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Network Television's Coverage of the 2008 Presidential Election

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Abstract

Content analysis of network evening news coverage of the 2008 presidential election revealed a slight increase in the amount of coverage and a decline in the coverage of policy matters compared to four years earlier. Barack Obama received the most positive coverage recorded for any major party nominee on network television since CMPA started analyzing election news content in 1988. The tonal gap between the Democratic and Republican nominees was also the largest recorded over the past six presidential elections. The one-sided coverage on ABC, CBS and NBC was in sharp contrast to the more uniformly negative coverage of the two candidates during the evening newscasts on Fox News.

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Introduction

Throughout recent decades, three television networks – ABC, CBS and NBC – have dominated the U.S. media landscape. Although their audience shares have declined as they have faced increasingly aggressive competitors – including CNN, Fox News, online newspapers and a tidal wave of online commentators – the networks and their cable and online offshoots remain influential media players (Pew 2008). Their flagship 30-minute evening newscasts still draw tens of millions of viewers, and their influence is magnified further by the many cable and online outlets that follow their lead. This paper examines the trends in network news coverage over the past several decades, paying particular attention to changes in the amount of news coverage, the subject of those election news reports, the ability of candidates to reach voters through these evening newscasts and of course the tone of news coverage. The data used here were produced by Center for Media and Public Affairs, a nonprofit, nonpartisan media research firm affiliated with George Mason University that has examined network news coverage of every presidential election since 1988 (cf., Farnsworth and Lichter 2007).

This analysis is conducted through scientific content analysis, the careful dissection of each news story into fragments that can be coded along several different dimensions. With content analysis, political scientists have demonstrated that the evening news programs on network television focus on horse-race coverage of who is winning and modest attention paid to matters of substance, the less-than-satisfactory performance with respect to the journalists' cardinal issues of accuracy and fairness, the declining amount of attention paid to candidates (as opposed to that lavished on the correspondents covering them) as well as the declining volume of

coverage of the presidential election overall (cf., Farnsworth and Lichter 2007, 2008; Iyengar 1991; Kerbel 1998; Patterson 1994; Robinson and Sheehan 1983).

Elections and the Mass Media

Researchers have often complained about the declining amount of coverage seen in recent presidential elections, a result of the shift away from “hard” political news and towards the “soft” news of lifestyle trends and human interest stories (Patterson 2000). Agenda-setting research argues that when important matters are not the focus of media attention the public tends to discount their importance (cf., Iyengar and Kinder 1987).

As conducted by the candidates, presidential campaigns are extended seminars on the state of the nation: primarily how well the incumbent has handled issues concerning the country’s security and economic well-being. Candidates debate other issues that could affect presidential performance as well, which -- depending on the year -- could include energy, the environment, health care, taxes and even the country’s moral climate. In addition, candidates discuss where the country should go in the years ahead, and how the nation can deal with some of its most vexing problems (cf., Owen 2002; Patterson 1994).

On network television’s evening news programs, though, a different picture often emerges. The televised discussion is not over whether the American economy needs a boost – and if so, how to provide a little macroeconomic help. Instead, in most national elections over the past three decades, network television reporters have talked largely about who is ahead and who is behind in the presidential polls, and the reasons for the disparity. The discussion of public

policy matters that does occur on network television is often framed in the context of this horse race, reducing the importance of issues and increasing the importance of the “sport” of politics (Farnsworth and Lichter 2007; Kerbel 1998; Lichter and Noyes 1995, 1998; Patterson 1994; Robinson and Sheehan 1983).

Many journalists regarded the 1988 general election battle between Bush and Dukakis as a campaign marred by negativity, superficiality and factual distortions. The network news divisions responded by vowing to pay greater attention to the topics that journalists considered most relevant to the public interest, regardless of the candidates’ spin on issues and events. In other words, after the 1988 election, broadcast journalism adopted a more active role in setting the campaign agenda, in order to serve better the voting public (Alter 1988, 1992; Bode 1992; Russert 1990). This commitment towards a more heavily mediated approach has been a goal of network television since 1988, though the effects of this approach have been mixed at best (Farnsworth and Lichter 2007; Kerbel 1998; Lichter and Noyes 1995, 1998; Owen 2002; Patterson 1980, 1994).

The news media’s power to set the agenda is particularly troubling if reporters fail to meet standards of objectivity and fairness. Conservatives have long charged that reporters are biased. In the 1992 campaign, when allegations of media bias were particularly high, many Republicans put bumper stickers on their cars that said, “Annoy the Media: Re-elect Bush.” In the 2000 election, however, many liberals alleged the reporters were being too easy on Texas Gov. George W. Bush and were unfairly keeping Green Party candidate Ralph Nader off the air.

Scholars have a range of opinions on the question of whether reporters are biased. Some

say that whatever bias that exists makes its way into the news because of deadline pressures and the need to make stories interesting for the public (Robinson 1976). Others say that reporters try to be fair, but whatever bias that does find its way into stories – consciously or unconsciously – is predominantly biased towards the liberal perspective (Lichter et al. 1990). Still other media researchers, generally found on the ideological left, focus on the corporate structures of the news business and argue that the generally conservative orientations of publishers, owners and other corporate executives are the true sources of bias (Herman and Chomsky 1988; Ginsberg 1986). As the diversity of opinion suggests, media researchers have not yet reached a consensus on the nature of an alleged media bias. In this project, we use the CMPA content analysis to search for evidence of bias on the network news across the past six presidential elections.

While scholars and politicians argue over the existence of ideological bias, there is strong evidence that television coverage became increasingly negative in tone during recent decades (Lichter and Noyes 1995, 1998). This negativity, directed against nearly all viable candidates, can have a powerful impact on the public's orientation toward government. Citizens exposed to the cynicism found in media portrayals of political candidates and public officials may become increasingly negatively disposed towards politics and government (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Hetherington 2001). This may have been a result of Vietnam and Watergate, but whatever the reason journalists remain highly cynical regarding government and politics (cf., Gergen 2000; Neustadt 1990; Sabato 2000; Woodward 1999).

From the Watergate years onward, citizens were mostly cynical about government, according to the trust in government questions of the American National Elections Studies (cf.,

Craig 1993, 1996; Farnsworth 2003). Not until after the terrorist attack on the U.S. on September 11, 2001 did the public's trust in government measure rebound. This gain in trust in government in late 2001 probably had more to do with a "rally 'round the flag effect" that often occurs in times of political crisis than with any long-term renewed faith in governmental officials (Adams et al. 1994; Lowi 1985; Nincic 1997).

If academic criticism has concentrated mainly on the superficiality and negativism of campaign news, the candidates and their supporters are most attuned to the fairness issue. Historically this complaint has been raised most often by Republicans, who see the national media as presenting the perspectives of liberals and Democrats (Bozell and Baker 1990; Rusher 1988). The Democratic voting patterns and relatively liberal personal perspectives of national media journalists are well documented, particularly on social and cultural rather than economic issues (Lichter 1996; Lichter et al. 1990; Schneider and Lewis 1985).

In recent years, however, Democrats have increasingly joined the chorus of media criticism. President Clinton's resentment of the media for its treatment of his personal life, beginning in the 1992 campaign, is well known. In the waning weeks of the 2000 campaign, several prominent liberal commentators charged that the media coverage was favoring George W. Bush, stemming either from journalists' personal antipathy toward Al Gore or their efforts to lean over backwards to avoid charges of partisanship (Kurtz 2000).

In response to such criticism, journalists typically argue that their professionalism prevents their personal politics from influencing their coverage in any overt or systematic fashion (Deakin 1983; Hunt 1985). Some scholars have reached the same conclusion by pointing to

economic and social constraints as counterweights to personal opinion in the news product (Epstein 1975; Gans 1979). This paper treats this sometimes emotional debate over bias in a more empirical fashion.

Data and Measures

This study is based on a content analysis of 683 news stories on the 2008 presidential campaign that aired on ABC, CBS and NBC, the three large broadcast networks. That total includes every evening news report on the campaign from August 23, 2008, which marked the start of the Democratic Convention through the evening newscasts on November 3, 2008, the night before Election Day. Another 2,766 evening news reports covering the 1988, 1992, 1996, 2000 and 2004 presidential campaigns are included in this study for purposes of comparison, bringing the total number of evening news stories in this analysis to 3,449 news reports. This adds up to 5787 minutes of network news reports, or more than 96 hours of campaign coverage, on ABC, CBS and NBC during the past six presidential elections. We also analyzed all the campaign news reports on the first half of “Special Report with Brit Hume,” the evening newscast on Fox News during the 2008 and 2004 campaigns. There were 514 Fox News reports on the 2008 campaign during the period from August 23 through November 3, and 410 of them aired between Labor Day and Election Day. (The second half of the Fox News program includes panel discussions, making the first half of the program more comparable to network television’s evening newscasts than the second half).

In previous election cycles, campaign news content was analyzed from Labor Day up to Election Day. We report results from this conventional campaign kick-off day in the tables below when comparing the amount of news on the 2008 campaign with earlier years. We use the extended 2008 campaign season for comparisons of measures of substance and tone because of the timing of the party's nominating conventions. In past years, both conventions took place before Labor Day, but in 2008 the GOP convention took place after the traditional start of the campaign season.

The different calendar for 2008 leaves researchers with a dilemma. To start our analysis at Labor Day would include one party's national convention and exclude the other's. To start our analysis early enough to include both conventions creates a campaign season roughly two weeks longer than the other years analyzed.

With this caveat, we use the extended study period (which includes both conventions) except where otherwise indicated. For measures of news volume we include both the extended period and the conventional campaign period starting on Labor Day and allow readers to select their preferred timeframe. For other measures, we rely on the extended period, which in our opinion more accurately reflects the complete general election campaign dynamics of 2008. It is also a fairer measure of substance and tone than the shorter conventional campaign period, which for 2008 would include the GOP convention and exclude the Democratic one.

Network news coverage was examined during all six news cycles to determine its thoroughness, substance focus, valence (i.e. positive or negative with respect to the candidates), and level of mediation (i.e., the degree to which the story of the campaign was communicated

through the candidates' own utterances as opposed to the comments of journalists and other on-camera sources). Trained coders were from videotaped newscasts. For each of the variables here, intercoder reliability – the extent to which one coder agreed with a second coder looking at the same taped newscasts – exceeds 90 percent.

The overall news story was treated as a unit of analysis only or measures of topical focus. Other variables were measured by coding individual statements (message units) within stories. This procedure allows for far more precise differentiation of campaign discourse than story-level coding affords.

With respect to tone, CMPA's content analysis system identified the tone as well as the source and topic of each statement about a candidate or issue, i.e., who said what about whom. Our coding procedure differentiated between the source and the object of each evaluative statement. We separated evaluations of candidate viability (horse race assessments) from those of candidate desirability (assessments of a candidate's qualifications, policies, personal character, or conduct). Only the latter were included in our definition of tone or valence, which is concerned with the merit of each candidacy rather than its likelihood of success. Second, we differentiated between evaluations made by (or attributed to) partisan and nonpartisan sources, respectively. In this case, "partisan" refers to sources identified as being affiliated with a particular candidacy; "nonpartisan" refers to all other sources. In practice, the vast majority of partisan evaluations in election stories come from the candidates and their campaign staffs. Nonpartisan sources of evaluative statements are most frequently journalists themselves, voters, experts (such as an economist who comments on a candidate's economic policies) and various pundits.

We followed the lead of Robinson and Sheehan's pioneering work (1983:94ff) in restricting our measure of tone to statements by nonpartisan sources. This was done for two reasons. First, these nonpartisan comments are more influential in predicting opinion change (Page et al. 1987), presumably because voters give less credence to identifiably partisan opinion. Second, they represent the more discretionary portion of election news, the value-added element of a journalist's (and a media organization's) particular news judgment. So news accounts of partisan evaluations are more closely linked to the campaign trail give-and-take, whereas nonpartisan evaluations give more latitude to journalists' own judgments in selecting sources and topics.ⁱ

Examples of "positive" and "negative" evaluations by our definitions are as follows:

Positive: "McCain has shown he can work on both sides of the table to help this country." (Voter, ABC, Oct. 10, 2008). Negative: "Obama's dollar deluge is possible because he broke a promise to accept public funding." (Kevin Tibbles, NBC, Oct. 2, 2008).

Results

The analysis of the 2008 presidential campaign news stories, like those of 2004, suggest that network television executives may be listening to the critics who have complained that the media are shortchanging viewers by reducing campaign coverage. As shown in Table 1, the three evening newscasts aired 500 stories on the presidential election between Labor Day and Election Day. That year, together with the 504 stories on the presidential election aired four years earlier, marked a strong expansion of coverage compared to that of 1996 and 2000. When measured by

number of minutes devoted to the election the results are even more striking: the 1,187 minutes of campaign news in 2008 was the second highest of the six election cycles we examined, trailing only the three candidate race of 1992. (Table 1 also includes figures for an extended period of 2008 campaign coverage, one that starts on August 23 with the opening of the Democratic National Convention rather than with the Labor Day newscasts used for previous election cycles. (The extended period of 2008 will be used in subsequent examinations of substance and tone).

(Table 1 about here)

From Labor Day to Election Day, the three evening newscasts showed a total of 8.8 campaign news stories on the presidential campaign, or roughly an average of three stories a night per network. That average figure is roughly comparable to 2004 and both years represent a significant improvement of the attention reporters paid to the 1992 and 1996 campaigns. During times of fiscal belt-tightening by the mass media, it is somewhat surprising to see as significant a focus on the coast-to-coast campaign as was presented during the fall of 2008.

The relatively strong performance of the Big Three networks on volume of coverage holds regardless of whether the measure is number of stories, the average number of stories per day or the total time in minutes. The total time in minutes excludes any change in the length of stories during a given campaign cycle, allowing for a measure of amount of news independent of particular trends towards different story lengths. The daily average allows for a measure divorced from the number of days contained in the different campaign news periods of different years.

Horse Race Coverage Trumps Substance

Improvements in the quantity of television news are not necessarily improvements in the

quality of television news, of course. The first test of the quality of coverage concerns the focus on substance as opposed to the daily horse-race standings. As Table 2 illustrates, 41 percent of all stories during the 2008 general election contained a discussion of the candidates' standings and prospects (We defined "discussions" as lasting a minimum of 30 seconds of air time or one-third of very brief stories). This figure is the lowest of the six election cycles we examined, below even the 48 percent figure produced by reporters covering the close 2004 election and Clinton's runaway victory eight years earlier. The 2008 results were far less than the 71 percent of the discussions devoted to horse-race matters in the razor-thin 2000 election, or the 58 percent of stories that dealt with the horse race in both 1992 and 1988.

(Table 2 about here)

Of course the question of who is likely to win the election is a perfectly legitimate one for the voters to hear about. This question is particularly likely to be a focus of media coverage when the answer is highly uncertain, as it was leading up to – and even for several weeks after – Election Day 2000. (The 2004 contest was also close, though an undisputed Bush victory in Florida that year prevented the weeks of uncertainty that followed Election Day 2000.)

Even though horse-race coverage declined in 2008, substantive coverage in 2008 fell as well. Little more than one-third of the news stories contained significant discussion of policy issues or other substantive matters, far below the 49 percent level of four years earlier. In fact, network television's performance on the policy coverage measure was the second worst (behind 1992) of the six elections we examine here.

The discrepancy between what the voters say that they want (more discussion of issues)

and what the networks provide (coverage dominated by the horse race) has frequently been observed by scholars (Hershey 2001; Just et al. 1996; Owen 2002; Patterson 1994; Pew 2004). But other scholars have suggested that consumers do want a high dose of campaign sports coverage, despite what they may tell pollsters (Iyengar, Norpoth and Hahn 2004). Regardless of where the truth lies, television's reliance on the game schema continued in 2008, even though the amount of horse-race coverage did drop below 2004 levels.

Network News Tone in Presidential Elections

Throughout the final weeks of Campaign 2008 it was good to be Barack Obama on network news. Using our extended period of analysis – from the start of the Democratic Convention in late August to Election Day – news coverage of the Democratic nominee was 68 percent positive in tone. This is the highest that CMPA has recorded for any nominee over the past six election cycles – significantly better than runner-up Sen. John Kerry (D-MA), the 2004 Democratic nominee. Sen. John McCain (R-AZ), Obama's 2008 rival, received coverage that was only 33 percent positive in tone. For every positive thing said on network television about the Republican nominee by nonpartisan observers, there were two positive things said about the Democratic nominee.

(Table 3 about here)

The 35 percentage point tonal coverage gap in 2008 is the largest of the six presidential elections examined by CMPA. Most tellingly for those concerned about potential partisan bias, four of the past six presidential elections have had double-digit coverage advantages for the

Democratic nominee. The 1992 campaign won by then-Gov. Bill Clinton of Arkansas featured a 23 percentage point gap between the tone of coverage of Clinton and President George H.W. Bush. Kerry's 22 point gap over President George W. Bush in 2004 also marked a particularly large tonal gap between the news coverage of these major party nominees.

The only election where the Republicans won the race for good press – or, more precisely, the race for less bad press – was in 1988. But the party didn't win it by much. Vice President George H.W. Bush received more positive news reports than Michael Dukakis, but the gap was only seven percentage points, far less than margins in all the other presidential election years examined here except for 2000, when the coverage was the most even-handed of the past twenty years.

McCain's coverage was not negative just because he was behind in the polls or just because he seemed to struggle in crafting a message on the economic crisis that hit with particularly strong force during September 2008. McCain's coverage fell short of Obama's on the subset of news reports that focused on policy areas (27 percent versus 52 percent). Network television tends to treat candidates better during the party's conventions, and once again Obama was treated better than McCain during their respective national conventions, by a margin of 80 percent positive to 46 percent positive. (This 34 percent tonal gap during the period of the two national conventions mirrored almost exactly the tonal gap in coverage during the extended 2008 campaign period we analyzed to create the results found in Table 3. It indicates that adding the two convention periods did not change the tonal gap of the 2008 campaign content analysis.).

One of the more unusual aspects of the 2008 presidential campaign was the media's

intense focus on Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin, McCain's vice presidential running mate. McCain said he selected Palin because of his desire to burnish the GOP's maverick credentials, and McCain's decision to campaign with Palin during much of the fall helped increase the attention paid to this particular vice presidential nominee. So, for the 2008 election cycle, we added coverage of the vice presidential candidates to this analysis to see if it affected the portrayal of the tickets on network television. Those results are shown at the top of Table 4.

(Table 4 about here)

The overall results show us two things: Palin did not help McCain, nor did she hurt him, at least when it came to media coverage. The tone of coverage of Palin on network news was almost exactly the same as the tone of coverage of the head of the ticket: 34 percent positive for Palin versus 33 percent positive for McCain. While Palin certainly generated more attention for the party (she received 39 percent of the tonal evaluations of the GOP ticket), she didn't affect the tone of network news coverage for the Republican Party nominees.

For the Democrats, Sen. Joe Biden (D-DE), mattered far less on the evening news. The Democratic running-mate had coverage that was notably less positive than Obama's (though still more positive than the Republican nominees), but little media attention was paid to the Democratic vice presidential candidate. Biden's tonal evaluations were less than 12 percent of those relating to the Democratic ticket. By way of contrast, for every tonal evaluation of Biden, there were more than four tonal evaluations of Palin on the network evening newscasts.

Separate breakdowns for coverage on the three networks showed greater differences among ABC, CBS and NBC than is usually the case. ABC's coverage of the GOP ticket was 46

percent positive in tone, notably more positive than the 32 percent positive treatment of the Republicans on CBS and the 22 percent positive treatment on NBC. The numbers for McCain varied little across the three broadcast networks, but for Palin the differences were much larger. She received an extraordinary 68 percent positive coverage on ABC – as high as Obama on that network and on all networks. That figure is particularly striking when one considers that no Republican nominee for president has received even 40 percent positive coverage during the past six election cycles.

But what the networks giveth, the networks taketh away. Palin received an extraordinarily negative assessment in NBC's news reports, which were 16 percent positive (and 84 percent negative) in comments about the Alaska governor. This is far lower than any presidential nominee examined over the past six presidential elections. While Katie Couric's interviews with Palin were extensive and some think significant in the public's assessment of the once-obscure Alaska governor, the tone of coverage Palin received on CBS was in the middle of the three networks – 31 percent positive in tone.

On the Democratic side, the three networks were roughly equally positive in their treatment of Obama. Each network had too few evaluations of Biden to allow for a meaningful assessment of tone. (We require more than ten assessments to calculate a tonal measure).

Network News versus Fox News

During the 2008 election we compared the coverage of the campaign on network television to the coverage of the first half of "Special Report with Brit Hume," the closest thing

to an evening newscast on Fox News. Although this cable news channel offers a significant helping of ideologically charged fare on some of its talk shows, the news coverage in 2008 was remarkably even-handed. The tone of coverage of McCain was 40 percent positive, as compared to 37 percent positive for Obama, a difference far too small to be perceived by a television viewer. Palin provided a slight boost to the ticket – her coverage was 43 percent positive, and Biden hurt the Democratic ticket with coverage on Fox that was only 11 percent positive.

The 35 point gap favoring the Obama on network television was more than eleven times the three point gap favoring McCain on the Fox News evening newscast. Differences of that magnitude are easily detected by news viewers and probably helps explain the partisan division in news audiences, with Republicans turning to Fox more than Democrats do (Pew 2008).

Four years ago, Fox was not so even handed. During the 2004 election, George W. Bush received coverage on Fox that was 53 percent positive versus only 21 percent positive coverage for Kerry. That 32 percentage point margin favoring Bush on Fox was greater than the overall 22 percentage point gap favoring Kerry on the three broadcast networks that year (cf., Farnsworth and Lichter 2007).

Our findings demonstrating tonal advantages that favor neither party in some years and favor the Democrats in others are consistent with the results of content analyses of the two presidential elections prior to those studied by CMPA. In 1980 Michael Robinson and Margaret Sheehan conducted the first large-scale content analysis of print and broadcast election news which focused on the tone of coverage. By controlling for horse race evaluations this landmark study provided the template for later studies of this type. They concluded that Ronald Reagan and

Jimmy Carter “both did about equally badly on television” (Robinson and Sheehan 1983:138).

When Maura Clancey and Michael Robinson reprised this study four years later, however, they found that Walter Mondale received balanced coverage, while Reagan’s was predominantly negative (Clancey and Robinson 1985, see also Graber 1987). Clancey and Robinson (1985) accounted for the good press gap between Mondale and Reagan by positing a general anti-frontrunner bias they termed “compensatory journalism.” They argued that reporters are toughest on the candidates who are most likely to become president, in effect compensating those who are trailing with better press than the leaders. However, this hypothesis has since been contradicted by data from subsequent general elections. Clinton got far better press than both Bush in 1992 and Dole in 1996, despite his wire-to-wire leads in the polls. And Bush led Dukakis in good press in 1988, albeit by a slight margin, despite his frontrunner status in preference polls throughout the fall.

In sum, a general pattern of negativism on network news has coincided with a tendency toward more favorable press for Democrats than Republicans. In four of the past ten elections for which exhaustive systematic content analysis data are available (1980, 1988, 1998 and 2000), both sides received mainly negative notices. In the other six (1984, 1992, 1994, 1996, 2004 and 2008), Democrats fared substantially better on the evening news programs than did Republicans.ⁱⁱ Democratic candidates did not always get better press than Republicans, but Republican candidates never got much better press than Democrats. These data suggest that allegations of ideological tilt in election coverage cannot be dismissed as the ill-considered pleading of conservative partisans. At the same time, neither negativity nor partisanship alone can fully

account for the tilt in the tone of campaign news over the past thirty years.

It is important to note that positive media coverage during the general election does not always help the candidate who received it. For the six elections in which the Democrats received significantly better coverage (the presidential election years of 1984, 1992, 1996, 2004 and 2008 and the mid-term congressional elections of 1994), the party was only three-for-six at the polls. Obama won in 2008 and Bill Clinton won his two presidential campaigns, but John Kerry lost narrowly in 2004 and Walter Mondale was trounced in 1984. In 1994, the off-year election in this group, the Republican candidates for the U.S. House and the U.S. Senate scored extraordinary victories on their way to taking majority party status away from the Democrats in both chambers (Jacobson 2001a).

The four elections in which coverage was about equally negative for the two parties and their candidates (1980, 1988, 1998 and 2000) also offer mixed results. Reagan won easily in 1980, and the Republican Party took control of the U.S. Senate that year. George H.W. Bush also won easily in 1988, securing nearly 54 percent of the popular vote and the electoral votes of 40 states. In the midterm election of 1998, when the air was thick with the presidential impeachment controversy, the Republicans broke even in the Senate and suffered a net loss of five seats in the House (Jacobson 2001a). In 2000, of course, the presidential election ended in a virtual deadlock that was settled by the U.S. Supreme Court after a five-week struggle involving partisan activists, lawyers and Florida ballot counters. Although the Republicans took back the White House that year, the party lost four Senate seats and two House seats (Jacobson 2001b).

The mixed results demonstrate that the fears of an all-powerful or “imperial” media are

overblown. In cases of both equally negative media and of more one-sided coverage, the results offer no evidence in support of the hypodermic effects model of media influence. The media don't tell us in a consistently decisive and effective way how to vote. But this doesn't mean television news coverage is unimportant. The mere fact that a "media candidate" did not win does not prove that the media did not influence voters. Further, the media have powerful agenda-setting effects, particularly relating to the framing of news stories, a process of telling viewers what issues to think about and in what ways to think about those key matters.

Our content analysis of six presidential elections reveals that what we are told to think about by television – the horse race, candidates who seem to be scheming at every opportunity, and the human failings of those candidates – are not matters likely to make us informed citizens or congenial voters. Nor does the generally declining amount of policy-oriented coverage we have found do enough remind citizens about the importance of political participation.

Conclusion

Media theorist Marshall McLuhan famously argued that "the medium is the message." But the evidence shows that in presidential campaigns the message matters a great deal to candidates and voters. But coverage that focuses on the horse race shortchanges candidates trying to talk about issues, and the voters who are trying to think about issues. The questions voters ask of candidates at public appearances are about a lot more than who is gaining or losing ground in the latest poll. The movement in recent years towards talk shows, cable television and the Internet suggests that increasing numbers of voters are hungry for the kinds of more substantive issue-oriented coverage that broadcast television news is increasingly unable and/or unwilling to

provide (cf., Pew 2008). Of course, not all people have equal access to, or equal ability to use, these alternative sources of information.

News coverage of the 2008 campaign suggests that the considerable ferment and reform efforts by mainstream journalists in recent years, together with extensive criticisms of media content by scholars, may be pushing the volume of news back towards the level of campaign coverage seen in the 1990s.

But on the fundamental question of balance, the networks turned in the worst performance since at least 1988, as far back as these data go. Claims of liberal bias in the mass media are increasingly supported by content analysis of network television newscasts of presidential elections, with particularly strong evidence for 2004 and 2008. While the audience for network television is nowhere near the size it once was, tens of millions of people still watch these evening newscasts, audiences far above the reach of a cable news program on Fox or CNN (cf., Farnsworth and Lichter 2007; Pew 2004, 2008)

The rise of alternatives to network television offers clear areas for additional research. Content analysis of online news content has lagged beyond print and television analysis because of uncertainty over which web pages to examine, but the growing influence of online media – (cf., Halperin and Harris 2007) demonstrate the utility of applying these techniques to the 2008 offerings online as well.

Table 1
Amount of General Election News, 1988-2008

	Number of Stories	Stories per Day (average)	Total Time (minutes)
2008 (Extended period)*	683*	9.4	1,606*
2008	500	8.8	1,187
2004	504	9.0	1,070
2000	462	7.3	805
1996	483	7.7	788
1992	728	11.5	1,402
1988	589	10.5	1,116

*The General Election campaign period starts with Labor Day and continues through the day before Election Day for 1988-2008. The 2008 extended period included here adds the party conventions, which occurred on either side of Labor Day. To include both conventions, these data cover the evening newscasts starting on August 23 through the day before Election Day. As a result, the 2008 extended period totals are not directly comparable with those for previous years.

Source: ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts content analyzed by the Center for Media and Public Affairs

Table 2
General Election News: Horse Race Coverage, 1988-2008

Focus of Coverage (percent of stories)*

	Horse Race	Policy Issues
2008 (Extended period)	41	35
2004	48	49
2000	71	40
1996	48	37
1992	58	32
1988	58	39

Note: The General Election Campaign Period starts with Labor Day and continues through the day before Election Day for 1988-2004. The 2008 General Election Campaign period is extended to include both party conventions. The 2008 figures cover newscasts from August 23 through the day before Election Day.

*Stories can include a horse race and a policy focus (or neither focus); numbers therefore do not sum to 100 percent.

Source: ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts content analyzed by the Center for Media and Public Affairs

Table 3
General Election News: Tone of Coverage, 1988-2008

Percentage of positive press*

	Democratic Nominee	Republican Nominee	Partisan Coverage Gap
2008 (Extended period)	68	33	35 (D)
2004	59	37	22 (D)
2000	40	37	3 (D)
1996	50	33	17 (D)
1992	52	29	23 (D)
1988	31	38	7 (R)

Note: The General Election Campaign Period starts with Labor Day and continues through the day before Election Day for 1988-2004. The 2008 General Election Campaign period is extended to include both party conventions. The 2008 figures cover newscasts from August 23 through the day before Election Day.

Source: ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts content analyzed by the Center for Media and Public Affairs

Table 4
Tone of Coverage: Comparing the Networks and Fox News, 2008

Percentage of positive press

	Republican Ticket	McCain	Palin	Democratic Ticket	Obama	Biden
Networks* (N)	34% (284)	33% (173)	34% (111)	66% (223)	68% (197)	50% (26)
Fox News (N)	41% (178)	40% (101)	43% (77)	32% (148)	37% (121)	11% (27)

ABC	46%	36%	68%	68%	68%	--**
CBS	32%	33%	31%	69%	68%	--**
NBC	22%	31%	16%	58%	73%	--**

Note: The 2008 General Election Campaign period used here includes both party conventions and runs from August 23 through the day before Election Day. N refers to number of evaluations of the candidate by sources not identified by partisan loyalty in the newscasts.

*Network figures are for ABC, CBS and NBC evening newscasts.

**Insufficient number of evaluations for analysis (ten or fewer)

Source: Center for Media and Public Affairs

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i . Additional data analysis showed that the inclusion of partisan evaluations did not significantly alter the tonal balance between Bush and Gore. We could not make longitudinal comparisons, because only non-partisan source evaluations were coded for all five elections.

ii . Hofstetter (1976) found negative but balanced network news coverage in the 1972 race between Nixon and McGovern. Unfortunately his coding system conflated what we have termed the viability and desirability dimensions of evaluative content. Robinson and Sheehan (1983:311) cite this problem as a major drawback of this study, which “relied almost totally on references to success or failure as a measure of good press or bad.” This convinced them to separate the two dimensions in their analysis of the 1980 campaign.