarely in the broadcasts is when the anchors or reporters confirm the validity of one sides perspective without doing the same to the other side.

The first network news I will look at is *ABC World News Tonight* hosted by Peter Jennings. Two different presentation strategies emerged upon review of this particular networks sample. The most used strategy by ABC was that of rationalization. On October 1, 2004, anchor Peter Jennings spoke on the first debate that had taken

place between George W. Bush, and John F. Kerry. In his report, Jennings established that the popular consensus was that Kerry had defeated Bush in the debate. Jennings however noted that the results of the debate did not move the earth in favor of Kerry because, "so many people have already made up their minds." This rationalization did not specifically imply that people had made up their minds in favor of George W. Bush; however what it did do was attempt to reason an event that could have been construed as a black eye to the presidential campaign of incumbent George W. Bush.

Peter Jennings on October, 4, again rationalized a negative story pertaining to George W. Bush. The coverage was based on John F. Kerry gaining ground in the polling numbers, and went through numerous reasons why Kerry was gaining ground. What was used to conclude this story was a statement that in many ways not only rationalized George W. Bush losing ground in the campaign; it also used the strategy of minimization to lessen the upward move that had taken place by the Kerry campaign. This rationalization occurred when Peter Jennings summed up the report on the gain in polling numbers of John F. Kerry by stating, "George W. Bush still leads in most polls by over 5%."

Again, this statement in and of itself is not a bias statement, it is however a way in which the jump in polling numbers by Kerry, and the downfall by Bush in the polling numbers was minimized and rationalized. The fact that Bush was still leading by over 5% in polls could have been part of the report, however when it was used as a summation to the story, it almost made it seem that although John F. Kerry had made advancement in terms of polling done on likely voters in the election, it was still not enough to make a difference. The argument is not whether these opinions by the reporters are true or not, it is the fact that they [reporters] position themselves as objective/neutral observers when in fact they are presenting reports that are rationalized and justified by personal opinions.

A great example of the strategy of minimization ABC's *World News Tonight* occurred on October 8, 2004. In this broadcast, Peter Jennings discussed the fact that over the past year, a record number of Americans had lost their jobs, and currently were un-employed. It seems that a story of this magnitude would have no room for minimization as to why this trend was harmful; however Peter Jennings noted not only one, but two reasons why this significant

trend of job loss was not a negative aspect of the Bush administration. Jennings editorialized that the job loss could have stemmed from the 2004 hurricane season, and that although Bush was the first President in recent memory to experience a job loss in terms of numbers, "He [Bush] lowered taxes and interest rates, raised the number of home owners, and has spearheaded positive economic growth." Although all those items listed in the quote by Peter Jennings may be true, they have no direct correlation to the fact that Bush and his administration had experienced a loss in jobs. This is merely another example where the mainstream network news media afforded a way for George W. Bush to skirt negativity directed toward him and his administration.

Although ABC's *World News Tonight* had the most cases of strategies used, they were not the only network to practice bias presentation strategies. *CBS Evening News* anchored by Dan Rather also had an example that fits within the three bias strategies. While rationalization and minimization were both strategies used by ABC's *World News Tonight*, *CBS Evening News* only had the strategy of rationalization emerge from their broadcasts. On October 13, 2004, Dan Rather reported that the popular sentiment

was that John F. Kerry had defeated George W. Bush in the first debate. Rather however could not end story there, he added, "Although John Kerry narrowly defeated George W. Bush in the first debate, Bush brought his 'A' game to the second debate and leveled the playing field with John Kerry." If you notice the wording in the quote, it makes the statement that Kerry "narrowly" defeated Bush in the first debate, and that Bush brought his "'A' game" to the second debate. Both of the prior statements whether intentional or not, are opinions not facts, and not only are they sheer opinions; they are opinions that are favorable to one political party over the other. This most clearly fits into the category of rationalization because Dan Rather reported that Bush had lost the first debate, and essentially legitimized that loss by countering that Bush out dueled Kerry in the second debate.

NBC Nightly News with Tom Brokaw seemed to have the fewest number of bias strategies, yet they to had instances in which their objectivity came into question. While the other two networks displayed examples of rationalization, no emergence of this strategy occurred within NBC's coverage. However, an interesting strategy that was used by NBC and not by the other two networks is that of the

strategy of validation. For example, on October 27, 2004, NBC reporter David Gregory presented a story on missing explosives in Iraq. At the time, this was an event in which John Kerry was using to point out the carelessness that was occurring in Iraq under the leadership of George W. Bush. David Gregory was doing an excellent job of staying objective in the presentation of the details involved in this story until it came to the summation of the presentation. It was this portion of the report that David Gregory made a statement implying that although it is important to take note of things such as missing munitions in Iraq, the most important thing to keep in mind is that Saddam Hussein was captured, and his regime conquered. This example falls under the strategy of validation because while reporter David Gregory does not minimize the importance of this story, nor does he legitimize the fact that mistakes were made in Iraq, he does validate what George W. Bush had done in Iraq, and yet does not do the same to the opposing point of view.

Although there was a lot of information pertaining to the presidential election during the month of October 2004, there were no examples as the ones above pertaining to George W. Bush that attempted to legitimize negative

stories that were presented about John F. Kerry. In fact, on October 14, 2004, reporter Jim Axelrod from the *CBS Evening News* discussed John F. Kerry's revelation in the previous night's debates that Republican Party vice-presidential candidate Dick Cheney's daughter was a lesbian. The coverage of this story included responses by both Dick Cheney and his wife Lynn Cheney as well as by John F. Kerry himself. It was not until the end of the account that reporter Jim Axelrod made the statement in regards to John F. Kerry that, "Whatever shreds of civility were left in this campaign are now gone for good."

This previously mentioned example by Jim Axelrod was by far the most blatant attack upon a candidate in the entire sample from all three networks. It is not the position of the reporter, especially a reporter who is masquerading himself as objective to place a judgment like that on a candidate for President of the United States. This is once again an example of the media rationalizing a story in defense of George W. Bush, and his administration.

Theory of Agenda Setting

As the theory of agenda setting notes, the media play a significant role in laying out the topics for which

consumers of a given medium deduce as important to their personal lives (Tedesco, 2001, p. 2048). And, as was presented through the review of literature, it does, in no way benefit the profit margin of media conglomerates to blatantly skew their coverage in favor of one political party. Therefore, the most productive way in which these conglomerates can skew their coverage, is by omitting either an entire story, or significant pieces from an entire story. This practice is a safe way for the conglomerates to avoid the stigma of blatant bias, and yet still adhere to the points of caution presented in the various components of the theory of agenda setting. Media do a good job of convincing the public what is important for them to concentrate on, and what is not presented is not of importance to their lives. By not covering an event, the media are indirectly presenting to the public that this particular story, or a particular part of this story, is not important for the consumer. Therefore, an objective message is being presented through the bias practice of omission of information for the purpose of suppression of that information.

As was shown in the Sonoma State study, there were colossal stories pertaining to George W. Bush, and his

administration which were not once mentioned in the October 2004 sample of network nightly news broadcasts. By the mere omission of this information, the mainstream television news media invalidated the importance of these stories, and therefore provided the appearance that these events were not important to the general public. By rationalizing negative events, and omitting disastrous stories in relation to George W. Bush, the mainstream television news media suggested that the damaging stories related to George W. Bush were of no importance, and therefore by the practice of omission, provided a bias presentation in favor of the Republican Party, and George W. Bush.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Discussion

This study started out by immediately addressing the popular notion of an institutionalized media bias in favor of the Democratic Party. In order to narrow the focus of this study down, a closer look was taken at the network nightly news coverage leading up to the 2004 presidential election. To conduct this study, and establish reliable findings, the research employed two important elements, first a content analysis through the scope of the grounded theory in order to discover the emerging themes and strategies presented in the news broadcasts, and second, the Peter Phillips study on the most underreported news events of 2004. These two factors were directly applied to a discourse analysis in order to address the three research questions of this study.

With the use of the grounded theory, the first research question pertaining to what themes emerged was able to be answered. To restate, those five themes, they were polls/examination of the horserace, daily campaign trail, profiling of the battleground states, voter turn-

out, and finally the Presidential debates. The grounded theory also assisted in answering the second research question. To once again restate, this question was in regards to what bias strategies were present in the network nightly news broadcasts. The three strategies that emerged here were rationalization, minimization, and validation. By implementing the results of the first two research question, as well as the Sonoma State study, and finally conducting a discourse analysis, I was able to concretely address and answer the third research question, and conclude that no evidence existed to support the notion of a media bias in favor of the Democratic Party in the coverage leading up to the 2004 presidential election.

To the lay observer, the televised network news media is, at best, neither in favor of the Democratic or Republican Parties, but once a basic discourse analysis is conducted and compared to a list of underreported events, a clearer view emerges that suggests a bias in coverage of what is reported, as well as what is not reported to us observers. By making this minimal effort, we as consumers of the media will be better off at deciphering the stories relayed in network news depiction of reality, and what is actually taking place.

Additional Research

Although this study was an extensive review of what took place in the network news coverage leading up to the 2004 presidential election, it was a mere microcosm of a media bias that has taken place in the past, and that will be occurring in the future. Were this study to be extended, it would be imperative to include a more in-depth analysis of the ownership of these media conglomerates. It is easy to infer that their major goal is profit margin, but at what expense, and to what degree is the ownership willing to go in order to improve profit margin? This issue of omission for the purpose of suppression is important to understand as a popular form of bias utilized by the media, and will hopefully, in due time, become a major focus for future studies examining political bias in the media.

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