Public Abstract

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Title:Congress in the Mass Media: How The West Wing and Traditional Journalism Frame Congressional Power

Congress is often overshadowed by the presidency in the mass media, and research into portrayals of Congress in the mass media is limited. This study seeks to add to existing scholarship on Congress in the mass media and specifically looks at how traditional journalism and fictional entertainment frame congressional power. Guided by framing theory and the social construction of reality, the study uses qualitative textual analysis to analyze articles from The Washington Post, The Washington Times, and The New York Times and episodes from The West Wing. The study employs literature on congressional history and Congress in the mass media to identify existing frames; however, the study also acknowledges additional frames that have not already been identified. The results show that both the newspaper sample and the West Wing sample predominately use conflict frames to portray congressional power. The conflict frames focus on conflict between parties, conflict between the legislative and executive branches, and even conflict between the chambers of Congress. Congressional power is framed as being dependent on these conflicts. The study shows how traditional journalism and fictional entertainment complement each other and suggests that the two types of media can affect citizens' social realities.