POLITICAL AGENDA-SETTING IN CABLE NEWS AS A POSSIBLE

TECHNIQUE FOR SECURING AN AUDIENCE NICHE

W.E. Mott, IV

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APPROVED:

Alan B. Albarran, Major Professor and Chair
    of the Department of Radio, Television
    and Film
James D. Meernik, Committee Member and
    Chair of the Department of Political
    Science
Phyllis Slocum, Committee Member
Sandra L. Terrell, Dean of the Robert B.
    Toulhouse School of Graduate Studies

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In an effort to better understand the motivations behind perceived biases in the US cable news industry, 72 hours of CNN, FOX, and MSNBC during the week preceding the 2006 congressional election were analyzed. First- and second-level agenda-setting theories are used to examine how long and in what way federal politicians are portrayed. The results indicate distinct differences in political presentations between the three networks.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter

LIST OF FIGURES

Page

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION OF BIAS AND AGENDA-SETTING

Television news audiences have so many choices these days. In national news

alone, 3 broadcast networks, PBS, and a handful of 24-hour cable news organizations

all compete in the business of acquiring audiences – audiences that are already

shrinking in size due to a shift in interest to other forms of media (Livingstone, 1999).

Further audience fragmentation has coincided with a rise in technological

advancements used to consume media (e.g., Internet streaming, satellite television,

DVR), as well as with the recent increase in content choice offered to audience

members. Among news organizations, the ever-growing challenge regarding the

acquisition and preservation of an audience has presumably led to niche marketing as a

way to maintain survival in a highly competitive broadcast journalism industry.

A news source's content that is marketed to a particular audience niche can

easily be perceived by the audience as biased. A portion of every audience inevitably

perceives content in such a way, as the injection of bias by the news media is a

commonly held notion, which in turn commonly renders complaint. Audience members

on each side of the political isle are convinced that the media is controlled by, and

panders to, their adversary. The right claims, and has for decades, that the mainstream

media is liberal; and the left, particularly since the consolidation movement of the 1980s

and 1990s, claims that the media is conservative. There are numerous accusations,

which span both ends of the political spectrum, that uphold the notion that certain cable

news channels add a biased slant to the presentation of seemingly objective content.

The published perception that the media is liberally biased, specifically, is not a new phenomenon. During the presidency of Richard Nixon, the first texts that alleged a liberal bias in the media surfaced. Efron's (1972) *The News Twisters* broadly accuses the national media of inserting a liberal bias into the news; and the American Institute for Political Communication (1972) also published a study in which network television news was deemed similarly liberal. One of the more commercially successful sources, *Bias* by Goldberg (2002), primarily accuses CBS, but also points to CNN, as being subjectively in favor of the viewpoints most commonly associated with left-wing ideology. Olaski (1988) goes as far as to accuse the American news media of being anti-Christian.

Scholarly studies, such as Groseclose and Milyo (2004), also claim the U.S. media, and specifically CNN, have a liberal bias. Many materials that claim a liberal bias in the media point to the notion that journalists themselves lean left, and in turn slant the actual news content. Elusive is the citing of content analysis research in many, if not most, of the published materials which allege a liberal bias in the media; nevertheless, the belief that there is a liberal bias in the American news media is widely held and well documented.

Conversely, there is also a growing number of published arguments that claim that the U.S. news media is in fact *conservatively* biased. Alterman's (2003) *What Liberal Media?* directly addresses the accusations of media liberalism and concludes that the mass media lean predominantly right. By title alone, Brock (2004) brands the media *The Republican Noise Machine*, and claims such a machine is corrupting democracy. A dominant argument for the mass media being conservatively biased

2

stems from the practice of media consolidation and the coinciding belief that a handful of conservative network owners dictate the nature of content that is distributed to a majority of outlets (McChesney, 1999). As with the liberal-bias argument, there are many sources that illustrate the commonly held notion that the American news media contain a conservative bias.

<center>Bias</center>

For the present study, it is important to discuss the concept of bias. There have been a great number of debates regarding the definition of the term, bias, as it relates to journalism. Defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989), *biased* is an adjective, which describes something that is "influenced; inclined in some direction; [or] prejudiced." Within the industry of journalism, *bias* is a dirty word. Potential reporters in journalism schools are taught to avoid bias at all costs, and encouraged to seek objectivity – the opposite.

However, some argue that objectivity in journalism is a lofty, even impossible, goal to achieve – implying that there is no such thing as objectivity; only lesser degrees of subjectivity. In formulating the present study, objectivity is believed to be in the eye of the beholder, which causes individuals to present and perceive events uniquely. Because individuals hold unique preconceived ideals regarding public policy - and other political issues commonly discussed in the U.S. journalism industry – every journalist will interpret a political object differently, subsequently reporting on it uniquely. Individual audience members will in turn perceive the reported news in a unique way as well. Therefore, the present study does not attempt to label a certain news organization

<center>3</center>

biased or objective – the act in doing so is believed to be a practice in futility. The present study attempts to *compare* the content of different news organizations in the hopes of better understanding possible niche marketing.

A recurring theme, which stems from the dichotomy of arguments for a liberally and conservatively biased media, is that, regarding political ideology, CNN generally leans left and FOX News generally leans right - but, compared to what? Each other? Furthermore, what would be the motivation or agenda in doing so? The present study builds upon the extensive body of published material which claims that certain cable news stations are biased; however, instead of only attempting to identify indicators that point to subjectivity, this study compares the general practice of news presentation among different news providers.

Also, the present study ignores the belief that there is a political conspiracy within a certain cable news network to affect public policy or oust an elected official, as some of the sources previously mentioned suggest. Instead, as Collins (2004) points out in regard to FOX, the present study adheres to the assumption that the cable news industry has become fragmented to the point at which niche audiences must be identified and targeted in order for a network to stay competitive. Going beyond this profit-driven theory in a capitalistic society provokes over-complicated speculation as to why a free press in a free market behaves as it does. Hypothesizing complicated motives, such as attempting to alter political occurrences, rather than an organization's straightforward need to protect their bottom line, yield methodologies that are unrealistic.

By avoiding this struggle to determine if a certain cable network has an independent political bias or not, and by simply comparing the analyzed content of numerous networks, a more practical model is used to determine if different cable news channels target different audience segments. Indisputably, the agenda of CNN and FOX is to acquire and keep a loyal audience for the purpose of making money. It could be argued that the transference of this fiscal agenda is interpreted by the audience as a desire to watch. Obtaining a target audience, by presenting content that might coincide with the desired political-agenda of such an audience-segment, creates an agenda-setting effect of heightened political-issue salience within the audience. This increase in salience transforms the target-audience into a loyal, profit producing entity, as the audience members identify with the perceived agenda of the news organization.

Agenda-setting theory provides a framework that helps explain the media's ability to transfer issue salience to an audience (McCombs & Shaw, 1972); therefore, it is an appropriate theory to guide the present study in facilitating a better understanding of how, and if, cable news caters content to political niche audiences. Additionally, because of this framework, a news organization's unilateral changing of an audience's agenda to consume certain media content is a phenomenon that agenda-setting theory is capable of embracing.

Agenda-Setting Theory

There are two levels of agenda-setting theory. First-level agenda-setting focuses on the dominance of an object in the media. This level assumes that the amount of time objects (e.g., words, images, audio clips) are displayed in the media directly correlates

with the level of salience the audience grants such objects. The dominant belief regarding first-level agenda-setting is that the more time an object is displayed in the media, the more salience the audience grants the object. In other words, according to Cohen (1963), the creator of the theory, "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).

Second-level agenda setting deals with *how* the media displays an object. This theorized media practice is assumed to alter how the audience perceives the object, and, ultimately, what the audience thinks about the object. The theory of framing is associated with this level and can be applied to the present study in an attempt to determine if, and how, different cable news channels cater content to a particular niche. In other words, according to McCombs (2005, p. 546), "the media can not only be successful in telling us what to think about, they can also be successful in telling us how to think about it."

Cohen first proposed the theory of agenda-setting in 1963; but the theory was not utilized in empirical research until 1972 by McCombs and Shaw. Since its inception, the theory has been applied to numerous studies in the attempt to identify a relationship between the agenda of the media and the agenda of the audience. The theory of agenda-setting has since become a globally relevant theoretical model used in understanding the media and audiences in many developed, as well as lesser developed, nation states (Al-Haqeel & Melkote, 1995; Anokwa & Salween, 1988; Ghanem & Wanta, 2001; Kwansah-Aidoo, 2003; Peter, 2003; Wilke, 1995; etc.). The

practices used in association with agenda-setting research are widely used and well documented, and they yield effective results.

One negative attribute of agenda-setting theory is that it was created in association with, and has all but recently been applied to, a three-network universe. Because the creation of 24-hour news is a somewhat new broadcast model, agenda-setting research has been rarely utilized in such an environment. However, as previously mentioned the theory has been practiced and found successful in widely diverse settings; therefore, the present study assumes that the relatively recent era of 24-hour news will yield an applicable setting for agenda-setting theory as well.

The present study utilizes both first- and second-level agenda-setting theories and the applicable methods carried out by selected previous agenda-setting studies. The present study's goal is to build on the assumption that a cable news organization is producing politically leaning content, when compared to another cable news organization, for the purpose of securing a politically niche-oriented audience.

Review of Literature

Applicable Agenda-Setting Attributes

McCombs (2005) discusses a self-produced agenda-setting study that was conducted in Chapel Hill, NC, and was the first applied practice of the theory in empirical research. The author reflects upon the 33-year-old inaugural implementation of agenda-setting theory while also giving a synopsis of the implications of the groundbreaking study. Most beneficial to the understanding of the area in which the present study intends to focus is the author's explanation of the first and second levels

of agenda-setting theory. In essence, the first level of agenda setting deals with an object's public presence (or lack there of), and the second level deals with the framing of an object. The source's substantial contribution is that almost every facet of agenda-setting theory is comprehensively explained from the valuable perspective of hindsight.

Agenda-setting theory was first used in empirical research in 1972; and since its adoption by media researchers, there has been an abundance of varying types of studies which utilize the theory. Dearing and Rogers (1996) give a comprehensive overview of the inner workings of agenda-setting theory, identify the specific contributions of the Chapel Hill study, and provide a history of the theory by citing numerous studies. The contributions of McCombs and Shaw, as indicated by the authors, are in naming the media-public relationship, agenda-setting. The authors explain the term, "agenda," and attempt to independently define it: "a set of issues that are communicated in a hierarchy of importance at a point in time" (p. 2).

In the spring of 1975, Weaver, Graber, McCombs, and Eyal (1981) began a yearlong endeavor that would be at the time one of the most intensive agenda-setting studies. The study is hybridized regarding methodology, incorporating practices in audience reception and in content analysis research pertaining to various mediums. A key finding in the study is that the media-agenda effect, the transferring of issue salience from media to their audience, does indeed exist. "Newspapers (…) had a major influence on which issues were discussed with others and which were considered important by voters" (p. 196). The conclusion is that the more exposure an object receives in a newspaper, the more the object resonates in the daily discussions and

thought-processes of voters – verifying the legitimacy of first-level agenda-setting theory.

McCombs and Shaw (1977) elaborate on the use of agenda-setting theory by indicating an ideal place in which to apply the practice. "A political campaign is a key place to study mass communication influence because media behavior is intimately connected with how our political environment is perceived, how our agenda of public issues is shaped, and how we cast our votes" (p. 150). The authors' explanation regarding this environment for agenda-setting theory leads to a great number of studies that focus on political campaigns and the news that surround them.

Kiousis and McCombs (2004) use a simple yet revealing model to focus on political figures during the 1996 Presidential election. The study counts news stories that focus on 11 politicians over the course of five months and then compares the level of coverage with public opinion polls aimed at each politician. Ultimately, the study finds correlations between polled approval ratings for politicians and the amount of coverage major news outlets allotted such politicians. Typically, a politician who received more media coverage had a higher approval rating when compared to a politician who received less media coverage. This finding substantiates the assumptions associated with first-level agenda-setting. The authors also identify a phenomenon regarding the time lag aspect in agenda-setting research. The longer a period of time content is sampled, the more reliable the results will be. In other words, broad time frames provide a more accurate depiction of what a certain media outlet regularly exhibits.

Weaver (1991) continues the practice of combining campaign coverage and agenda-setting theory. One of the author's key findings is that the media agenda-

setting effect increases with the nearing of an election date, and an issue's salience within the public, as well as in the media, is inversely correlated with the amount of time remaining before an election. In other words, the closer an election nears, the more attention the media and the audience grant politicians and political issues. Conversely, the study concludes that when an election is not in the immediate future, political objects weakly resonate in both the media and public.

One way of conducting agenda-setting research is to fabricate fictional news stories and, in the hopes of creating a more controlled environment, exhibit the content to an audience. Kiousis, Bantimaroudis, and Ban (1999) conduct this kind of experiment by showing a group of audience members a series of stories that focus on fictional politicians' attributes (i.e., personality traits, educational background, habits). The study attempts to identify which attributes most keenly resonate in the perceptions of audiences. In determining what kind of personal attributes audiences find more salient, one conclusion is that corruption outweighs education. A major conclusion is that the manipulation of a certain politician's attributes influenced the subjects' perception of that fictional politician, verifying the authors' assumptions in second-level agenda-setting theory.

Agenda-Setting's Negative and Positive Variables

Research that includes content analysis brings forth the potential of subjectivity on the part of the researcher; subjectivity is difficult to avoid. A common approach in conducting content analysis research within the theoretical framework of second-level agenda-setting, which has both succeeded and failed in preventing supplementary

10

subjectivity, is the incorporation of labeling objects *positive, negative, and neutral* within

the context of framing. Chaudhary (2001) examined the slant of a week's worth of

stories found in two newspapers, *The Washington Post* and the *Daily Times of Nigeria*.

Two coders were used and were given definitions of negative, positive, and neutral

news.

> Negative news was defined as that which would be interpreted as unpleasant,
> critical, conflicting, unhealthy, unwholesome, gruesome, representing
> disagreement, antisocial, deceitful, destructive, painful, injurious, or indicative of
> social or individual problems or troubles. Positive was defined as news that
> would be generally interpreted as pleasant, humorous, uncritical, agreeable,
> prosocial, healthy, wholesome, constructing, healing, favorable, sharing helping
> cooperative, altruistic, expressing affection, sympathetic, reassuring, or news
> about an improving trend or anything else normally perceived as pleasing.
> Neutral news was defined as that which involved neither negative nor positive
> aspects of anything or that involved both negative and positive aspects equally.
> (p. 247)

In order to apply Chaudhary's definitions to actual content, interpretation is a must when

coding for positive, negative, or neutral news. For example, an audience member's

perception of humor might coincide with another audience member's perception of

injurious; thus, this particular model, when applied to reality, lends itself to a high

potential for irregularities. The study ultimately concluded that newspapers, *The

Washington Times* and the *Daily Times of Nigeria*, both exhibit news that was about

30% positive and 30% negative.

In a previous study that focuses on televised sound bites in which commentators

refer to political candidates, Lowry and Shidler (1998) also attempt to utilize the

variables of positive, negative, and neutral when analyzing content from ABC, CBS,

NBC, and CNN. However, the authors also fall victim to models that are riddled with the

potential for subjectivity. "Positive sound bites were defined as those in which the biter

was saying favorable or supportive things about a candidate, (…) [and] negative bites were defined as those in which the biter was saying unfavorable or critical things about a candidate" (p. 273). The authors' failure to define "favorable," "supportive," "unfavorable," and "critical" is a shortcoming in this particular study. Regardless of the shortcoming, the authors conclude that political incumbents and challengers are not framed in unique ways.

McCombs, Llamas, Lopez-Escobar, and Rey (1997) examine second-level agenda-setting by employing positive and negative variables as well. In various newscasts, remarks made about a candidate are coded as negative, positive, or neutral based on a multitude of, albeit general, indicators. The authors further label any phrase that does not favor or harm a candidate as neutral. The study draws noteworthy conclusions: a direct link is found between how a political candidate is represented in the media and how the voters ultimately view that candidate. Specifically, candidates who receive more favorable coverage in the media, when compared to their opponent, usually receive better approval ratings. The authors essentially prove that effects of second-level agenda-setting do, indeed, exist.

Fictional news, used for better understanding an audience's perception of issue saliency, is branded with the positive and negative variables by Knobloch-Westerwick, Carpentier, Blumhoff, and Nickel (2005). In the hopes of determining if issue salience is affected by greater or lesser degrees of applied attributes to objects, the authors calculate the magnitude of intensity regarding fabricated negative and positive news stories. An example of varying magnitude levels in a negative story's headline is "Minor Reduction in Library Hours," for a low magnitude of intensity, and "Drastic Reduction in

Library Hours," for high magnitude (p. 188). Although the magnitude of intensity for a positive or negative story might be a valid variable in determining issue salience among audience members, the subjective quality pertaining to the definition of positive and negative is still an unresolved issue. For example, in the negative case involving the library previously cited, an overworked employee of the library might read the same headline and perceive the statement as not negative in any magnitude, but positive. This study is able to confidently conclude that the magnitude of intensity regarding a message did indeed affect the level of salience an audience granted the message. In other words, the more intense a message was, the more salient the audience found it. In this particular study, whether the message was positive or negative did not substantially affect the issue salience within an audience. The studies, which rely on rhetoric to determine if an object is positive, negative, or neutral, all appear to be subjective in nature to the point of being unreliable.

One exception by Chen (2005) makes use of 16 transitive verbs by affixing the positive, negative, and neutral variables to each specific verb. The study looks at a journalist's choice when deciding which verb to use in describing the actions of a politician. The author presumes that journalists do indeed have choices when choosing certain words, and that the choices might be made based on a preconceived bias, unconsciously or consciously. With a great amount of explanation, "pointed out," "announced," "explained," "declared," "indicated," and "urged" are labeled "positive;" "denied," "claimed," "admitted," "insisted," and "complained" are labeled "negative;" and "said," "told," "described," "asked," and "commented" are labeled "neutral" (p. 40). The findings indicate that there is strong evidence that the usage of certain transitive verbs

were used, "consciously or unconsciously," to connote a positive, negative, or neutral attitude. Most applicable to the current study, the author concludes by suggesting that the word choices reporters and/or news organizations make when describing a politician's action represents an agenda that is attempting to be transferred to the audience.

Coleman and Banning (2006) refrain from using the ever-popular positive, negative, and neutral verbiage analysis to determine second-level agenda-setting. Instead, the authors apply positive and negative variables to a candidate's *nonverbal* gestures. Nonverbal gestures are divided into five categories – activity, posture, arms, hands, and eyes – and a positive or negative variable is assigned to each category depending on what the candidate is physically doing. For example, if a subject's hands were gesturing or doing something, they were coded as positive. If a subject's hands were at rest, they were coded as negative. The results indicate that there is a significant correlation between a candidate's nonverbal behavior and the way audience members perceive the candidate. If news coverage of a candidate's body gestures is mainly positive, the audience typically receives a more favorable impression of that candidate. Conversely, if the candidate's gestures were predominately negative, the audience's saliency toward that candidate was comparatively less favorable.

Agenda-Setting Shortcomings

Regardless of perceived successes of diverse agenda-setting studies of the past, Protess and McCombs (1991) suggest that innovative, heterogeneous approaches to agenda-setting research is ultimately harming the practice. Despite more than 200

empirical studies, the authors claim that "the diversity of this research has fragmented our efforts to build a comprehensive theory of the agenda-setting role of mass communication" (p. 43). Careful replication in constructing theoretical models is advocated more so than the drive for innovation.

Hill (1985) finds that model complexity creates the parameters for a conclusion that might also consist of unwanted results of a complex nature. The author concludes that the weak indications of agenda-setting are consistent with the concept that it is more challenging to reveal the phenomenon in cross sectional surveys. The author attempts to address the possibility that viewers with a prior awareness of an issue might have a different perception of salience than viewers with no prior experience. Again, because of the overly complex theoretical model used, the findings were sketchy; thus, reinforcing the belief that in agenda-setting research, model simplicity usually provides the most sound results. Despite the doubtful method used in obtaining the results, the author's conclusion that the education level attained by the audience member directly affects issue salience. The more educated an individual is, the more likely an issue will be more salient, when compared to a less-educated individual.

Implicit in agenda-setting theory is a rather convenient assumption. Burd (1991) points out that agenda-setting theory is a "linear, one-dimensional, assembly-line model for the production and manufacture of public opinion and policy" (p. 291). The author elaborates that the theory essentially rules out the possibility that the public's independent agenda might in turn affect the media's agenda, and that the theory wrongly supposes that an audience is inactive – and strictly acted upon. However, the author's observation pertaining to agenda-setting neatly fits into the present study's

assumption that cable news is the facilitator regarding the altering (or setting) of the public's agenda in choosing which cable news channel to watch. Because the audience's agenda is assumed to be essentially at the will of the media within the theory of agenda-setting, the notion that a profit-driven mass medium framing its content for a targeted segment of the audience warrants believability in this type of research. Thus, the concept, that CNN and FOX News target different audiences with a unique brand of news content, is used in forming hypotheses in the present method of agenda-setting research.

A plethora of former studies provide insight regarding possible behavioral trends in which the media interacts with the audience. These former analyses of agenda-setting effects help facilitate the hypothesizing of future measurements of both levels of agenda-setting. The present study utilizes methods drawing from both levels, and resulting from these two approaches will be an index of variables that will hopefully create a better understanding of *what* political ideology three cable channels (CNN, FOX, and MSNBC) want us to think about, and provide comprehension as to *how* these three cable channels want us to think about a certain political ideology. The present study's preconceived notion, which assumes that CNN and FOX present differently slanted news in order to create an ideologically aligned audience, allows for the following hypotheses to be investigated.

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: Compared to FOX, CNN will display video images of Democrats for a longer duration of time.

Hypothesis 2: Compared to CNN, FOX will display video images of Republicans for a longer duration of time.

Hypothesis 3: Compared to FOX, CNN will display video images of Democrats that are more positive.

Hypothesis 4: Compared to CNN, FOX will display video images of Republicans that are more positive.

Hypothesis 5: The data that represents the analyzed content of MSNBC will act as the medium between the two data sets that represent the analyzed content of CNN and FOX.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

The present study analyzed a portion of the content produced by CNN, the FOX News Channel, and MSNBC. These three channels were chosen because of the relatively new level of trust in breaking news on cable, which now outweighs network news (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2006), and also because of the preconceived notions pertaining to the channels regarding political leaning (Brock, 2004; Goldberg, 2002; etc.). It is generally assumed, and exemplified in many of the sources mentioned in Chapter 1, that FOX News has a conservative slant and that CNN has a liberal slant in their presentation of news. MSNBC does not necessarily have the reputation of a partisan news organization; and therefore, the network was considered for the present study a moderate regarding political news presentation. This consideration of MSNBC as a moderate entity forced the hypothesis that the network's content would most likely be coded as such when compared to the content on CNN and FOX.

In order to accurately demonstrate first- and second-level agenda-setting effects, it is best to replicate methods from previous studies (Protess & McCombs, 1991). The present study drew elements from the methods used in Kiousis and McCombs (2004) in addition to Coleman and Banning (2006). Kiousis and McCombs' (2004) method of simply quantifying news stories that focus on certain politicians was used in determining a first-level agenda-setting effect of the three cable news networks. Coleman and Banning's method of coding the nonverbal gestures of featured politicians as positive or

negative was used in determining a second-level agenda-setting effect for the three cable news networks.

The Intended Dataset

The sample intended to obtain 72 hours of cable news; 24 hours of CNN, 24 hours of MSNBC, and 24 hours of The Fox News Channel. However, a recording error on the last day of sampling forced 90 minutes to be omitted from each channel's total. As a result, 22.5 hours were successfully recorded for each news network, totaling 67.5 hours. Specifically, each channel was recorded from 2pm to 5pm CST for the eight days preceding the 2006 congressional election, Monday, October 30th through Monday, November 6th 2006. These dates were chosen primarily because of Weaver's (2004) finding, which places on political news content a greater or lesser significance based on the content's proximity (in time) to an election.

The news content was independently recorded on three Apple® computers using Elgato's® *EyeTV* software, subsequently separated into daily clips, and then stored as Quicktime® files on two different hard drives (a primary and a back-up) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Recording equipment.

Coding Variables

In studying first-level agenda-setting in this sample, the displayed image of any applicable politician by the three cable channels was coded using 6 variables. The name of the featured politician was noted as the first variable, and the date on which the image appears was noted as the second variable. The time, as it was displayed on screen by the network, was coded as the third variable. The fourth variable, the duration of time that the image of the politician is displayed without interference, was noted – rounded to the nearest second. The political party of the featured politician (Republican or Democrat) was coded as the fifth variable. A Republican politician was coded as a "1" and a Democratic politician as a "2." Politicians not belonging to either the Republican or Democratic party (e.g., Libertarians and independents) were coded as a "3."

In studying second-level agenda-setting (framing), the nonverbal behaviors of the previously coded politicians were analyzed using the same methods used by Coleman and Banning (2006):

> Activity was coded as dynamic, and was later rated positive, if the candidate was speaking, shaking hands, kissing babies, or exhibiting similar highly active behavior; it was coded as not dynamic, and thus negative, if the candidate was shown passively listening, reading, dozing, or engaged in other non-active behavior. Posture was coded as either standing tall and upright (positive), or as bowed, slumped, or leaning on something (negative). Arms were coded as either held at shoulder height or higher (positive), or held at rest, at the side, or folded (negative). Hands were coded as gesturing or doing something (positive), or being at rest (negative). Eyes were coded as looking directly at the camera or someone (positive), or as looking indirectly, up, or down, or being closed (negative). The five nonverbal measures were indexed by summing all the positive nonverbal behaviors into one index, and all the negative nonverbal behaviors into another. (p. 318)

Omissions

The actual method for capturing and analyzing images of politicians featured on

one of the three news channels was very specific. No still-photographs were used in the sample; only live video of politicians were used. When the three channels presented a photograph of a politician, it was usually displayed next to a photograph of another politician, or to a cluster of many photographs for the utility of comparison. It was rare that a single photograph of a politician was solely used in the three networks sampled; thus, this study omitted photos entirely.

Only current elected officials and candidates seeking office were counted; no bureaucrats or former elected officials were included in this study. Also, only federal and state level politicians were counted, leaving out in this study any locally elected officials.

Video footage of politicians found in teasers were omitted. In other words, whenever an on-air personality stated, "coming up after the commercial break," or something similar, and then described what stories would be featured at a later time, it was common for the network to show video of a politician to be featured in the upcoming story. Such video featuring politicians were omitted in these circumstances. The reason behind this particular method was to eliminate redundancy, as the same footage would commonly be teased numerous times before the actual story took place on any given network.

In an attempt to enrich the data, a decision was made to note the on-air anchor at the time of the displayed image of a politician. It has long been speculated that anchors have immense influence, and use such an influence, on the content that is displayed by a news organization. In the past, a news anchor was essentially a reader of news – and nothing else. But recently, the role of an anchor has increased in the

production of broadcast journalism. Goldberg describes this phenomenon well in

Anchors:

> Over the years, as the anchor position has evolved from news reader to celebrity, as marketing concerns have made the anchor a bigger and bigger presence, the job holders have branched out into many roles, and assumed more and more executive powers in almost every facet of the network news organization. With the clout they have as living logos, mixed with the demands of a fragile ego…When logo meets ego, something a little scary is born. (331)

Incorporating this particular method was thought to possibly identify disparities

between what a channel predominantly displays and what an anchor of the same

channel predominantly displays. If this phenomenon was to surface, conclusions could

be drawn that point to an agenda of an anchor, as opposed to an agenda of a cable

news channel. The 4 most-present anchors for each network were used in this

comparison.

Reliability

The primary coder and author of this study analyzed the sample in its entirety.

For the purpose of satisfying the argument for a need of inter-coder reliability in content

analysis research, a secondary coder examined approximately 10 percent of the

content. A qualified individual with an M.A. in journalism was chosen to check for

reliability by surveying 6 hours of the total 67.5 hours of content. The results were then

compared to the original coded sample using Holsti's formula for determining reliability

of nominal data (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). Holsti's formula is as follows:

$$\text{Reliability} = \frac{2M}{N_1 + N_2}$$

"M" is equal to the agreed coding decisions between the two coders. And N_1 and N_2 are equal to the total number of coding decisions between the first and second coder, respectively. Generally speaking, any result falling between .7 and 1.0 is accepted as reliable. The applied formula and outcome are as follows:

$$\frac{2(700)}{781 + 781} = \frac{1400}{1562} = 89.62$$

Because the variables determining first-level agenda-setting are fairly difficult to erroneously code (i.e., date, time, name of politician), it was deemed responsible to isolate the second-level agenda-setting variables and check for reliability within. These variables pertained to the positive and negative attributes applied to the framing of politicians, and they could be viewed in a more subjective manner when coding.

$$\frac{2(272)}{335 + 335} = \frac{544}{670} = 81.19$$

The results of Holsti's applied reliability formula demonstrated that the method by which this study examined the first- and second-level agenda-setting of FOX, CNN, and MSNBC is reliable. The measures of reliability calculated in this study both exceed the required .70 specified by Holsti.

The methods used for the present study were not inventive, as they were replicated from previous studies. They are believed to be sufficient in being able to identify the phenomenon of targeting political niche audiences by CNN and FOX, if this phenomenon does indeed exist. The primary coder and author of the present study approached this analysis with the utmost integrity in an attempt to be as close to objective as possible (regardless of the notion that objectivity is an impossible goal to achieve). The author believes that the results are sound.

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

The results at face value represent the appearance that all three networks favor

Republicans over Democrats, which is significant in itself. However, again, the present

study is only attempting to compare the coverage of politicians by the three cable news

networks – not examine them independently. In this chapter, the results for each

network will be presented first, and then the compared results for all three networks will

follow. To restate the five hypotheses, CNN was expected to present more video

images of Democrats than that of FOX, and present them in a more positive light as

well. FOX, on the other hand, was expected to present more video images of

Republicans than that of CNN, and present them in a more positive light. The results of

MSNBC were expected to act as a medium between the results pertaining to CNN and

FOX.

CNN

Time (in seconds) devoted to airing video images of Republicans significantly

outweighed the time devoted to airing video images of Democrats and 3rd party

politicians (see Figure 2). On CNN, time allotted to Republican video images (6,649

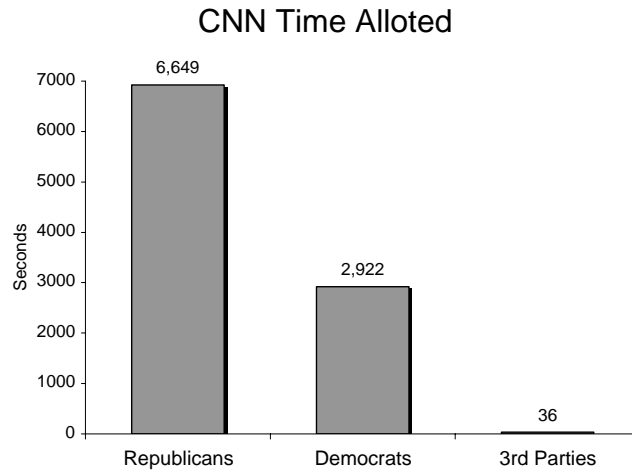seconds) more than doubled the time allotted to Democratic images (2,922 seconds).

CNN Time Alloted

Figure 2. CNN time allotted.

Based on the 5 criteria (activity, posture, arms, hands, and eyes) used to determine framing and second-level agenda-setting, CNN proved to cast 3rd party politicians as most positive (.2), followed by Republicans (.297), and ultimately Democrats as the least positive (.376) (see Figure 3). All three groups were framed as generally positive as the index accounted for an average of 1.0 as being a completely negative portrayal, as well as 0.0 as being a completely positive portrayal.
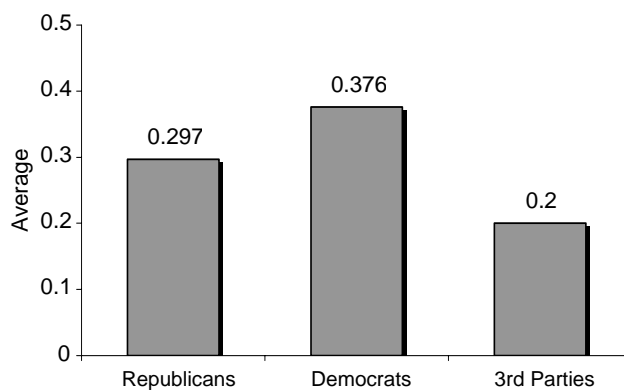
Figure 3. CNN average portrayal.

Regarding time allotted to video images of politicians by CNN's individual anchors, Don Lemon was the only anchor that devoted more video to Democrats, rather than Republicans (see Figure 4). All other sampled Anchors allotted at least double the time to Republicans when compared to Democrats.
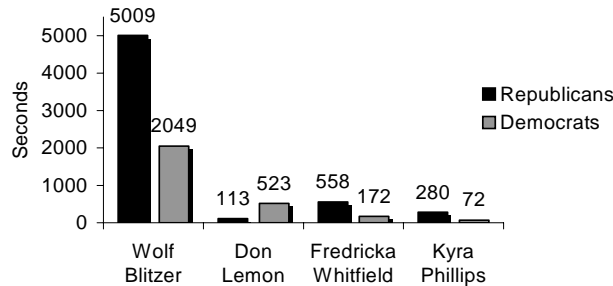

Figure 4. CNN anchors time allotted.

Comparing how CNN's individual anchors frame politicians brings forth Republican dominated consistencies (see Figure 5). While all politicians were portrayed generally positively, all 4 sampled anchors cast Republican politicians in a more positive light, when compared to Democrats.
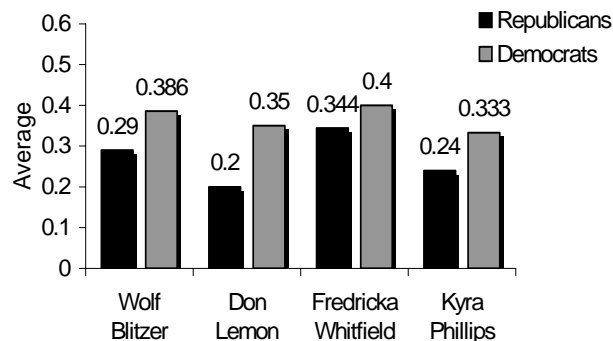

Figure 5. CNN anchors average portrayal.

26

MSNBC

While disparity between allotted time for the different political parties was not as significant as with CNN, MSNBC still devoted more seconds of video to Republicans (8,305) than to Democrats (6,502) (See Figure 6). 3rd party candidates received but a small fraction of all devoted video on MSNBC (but still substantially more than aired by CNN).
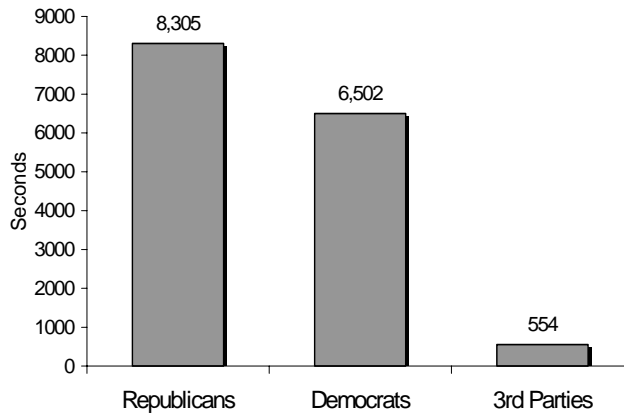

Figure 6. MSNBC time allotted.

In determining second-level agenda-setting, MSNBC also framed 3rd Party politicians and candidates in the most favorable light (.3) (see Figure 7). Republicans scored a .313, which indicates that they were framed more positive than the Democrats, who scored a .377.
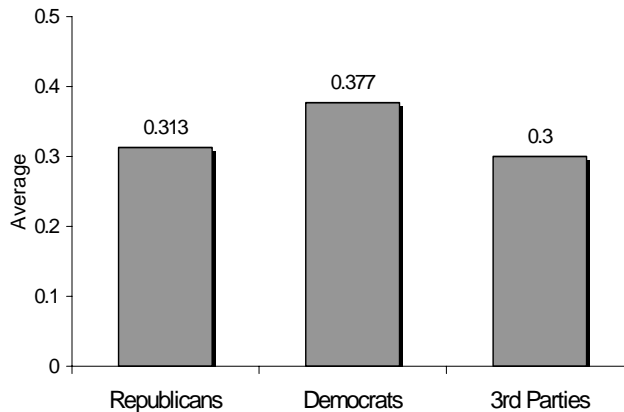

Figure 7. MSNBC average portrayal.

27

Pertaining to the time allotted to politicians by individual anchors, CNN, like

MSNBC, only had one anchor that devoted the most video to Democrats – Tucker

Carlson (see Figure 8). All other MSNBC anchors devoted more time to Republicans

rather than to Democrats, although the disparity between the two parties' coverage was
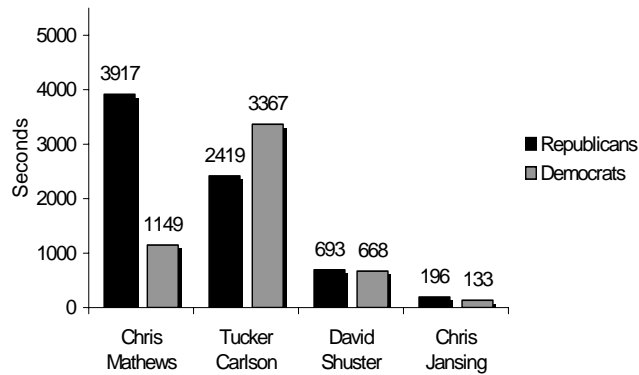
not as significant as with CNN.

Figure 8. MSNBC anchors time allotted.

The framing of politicians by individual anchors on MSNBC, however, proved

rather consistent with that of CNN (see Figure 9). All anchors on MSNBC cast

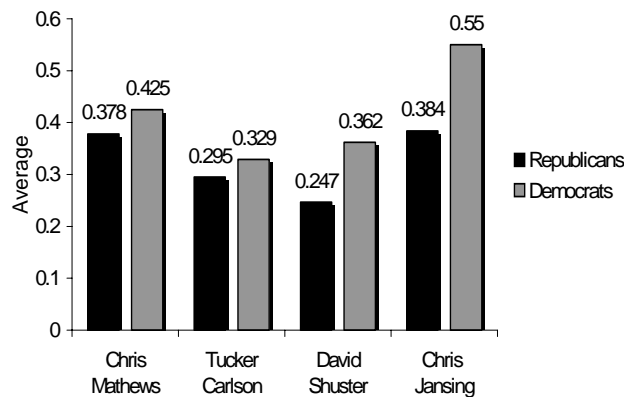Republicans in a more positive light than Democrats.

Figure 9. MSNBC anchors average portrayal.

FOX

FOX matched the trend of showing more video images (in seconds) of Republicans (8,792) than Democrats (4,316) (see Figure 10). 3rd party politicians scored weakest with 212 seconds.
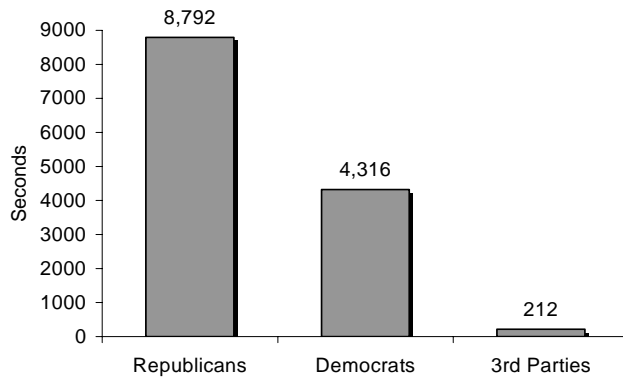

Figure 10. FOX time allotted.

Third party politicians received a completely positive score (0.0) when measuring second-level agenda-setting (see Figure 11). Democrats scored the least positive with .439 (although still generally positive), and Republicans faired slightly better with .33.
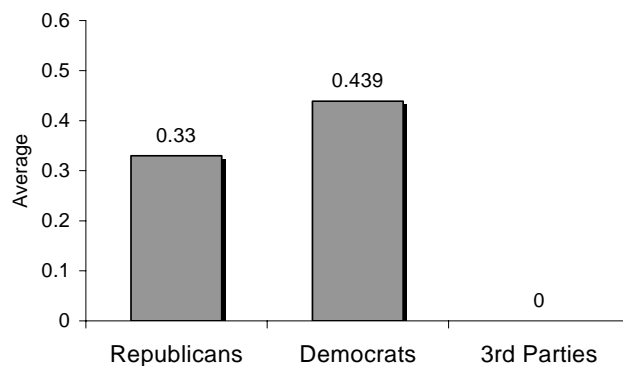

Figure 11. FOX average portrayal.

Individual anchors on FOX all devoted about the same amount of time to

politicians based on party, proportionately (see Figure 12). Republicans far outweighed

Democrats in devoted time individual anchors allotted.
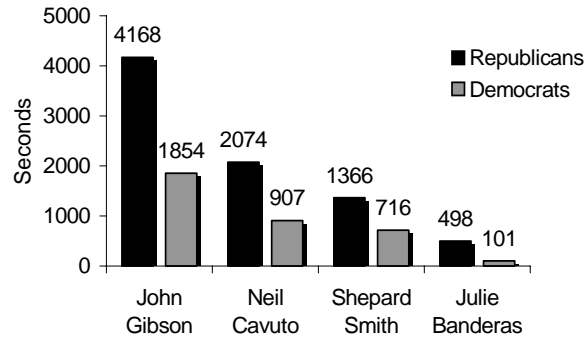
Figure 12. FOX anchors time allotted.

All sampled anchors on FOX cast Republicans in a more positive light than

Democrats (see Figure 13). John Gibson was, by far, the most distinct in his disparity

between the ways he framed politicians of different political parties.

Figure 13. FOX anchors average portrayal.

Comparison

Regarding the amount of video (in seconds) devoted to politicians on each

channel, Republicans received the most attention on FOX (8,792 seconds) and the

least amount of attention on CNN (6,649 seconds) (see Figure 14). Democrats

received the most attention on MSNBC (6,502 seconds) and least amount of attention on CNN (2,922 seconds). Republicans received the most attention on all three sampled networks, when compared to Democrats.
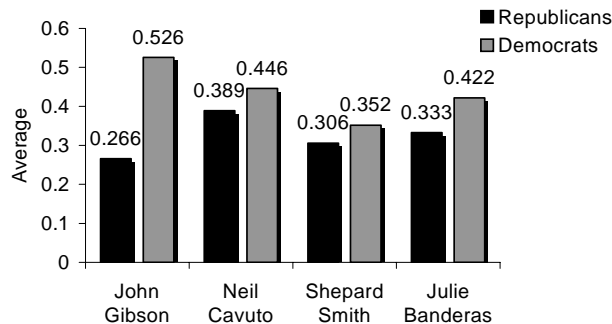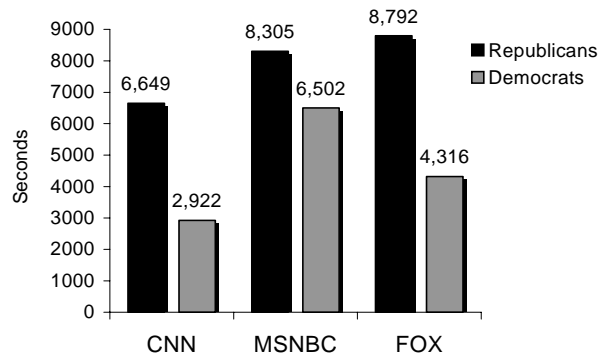

Figure 14. Time allotted comparison.

Regarding second-level agenda-setting, Republicans received the most positive portrayal on CNN (.297). Democrats also received the most positive portrayal on CNN (.376). In general, FOX portrayed politicians, regardless of political ideology, in the most negative of light, while CNN generally portrayed all politicians in a more positive fashion (see Figure 15). For all three networks, Democrats were portrayed in a more negative light than Republicans. However, all three networks generally portrayed all politicians more positively than negatively (that is, all scores registered less than .50).
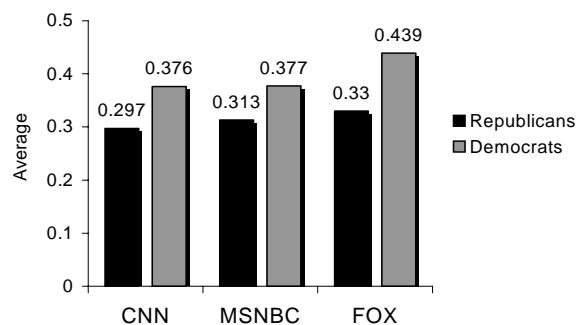
Figure 15. Average portrayal comparison.

Based on the results at face value, Hypothesis 1 was proved false – CNN did not display video images of Democrats for a longer duration of time than that of Fox. Hypothesis 2 was proved true, as FOX did, indeed, present video images of Republicans for a longer period of time than that of CNN. Hypothesis 3 was also proved true, as the representation of Democrats by CNN was more positive than that of FOX. However, Hypothesis 4 was proved false – FOX did not represent Republicans in a more positive light than that of CNN. Hypothesis 5 was almost justified as completely true, as MSNBC's results did act as the medium between FOX and CNN in all cases except for the time allotted to video images of Democrats – in which the network presented to most.

Based on the exact methodology used, 3 out of the 5 hypotheses were proved true. These results are sound; but, as discussed in the subsequent chapter, quantifying elements in broadcast news is a complicated practice that requires a more complicated methodology

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

As advised by Hill (1985), the five hypotheses proposed prior to the data acquisition and analyses were of a simple, straightforward method. While the results do grant some legitimate foresight to the predictions, grasping a solid meaning of the data proved to be anything but simple and straightforward. Certain elements found in cable news content, both common and uncommon, added unforeseen complexities to this particular agenda-setting model. The three networks sometimes shared a similar complex-inducing element, while on occasion a particular channel, due to its specific format or style, would contain a practice that complicated the seemingly simple research method used. Still, upon face value, the results ring provocative – the sheer lop-sidedness of the data incites a hunger for deeper analysis and explanation.

As detailed in Chapter 3, Republicans dominated Democrats in the amount of video presented on all three networks, as well as by receiving a more positive visual portrayal. Not only did Republican images receive more allotted time compared to Democrats, they did so with vast disparities. On both FOX and CNN, a more than 2:1 ratio was found when comparing the duration of video of Republicans to Democrats. However, the purpose of this particular agenda-setting study is not to scrutinize the general content of individual networks (regardless of significance), but to *compare* specific content of all observed networks in the hopes of finding key differences that might point to possible target marketing.

Hypotheses 1 and 2 essentially predicted that CNN would show more footage of Democrats and that FOX would show more footage of Republicans. Evidently, Hypothesis 1 is proved false and Hypothesis 2 is proved true, as all three networks displayed video images or Republicans for the longest duration of time, compared to Democrats. However, the data representing the presence of two politicians who dominated the reception of coverage during the sampled week, George W. Bush and John Kerry, appear to have skewed the results. On CNN, time allotted to Bush accounted for 30% of all the time that was allotted to Republicans, 36% of all the time allotted on MSNBC, and 39% of all the time allotted to Republicans on FOX. Kerry, on the other hand, made up 22% of CNN's video images of Democrats, 16% of MSNBC's, and a remarkable 60% of all video images of Democrats on FOX.

The dominant presence of President Bush, or any sitting president, is an element in national news that creates complications in the methodical approach taken. Counting the sitting president during a period when there is not a presidential counter-part (i.e., a challenging Democratic candidate) provides a numerical advantage of Republican politicians to which more airtime will inevitably be granted. Moreover, the office of the President, resulting simply from the authority the role maintains, normally receives spotlighted attention in the media; and without a challenger, Bush did not share the media attention that was focused on the presidential branch.

As previously stated, Bush received more than 30% of all Republican coverage on all three networks. If a challenger existed, there may be a strong potential for Bush's dominance to diminish, as well as for the results in this study to be less skewed toward

Republicans. Furthermore, a Democratic president's corresponding data – and their hypothetical impact on this study – can be reasoned to be just that of President Bush. If Bush were a Democrat, all three networks would have presented a longer duration of Democrats' video images than that of Republicans'. Bush seemingly received an abundance of media attention regardless of party affiliation and most logically because he is the U.S. President, not coinciding with other politicians' roles in the media supposed in this study. It is deemed responsible to dig deeper into the true meanings of this data by omitting Bush's appearance. This omission's purpose is experimentation and does not negate the said results that most simply address the hypotheses.

Another element commonly found in the practice of journalism is the dominating presence of a scandal. One scandal, which permeated the media during the week in which this study was conducted, concerned a botched joke told by John Kerry. Kerry, with a week remaining before Election Day, made a statement, which implied that students must make good grades or risk finding themselves in Iraq. The statement was interpreted by some as an insult to the U.S. military, and Kerry drew immense media attention. Kerry had not been attempting to engage in high-profile political activity (e.g., re-election, legislation, committee deliberation); nevertheless, he received a disproportionate amount of media attention when compared to other Democrats during the week measured. Essentially, the data pertaining to Democratic coverage were skewed because of this extraordinary incident.

In attempting to reveal a clearer picture of the typical amount of time certain networks allot certain politicians, John Kerry can be omitted from the data based on the notion that his presence derives from an extenuating circumstance. Again, this

subsequent method of omission can be considered impromptu experimentation as a means of better understanding the results – it does not nullify the results at face value.

These two omissions of Kerry and Bush prove Hypothesis 1 and 2 (see Figure 16). Excluding Kerry and Bush provides results that are more representative of the general practice of these three networks, and the adjusted results prove the corresponding hypotheses true. FOX presented video images of Republicans for 5,305 seconds, while CNN presented video images of Republicans for 4,650 seconds. Regarding video images of Democrats, CNN presented 2,263 seconds and FOX presented 1,726 seconds. Both networks still presented the majority of its footage with Republican images, but compared to each other, which is what this particular study intended to determine, it appears that FOX and CNN present news on politicians (or at least the time devoted to their video images) in a contrasting manner.
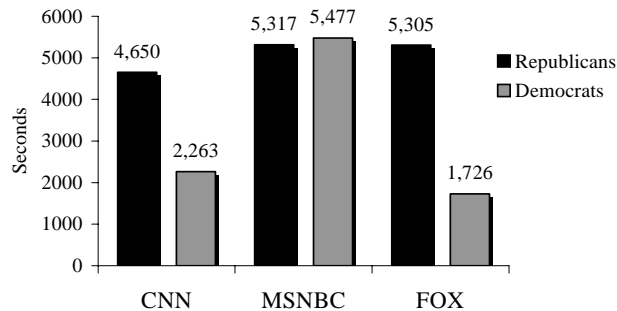

Figure 16. Time allotted, minus Bush and Kerry.

The first two hypotheses that are proved true are significant to the questions raised in this study regarding the possible target marketing of different cable news networks. However, what could also be considered significant and add to the evidence

for differential agenda-setting practices in cable news is the variation of the removed data, which corresponded to Bush and Kerry.

During the timeframe in which this study was carried out, video images of President Bush aired for 1,999 seconds by CNN and 4,316 seconds by FOX. First-level agenda-setting considers time-duration an object attribute that can affect the transferring of issue salience from media to audience. The disparity (in seconds) of the networks' displayed video image of Bush indicates that different agendas are attempting to be set.

Based on the information that went into formulating Hypothesis 2, it makes sense that FOX would exhibit the greatest number of images of Bush – Bush is a Republican. Conversely, CNN, exhibiting the least amount of images of Bush, completes the *implied* truth of Hypotheses 2 – that CNN will exhibit Republicans for the least amount of time. Furthermore, FOX's dominant focus on the president maintains the attention of their audience on that which has been politically successful (The re-elected President Bush); and, the lessened attention on Bush by CNN indicates an attempt to shift the focus from a dominant figure to something else. If FOX and CNN are indeed attempting to target conservatives and liberals, respectively, the significant by-product of this study regarding the varying attention allotted to Bush is an indication.

The varying attention allotted to Kerry, too, does not directly answer any hypotheses, but is still significant in terms of indicating the setting of different first-level agendas. During the week in which this study was conducted, John Kerry was displayed by CNN for a total of 659 seconds and by FOX for 2,590 seconds. What makes this dominance of a figure different than that of Bush is that Kerry was not being

presented because of his leadership, like Bush, but because of his gaffe. Kerry's comment regarding educational success and military personnel is what kept him illuminated by the media spotlight. However, the vast disparity in attention between the networks indicates diverse agendas.

Because Kerry's negative blunder was the basis of the dominating news story, it can be assumed that FOX devoted the most attention as a means of highlighting a perceived negative attribute of a Democratic leader. With an agenda of obtaining and keeping a niche conservative audience, it makes sense that FOX would overwhelmingly showcase the shortcomings of its viewers' opposing team – liberals. In contrast, CNN presenting but a quarter of the video images of Kerry, when compared to FOX, signifies the desire to not focus on the perceived mistakes of Democratic leadership.

By using the exact methods presented in Chapter 2, the results attest to FOX indeed displaying video images of Republicans for a longer period of time than CNN, proving Hypothesis 2. However, under this method, Hypothesis 1 is not supported, as CNN did not display more video images of Democrats than FOX. These conclusions to the first two hypotheses, attained from the original methodology, should be considered the recognized conclusion to Hypotheses 1 and 2. The undeniable significance in these specific results is the dominance of time allotted to Republicans.

However, as outlined above, it appears that the methodology for testing Hypotheses 1 and 2 was oversimplified, indicated by the disproportionate presence of President Bush and Senator Kerry. The adjusted conclusions to Hypotheses 1 and 2, sans Bush and Kerry, prove the predictions true and should be considered somewhat valid (or, at the very least, noteworthy and deserving of further study).

Hypotheses 3 and 4

In determining second-level agenda-setting, or framing, all networks portrayed all politicians generally positive. That is to say, in the established spectrum where a completely positive portrayal of a politician equals an index of *0.0* and a completely negative portrayal equals an index of *1.0*, the average portrayal for both Republicans and Democrats on all three networks was less than .49. Repeating the theme found in this study's examination of first-level agenda-setting, Republicans scored much more favorably than Democrats on all three networks. Republicans scored about 7.5% more positive than Democrats on CNN, 6% more positive than Democrats on MSNBC, and 11% more positive than Democrats on FOX.

Different presentation practices appear evident when comparing the general portrayal of politicians on all three networks. FOX was generally more negative in their news presentation regardless of party affiliation, as the network portrayed both Democrats and Republicans more negatively than did CNN and MSNBC. Conversely, CNN was generally more positive in their news presentation, portraying both Republicans and Democrats in the most positive of light. These specific results, regarding the framing of politicians by FOX and CNN, indicate a possible phenomenon that FOX is generally a more negative and/or critical exhibiter of politicians, while CNN is generally a more positive and/or accepting exhibiter of politicians. Of course, more research and data are needed to fully make such an assumption. However, this study is not making an effort to compare the overall presentation by each network, but is attempting to compare the specialized presentation of individual politicians in way that could justify a theory of political niche marketing

Regarding Hypothesis 3, which states that CNN would display more positive video images of Democrats than would FOX, the data proved true. CNN portrayed Democrats as an index of .376, and FOX portrayed them as an index of .439. This particular conclusion reflects the assumption that CNN is targeting a more liberal audience, as they portray Democrats in a more positive light when compared to FOX.

However, Hypothesis 4, which states that FOX would show Republicans in a more positive light than would CNN, does not conclude as presumed. FOX portrayed Republicans as a .33 index, and CNN portrayed them as a .297 index; thus, Hypothesis 4 is proved false. However, as with Hypotheses 1 and 2, the true significance of the data is complicated with various elements found in journalistic practices.

In television news, video footage is paramount. There are many occasions when the only footage to which a network has access is consequently (and obviously) the only footage that the network will air. A news network is limited to the extent of its B-roll library. This practice creates complications for the second-level agenda-setting portion in the current study. The framing of a politician might not be dictated by a certain network, but by the finite video footage the certain network possesses.

The corresponding results to Hypotheses 3 and 4 are difficult to validate, as the footage on each network was predominantly proprietary and looped on a regular basis, insinuating that each network lacked a diverse catalogue of video that disparately portrayed each presented politician. Furthermore, if a network only had video footage of a politician that framed him/her negatively, then that is how the network would ultimately frame that politician. For example, the state of a politician's eyes was coded as positive if visibly looking directly at the camera or at someone, and negatively if

indirectly looking around, closed, or not visible. Not taken into account in this

methodology is the element of camera angles, or the lack there of. Many times a

politician would be looking directly at someone, but because the videographeor was

forced to film from behind the subject, the eyes were invisible to the viewer, rendering a

negative variable when coding for the eyes. Is it possible that the network purposely

filmed the politician from the rear for the purpose of negatively framing the subject?

Yes, but it is highly unlikely. It is more plausible that the camera operator had no choice

but to film from a location that negatively portrayed such a politician.

In addition to this phenomenon of a networks' limited supply of diverse footage,

politicians themselves are diverse – and their mannerisms can be just as sundry. The

specific variables in this study, which attempted to identify second-level agenda-setting,

coded as positive or negative the various body movements, which correspond to

posture, hand-activity, arm-activity, and general activity. It was found in analyzing the

data that some politicians naturally act negative or positive. For example, some

politicians wave their arms and hands about when they publicly speak, and some don't.

A certain politician's mannerisms haphazardly coinciding with this study's definition of

negative does not necessarily indicate that the presenting network is actively attempting

to frame the politician as such. This methodic shortcoming also presents a difficulty in

validating the results concerning Hypotheses 3 and 4.

In furthering the awareness of complications that seemingly invalidate the

methodology used for testing second-level agenda-setting, it is important to discuss the

observed perception that, in many instances, the rhetoric describing the actions or

platform of politicians did not coincide with the video footage that was being presented.

For example, the extensive amount of video footage that featured John Kerry contained many gestures that were coded as positive, yet the rhetoric accompanying the video was arguable negative. Kerry would look into the camera, move his arms and hands, and display good posture – seemingly indicating a positive framing on the part of the networks; however, the accompanying commentary would relate to the possibility that Kerry might have ruined the chances for the Democrats in the upcoming elections – language that could easily be perceived as negative. There were many instances such as this one in which the video footage and the accompanying commentary of a politician were not consistent. This phenomenon pertaining to the methodology used in determining second-level agenda-setting, as well as others discuss, lend credence to the notion that this particular portion of the study might be faulty.

It is also important to note that the data corresponding to Hypotheses 3 and 4 were altered in experimenting with the Bush/Kerry dominance. Upon removing the data that represented Bush and Kerry from the data that represented the second-level agenda-setting results, no significant change in the general framing of Republicans and Democrats was found in the remaining data. In other words, it was determined that the portrayal of Bush and Kerry by all three networks was in no way different than the general portrayal of Democrats and Republicans. This finding prompted the allowance of Bush and Kerry's data when determining second-level agenda-setting.

Hypothesis 5

Even though the preliminary results rendered two out of the first 4 hypotheses false, specifically Hypotheses 1 and 4, Hypothesis 5 was proved true in almost every

tested account. In the amount of video images allotted to Republicans, FOX displayed the most with 8,792 seconds; CNN displayed the least with 6,649 seconds, and MSNBC, as predicted by Hypothesis 5, scored in the middle by displaying 8,305 seconds. However, in the amount of video images allotted to Democrats, MSNBC did not score in the middle, but scored as the network that presented the most video images of Democrats with 6,502 seconds.

When comparing the average portrayal of both Republicans and Democrats on all three networks, MSNBC scored in the middle on both accounts, as predicted. In the way Republicans were framed, FOX portrayed them most negatively with a .33 index, CNN portrayed them most positively with a .297 index, and MSNBC scored in the middle with a .313 index. In the manner in which Democrats were framed, FOX portrayed them most negatively with a .439 index, CNN portrayed them most positively with a .376 index, and MSNBC scored in the middle with a .377 index.

Another validation of Hypothesis 5, which states that MSNBC's results would act as a medium between CNN's and FOX's, can be found in the results of the experiment to omit the data relating to Bush and Kerry, as previously discussed above. Of video images of Bush, CNN displayed 1,999 seconds, MSNBC displayed 2,988 seconds, and FOX displayed 4,316 seconds. Of video images of Kerry, CNN displayed 659 seconds, MSNBC displayed 1,025 seconds, and FOX displayed 2,590 seconds. As evident in both cases, MSNBC displayed more video images than CNN and fewer than that of FOX. This finding does not necessarily correlate with the intended method of Hypothesis 5, but it nevertheless fits the prediction. Furthermore, the finding adds more strength to the argument for the removal of Bush and Kerry in this dataset.

As detailed above, MSNBC was found to be the medium in a number of measurements, some of which were not hypothesized. Overall, the hypothesis that MSNBC would offer a medium presentation proved to be generally true.

Disparity in Time Allocation and Portrayal

Comparing the disparity in the manner each network allotted time and portrayed different politicians proved significant. While all three networks allotted more time to Republicans and portrayed them more positively when compared to Democrats, MSNBC did so with the least amount of disparity.

In measuring the video images allotted to both Republicans and Democrats, CNN had a dispersion range of 3,727 seconds, FOX had a dispersion range of 4,476 seconds, and MSNBC had the smallest dispersion range of 1,803 seconds. These differences are significant in that they could represent a varying level of favoritism, or bias, directed toward a particular party. FOX and CNN both have very lop-sided figures in the representation of both parties, plainly favoring Republicans; but MSNBC presents a more balanced allotment of video images toward both political parties.

Taking into consideration the Bush/Kerry factor, and by using the data that correspond to the adjusted measure of allotted video images, the dispersion ranges become more distinct. After removing the data of Bush and Kerry, CNN had a dispersion range of 2,387 seconds, FOX had a dispersion range of 3,579 seconds, and MSNBC had a dispersion range of just 160 seconds – with more time going toward the Democrats. Based on these measurements from the adjusted data, it appears that FOX slants its content the most, favoring the Republicans. CNN also seems to favor the

Republicans, but not by as much as FOX. And MSNBC appears to be almost perfectly balanced.

In comparing the disparity between the portrayal of Republicans and Democrats, MSNBC appears to be the most balanced as well. CNN's portrayal index had a dispersion range of .079, while FOX's portrayal index had a dispersion range of .109. MSNBC's portrayal index had a dispersion range of just .064. While all three networks portrayed Republicans in a more positive light, FOX appears to be the most slanted toward the Republican Party, and MSNBC comes closest to portraying both parties evenly.

<div align="center">Scandals</div>

As previously discussed, the John Kerry scandal that played out during the week in which this study was conducted made an impact on the entire data. Consequently, measurements were made pertaining to the different presentations carried out by the networks, and valuable insight was acquired as to possible agendas that were specific to each news organization. To recap, during this study's timeframe, John Kerry was presented for 659 seconds on CNN, 1,025 seconds on MSNBC, and 2,590 seconds on FOX. Referring to the previous portion of this chapter, which discusses the differences in these presentation periods and their significance to possible target marketing, will yield understanding as to why the analysis of political scandals is essential in agenda-setting research.

Another scandal that implied different networks were setting different agendas was the incident involving Reverend Ted Haggard. On November 3rd, four days before

Election Day, a man who admitted to being a gay prostitute alleged to have had sexual relations with Haggard, while also facilitating an illegal methamphetamine purchase for the esteemed reverend. Haggard ultimately confessed to the allegations. Haggard was not a politician; however he did hold immense political power. Haggard held a weekly phone conversation with President Bush and was believed to be the pastor with the most influence over the political direction of evangelicalism (Sharlet, 2005). He was also a champion for Republican agendas, such as legislation regarding pro-life positions and the sanctity of marriage between a man and a woman.

The manner in which the three networks presented this story was very diverse. During the week in which this study was carried out, video images of Ted Haggard were displayed by CNN for 1,252 seconds, by MSNBC for 794 seconds, and by FOX for 117 seconds (see Figure 17). Upon comparing the different ways the three networks presented this story, it is easy to distinguish the different agendas that are attempting to be set.
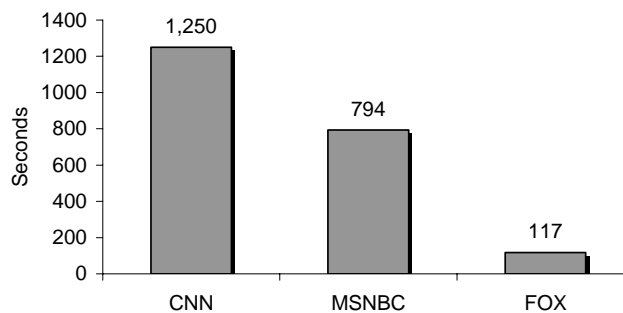

Figure 17. Ted Haggard time allotted.

For all intent and purposes, Haggard pushed the Republican agenda. It makes sense that CNN would show the most video footage of Haggard if indeed the network were trying to target a more liberal niche. As with FOX's dominant presentation of

Kerry's tribulation, CNN, by displaying a disproportionate amount of Haggard, was trying

to highlight the flaws of a Republican leader. Conversely, FOX showing less than two

minutes of Haggard is a blatant exclusion of a harmful story to the Republican Party.

Bill Maher best described this dichotomy of opposing methods of presenting the Ted

Haggard story on his weekly political talk show, *Real Time with Bill Maher*:

> Last week, one of the biggest evangelical leaders in America, the Reverend Ted
> Haggard, was outed for drugs and extramarital gay sex with a male prostitute.
> Or, as FOX News reported it, John Kerry hates our troops. (2006)

Based on the results and analysis of the present study, Maher, even though he was

attempting to be humorous, was correct in the assessment of the way FOX presented

these two scandals, as well as in the motivations in doing so. However, Maher did

exclude the fact that CNN was similarly biased in their presentation of the Kerry and

Haggard scandals – only in the opposite manner.

Individual Anchors

The recent growth in personality-driven shows on cable news in the last decade

deems it important to isolate the activity of anchors in this study. Cable news anchors

such as Bill O'Reilly, Glenn Beck, Lou Dobbs, Neil Cavuto, Keith Olbermann, Nancy

Grace, Chris Mathews, Tucker Carlson, John Gibson, Michelle Malkin, etc. all have

personalities that are very distinct – injecting a level of entertainment that derives from

individualism. Some of these mentioned personas, as well as others not mentioned, are

speculated to be partisan characters; and because of this notion, it was deemed

responsible to isolate the activity of such anchors as a means to better understand if

and how these individuals were skewing the data for an entire network.

For the most part, the activity of the individual anchors for each network match the activity of the individual networks themselves. Only the activity of two anchors did not match that of their corresponding networks: Don Lemon and Tucker Carlson.

Don Lemon, who is an anchor on CNN, presented 523 seconds of Democrats and 113 seconds of Republicans. This does not coincide with the overall coverage of both Republicans and Democrats on CNN, as video images of Republicans completely dominated. One could speculate that Don Lemon had an agenda of his own, which was to aid in the facilitation of pushing a Democratic agenda, but it is doubtful. Lemon was not a producer of his news segment, and he was not featured as a selling point in co-hosting the show by CNN. Lemon is a nominal on-air figure at CNN and most likely does not make the decisions regarding what stories he himself will cover. Speculation that Lemon had an agenda apart from CNN's is unfounded, regardless of evidence.

Tucker Carlson, who is an anchor at MSNBC, presented 3,367 seconds of Democrats and 2,419 seconds of Republicans. Again, this presentation by Carlson does not coincide with the general presentation of MSNBC. However, unlike Lemon, Carlson is a featured anchor; he does not read from a teleprompter for the entire duration of his appearance – speaking off the cuff and injecting his opinion regularly. Also, Carlson most likely plays a larger role than Lemon in choosing the content that is presented on his segment.

Based on the manner in which Carlson presented Democrats and Republicans, and taking into account his credentials and tenure as an on-air personality, one could reasonably presume that Carlson did play a role in breaking from the general practice of MSNBC by allotting the most video images to Democrats. However, Carlson is known

to be a conservative. A former job of Carlson was that of a right-wing champion on the

CNN debating show, *Crossfire*. He has played the role of a conservative pundit on

numerous occasions, and this fact of the matter lends complications to the notion that

Carlson was pushing a Democratic agenda on MSNBC.

Conclusion

By Republican video images dominating the coverage and positive framing on

every network, two hypotheses were proved wrong – CNN did not show more

Democratic video images than FOX, and CNN did not portray Democrats in a more

positive light than did FOX. However, as outlined above, the two scandals during the

week sampled coupled with the shortcomings in the methodology pertaining to second-

level agenda-setting, specifically, played a major role in convoluting the results. By

digging deeper into the obtained data, however, it was clear that in some cases FOX

and CNN were targeting different political niche audiences. Mainly in the analysis of the

individual presentations of George W. Bush, John Kerry, and Ted Haggard was the

evidence clearest.

Much more research is needed to better understand this identified phenomenon

– that the distinct presentation of key individuals and/or events is what separates the

methods by which different cable news networks exhibit seemingly objective facts.

However, the methodology used in this study needs to be altered in future research

endeavors, as it appears oversimplified and insufficient to handle the complexities that

is cable news. It is advised that future researchers abandon the effort to measure the

general practice of news presentation on certain networks, and instead compare the

exhibition of certain people and events. The limitations for this study were definitely in determining the presence of second-level agenda-setting. Many similar studies were discussed in the present study's Literature Review, and most were deemed to be flawed in their methodology. This study, too, was also flawed in its methodology, as it did not account for scandals, which dominated the coverage. Creating a method to accurately identify second-level agenda-setting is far more difficult than creating a method for the identification of first-level.

Agenda-setting theory, overall, provided a helpful framework in attempting to identify branded cable news content. With the theory's help, the present study was able to present quantitative evidence that certain cable news organizations, in an effort to target a political niche audience, set unique agendas by presenting a distinct brand of news. However, much more measurable evidence is needed to further the understanding of this phenomenon.

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