

THE POLITICS OF ELECTION COVERAGE:
A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF INDIANA'S TWO LARGEST NEWSPAPERS
DURING THE 2008 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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THE POLITICS OF ELECTION COVERAGE:
A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF INDIANA'S TWO LARGEST NEWSPAPERS
DURING THE 2008 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this study was to investigate the 2008 presidential election coverage of Indiana's two largest news publications - *The Indianapolis Star* and *The Fort Wayne Journal Gazette* – and determine if any statistically significant differences exist. Utilizing the theories of framing and second-level agenda setting, a content analysis focused on each newspaper's choice of topics, tone, story sources, and amount of coverage as applied to the Republican and Democratic presidential and vice presidential candidates. Each paper's national and local election articles - dated September 7th to November 4th – were analyzed and coded in accordance with the study's code guidebook.

Results indicated that despite the geographical and ideological differences of each newspaper's respective audiences, both offered statistically similar coverage of the election. The principal conclusion drawn was that while coverage was similar, both newspapers lacked stories that discussed each candidates' stances on issues, as well as local and opinion articles. This void of substantial news coverage undermines a newspaper's vital function of providing citizens essential information to make educated voting decisions. Additionally, less substantive stories limit newspapers in their agenda-setting role.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The 2008 presidential election saw the first African-American presidential nominee for a major party, while boasting the first female vice-presidential candidate for the Republican Party. However, one lesser-touted historical feat was the emergence of the state of Indiana as “blue”, or voting for the Democratic presidential candidate, for the first time since 1964.

General factors can explain this switch: the state’s close proximity to Democratic candidate Barack Obama’s hometown of Chicago and the state’s weakening economic situation, an issue heavily favored by Democratic candidates. While these outside factors may have influenced the electoral voting shift, an examination of the election coverage of the state’s two largest newspapers is warranted along with the potential influence the papers have on public opinion.

Scholars have been analyzing the media and its influence on political elections for over 40 years. Studies have provided strong evidence that the media not only tells the public what to think, but what to think about (Cohen, 1963; Entman, 1993; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Notably, the media prefers less substantial, tactic stories over more in-depth policy coverage, and it bears a slightly negative tone (Graber, 1976; Just, Crigler, & Buhr, 1999; Patterson, 2002). Most importantly, the topic and tone coverage that a candidate receives, or how he/she is framed by the media, can have an impact on public opinion (Graber, 1988; Ross, 1992; Golan & Wanta, 2001).

These previous studies have also provided a valuable framework for future examinations of the media and presidential election coverage. What remains to be explored is how two local Indiana newspapers, one serving an audience that voted for the Democratic nominee and the other an audience that voted for the Republican nominee, covered and portrayed the candidates in this historic election. More specifically, did the state's two largest newspapers - *The Indianapolis Star* and *The Fort Wayne Journal Gazette* - differ significantly in their coverage? And how did this coverage make an impact on election-day votes?

The results of this study will have significance to scholars, newspaper personnel and informed citizens alike. If a link between more favorable coverage and more votes is found, greater credence will be given to the theories of framing and second-level agenda setting. This study will also afford the newspapers in the study the opportunity to evaluate coverage and to see if certain topics were more salient than others, or if a candidate received too much favorable/unfavorable coverage. Finally, it will provide citizens a thorough examination of local newspaper coverage during a historic election shift.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Agenda-Setting Theory

Hundreds of studies have examined the press's relationship with its audience through the theory of agenda-setting. Cohen (1963) first discusses the press's power over its audience and perceptions of reality. "The press is significantly more than a purveyor of information and opinion. It 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*" ¹(Cohen, 1963, p. 13).

Shaw and McCombs (1977) first coined the agenda-setting term and asserted that the press "largely structures voters' perception of reality...the press can exert considerable influence on which issues make up the agenda for any particular election" (Shaw & McCombs, 1977, p.15).

Therefore, in a given election, the press chooses from a variety of campaign topics and determines which topics will receive the most coverage: from comparing the candidates' stance on issues – such as the economy, foreign policy or social issues – to less substantial matters – such as horse race or personal quality stories. Regardless of which topics are chosen, the press wields a great deal of power by setting the agenda during an election as the topics frequently covered are the ones that citizens will view as the most important.

¹ Entman (2007) doubts this notion. "If the media really are stunningly successful in telling people what to think about, they must also exert significant influence over what they think" (Entman, 2007, p. 165) Media influence on public opinion will be discussed later in this report.

When examining the media's agenda setting abilities in the 1968 election, McCombs and Shaw (1972) found a strong relationship between the media's focus on a particular campaign issue and the perception of voters as to the importance of that issue. In other words, "voters tend to share the media's composite definition of what is important strongly suggests an agenda-setting function of the mass media" (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 184). Graber (1988) concurs with this assessment. "Most [television viewers] considered frequency of coverage as a sign that newspeople deemed the story important" (Graber, 1988, p. 132).

Topic Coverage

Previous studies have shown a shift in the types of stories covered during presidential campaigns. When examining the 1968 election, both Graber (1971) and McCombs and Shaw (1972) found a propensity to cover campaign tactics rather than issues and policy. Graber (1976) not only found similar results in the 1972 campaign coverage, but that the amount of campaign tactic stories had increased dramatically, from an average of 23% in 1968 to 41% in 1972 (Graber, 1976, p. 507).

This trend seemed to shift slightly in the 1990s to cover more personal quality stories. Just, et al. (1999) found that a candidate's character was referred to in 34% of local newspaper coverage during the 1992 election, while 39% focused on "horse race" (or polling). Kim and McCombs (2007) found an abundance of personal quality stories when analyzing local gubernatorial and U.S. senatorial election coverage in 2002. In examining the *New York Times* election coverage, Benoit, Stein, and Hansen (2005) confirmed these results and found that while "horse race" stories remain prominent, their prevalence has decreased over time, from 58% of election stories in 1952 to 31% in 2000.

Scholars have speculated as to the media's fixation with horse race and campaign tactic stories, in lieu of in-depth policy stories. Jamieson and Waldman (2003) suggest that news reporters may avoid discussion of serious political issues so to not appear biased (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003, p. 168). Patterson (2002) credits the rise of horse race and tactic stories to the rise of interpretive journalism, where "strategic game" rhetoric is at the forefront. Here, election coverage has become a "spectacular struggle: rapid followers, dramatic do-or-die battles, strategy, tactics, winners and losers" (Patterson, 2002, p. 69). Gulati, Just, and Crigler (2004) maintain that this shift in journalism has led to a structural bias in election coverage. They define a structural bias as the "norms of journalism or reporter behavior [that] favor news about some topics over others and that this news emphasis advantages some candidates and disadvantages others" (Gulati, et al., 2004 p. 239). Accordingly, this coverage occurs because horse race and campaign tactics are simply easier to cover. "...[R]eporters are drawn to covering factual stories that lend themselves to simple descriptions and to concrete analysis" (Gulati, et al., 2004, p. 240).

Reporters also enjoy horse race stories because they are able to showcase their analytical skills by predicting the likely election winner. Drawing from a horse racing term, Jamieson and Waldman (2003) have dubbed the media's focus on three key states that will supposedly decide the election as a "trifecta" (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003, p. 85). For example, in the 2000 presidential election, television-network coverage centered largely on polling and predicting the results for Florida, Michigan and Pennsylvania. If either candidate – George Bush or Al Gore – won all three of these states, according to the network commentators, then he would win the presidential election. Therefore, voter interests and

concerns in other states were given considerably less coverage (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003, p. 85-86).

Overall, researchers have denounced the media's focus on campaign tactics and horse race stories, as it is an ineffective way to inform voters. "The emphasis on horse race coverage...has less potential to inform voters about the candidates and their issue positions, and less opportunity to perform an agenda-setting function, than if more coverage were devoted to policy and character" (Benoit et al, 2005, p. 366). In studying the news coverage of the 1976 primaries, Graber (1988) also laments that not enough substantial attention was given to policy issues. "...[N]o single policy issue received in-depth coverage during the primary season, notwithstanding that this is the most crucial period for predetermining who will have the chance to win the final election" (Graber, 1988, p. 79).

Topic Coverage in Local Newspapers

Another question that must be examined is: do newspapers in different geographical locations differ in their topic coverage of presidential elections? Previous studies suggest not. When examining 20 daily newspapers from around the country, Graber (1971) found that all newspapers contained uniform topic coverage of the 1968 presidential race, regardless of the paper's size, location or partisan orientation. When Graber (1976) replicated this study to examine the 1972 presidential campaign, her initial results were confirmed. "Shared coverage patterns meant that in both elections the kinds of issues and presidential qualities which made news in Washington or New York also made news in Raleigh or Topeka...in basically similar proportions" (Graber, 1976, p. 500).

Surprisingly, Graber (1971) could not attribute this uniformity to an access of news wire stories. In the 20 newspapers examined, only an average of 22% of campaign stories came from wire sources in 1972, a drop from 30% in 1968 (Graber, 1976, p. 501). Graber (1971) does point out that a majority (56%) of all campaign news in 1968 could be directly linked to the presidential and vice-presidential campaign efforts (Graber, 1971, p. 511). Additionally, “newspaper personnel apparently shared a sense of what is newsworthy and how it should be presented” (Graber, 1971, p. 512). Because Graber’s studies took place over 35 years ago, a re-examination of press uniformity in presidential coverage is warranted.

Another notable aspect of Graber’s studies is that Midwest and smaller town newspapers in general covered fewer presidential campaign stories than larger dailies on either coast, creating what Graber (1971) called “news-poor areas.” For example, the *New York Times* averaged 10 campaign items a day, compared to less than 4 daily items at the *Topeka Daily Capitol* (Graber, 1971, p. 504). This finding is significant, as Indiana newspapers in comparable towns will be examined in the current study. Again, because of the number of years that have passed since this study, it is necessary to re-examine coverage.

Framing & Second-Level Agenda Setting Theories

Incorporating both theories of agenda-setting and framing is important in a communication setting because of their complimentary nature. As McCombs and Ghanem (2001) point out, framing examines the influences that are shaping the media agenda, while agenda-setting focuses on the impact of those frames on the public. “The convergence of these two research traditions will yield greater unity in our knowledge of how the media’s

pictures of the world are constructed and, in turn, how the public responds to those pictures.” (McCombs & Ghanem, 2001, p.68)

More specifically, while the theory of agenda-setting tells us what to think about, the theories of framing and second-level agenda setting go a step further, stating that the press tells us *how* to think. “To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communication text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). In this definition, Entman (1993) outlines the four functions of frames:

1. *Define problems*, where topics and/or problems that are worthy of the public’s attention are determined,
2. *Diagnose causes*, where forces creating the problem are identified,
3. *Make moral judgments*, where the problem and its effects are evaluated, and
4. *Suggest remedies*, where solutions to the problem are offered and its likely outcome predicted. (Entman, 1993, p. 52)

Using Entman’s definition, framing, and the reporters that apply them to their news coverage, possess a great deal of power over political candidates and public perception.

“Reporters can choose not to cover a political actor...they can reduce the influence of a given actor’s comments by increasing the attention given to alternative voices on that topic, and they can even investigate the claims and find them to be transparent symbols or even false” (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2003, p. 91). It is through this framing perspective that the public may decide which candidate and/or issue they will focus their interests. “If the portrayal is

inviting, they will be encouraged to get involved and pay attention. But if it's disheartening, they will maintain their distance and disengage" (Patterson, 2002, p. 65). It is within this framing that the significance of negative news emerges, which will be discussed in more detail later in this paper.

The power of the press may not only tell people how to think, but also silence those with a differing opinion. In her "spiral of silence" theory, Noelle-Neumann (1974) postulates that individuals are less likely to voice their opinions if they feel they are in the minority for fear of reprisal or isolation from the majority. In this situation, the media plays an important role of establishing what is considered the majority opinion, and those with a different outlook are less vocal about their opinion. As Entman (1993) bluntly states, views outside established frames or majority opinion are no longer newsworthy (Entman, 1993, p. 55).

Recently, scholars have posited the connection between framing and the theory of second-level agenda setting. "The framing of attributes can impact the way in which the public perceives the attributes of public figures, which is at the heart of second-level agenda setting" (Golan & Wanta, 2001, p. 248). Weaver, et al. (2004) offer the following comprehensive definition of second-level agenda setting:

In the majority of studies to date, the unit of analysis on each agenda is an *object*, a public issue. But objects have *attributes*, or characteristics. When the news media report on the public issues or political candidates, they describe these objects. But due to limited capacity of the news agenda, journalists can present only a few aspects of any object in the news. A few attributes are prominent and frequently mentioned, some are given passing notice, and many others are omitted. In short, news reports also present an agenda of attributes that vary considerably in salience. (Weaver et al, 2004, p. 259).

Put another way, the focus of this theory is not on what the media emphasizes, but how the media describes it. (Coleman & Banning, 2006, p. 314) Second-level agenda setting

examines “how people learn important characteristics of public figures. This level emphasizes the attributes of public figures that should concern the public” (Golan & Wanta, 2001, p. 258).

Going a step further, these attributes or characteristics can be broken down into two categories: cognitive and affective. Cognitive attributes provide “information about specific substantive traits or characteristics that describe the object” while affective attributes depict “the positive, negative, or neutral tone of the descriptions of these traits when they appear on the news agenda or the public agenda” (Kim & McCombs, 2007, p. 300). For example, cognitive attributes describe a candidate’s physical traits and personality, such as intelligent-stupid, young-old, energetic-boring, etc. Affective attributes rate a candidate’s cognitive attributes, such as intelligent (positive), old (negative) or moderate (neutral). How a candidate’s attributes – cognitive and affective - are portrayed in the media is therefore worth examining.

Tone and Second-Level Agenda Setting

Previous studies that have examined the tone of presidential news coverage have been mixed. Just, et al. (1999) found that while newspapers provided more in-depth coverage than other mediums, it was also more negative in tone. Benoit et al. (2005) examined the presidential election coverage of the *New York Times* from 1952-2000 and concluded that overall, negative tone was more common than positive tone. However, the study’s results show a steady decline in the amount of negative coverage over time, from 63% in 1952 to 49% in 2000. Additionally, the 2000 election had almost equal positive and negative coverage, 48% and 49% respectively (Benoit et al., 2005, p. 364).

Previous studies have also shown a correlation between positive stories and a candidate's rise in the polls, giving some credence to the second-level agenda setting theory. Graber (1971) notes a positive correlation in Humphrey's public popularity and an increase in pro-Humphrey news stories, while Nixon's public popularity and positive news stories take a dip at the same time (Graber, 1971, p. 504). Graber (1988) found similar findings in the 1976 election coverage, when negative stories about Carter coincided with an increasingly negative public perception (Graber, 1988, p. 79).

Interestingly, when examining the 1984 Democratic primaries, Ross (1992, p. 82-83) found that candidates who had low poll numbers not only had difficulties acquiring television coverage, but also faced more negative coverage (Ross, 1992). Ross also found that unknown candidates had the most to gain from media effects on public opinion. For example, Democratic primary candidate Gary Hart "began as the least known of the four candidates at the start of the campaign, and his [elevated] public standing was highly associated with the media attention he received" (Ross, 1992, p. 87).

Most recently, an examination of the local news coverage during the 2000 Republican primary in New Hampshire "found some support for the notion of media influence on the public's perceptions of political candidates" (Golan & Wanta, 2001 p.258). When assessing local candidate coverage in 2002, Kim and McCombs (2007) concluded that "substantive attributes and their tone emphasized in the media are likely to predict attitude toward candidates more for heavy newspaper readers than for light newspaper readers" (Kim & McCombs, 2007, p. 310). Coleman and Banning (2006) confirmed these results in that "those

who watched more [television coverage] were significantly more likely to hold attributes that mirrored the media portrayals” (Coleman & Banning, 2006, p. 313).

While this evidence does seem to support the framing and second-level agenda setting theories, one must ponder what the media’s true power and influences are over public opinion. Entman (1993) points out that while media framing of candidates may be powerful, it is not universal. “The notion of framing...implies that the frame has a common effect on large portions of the receiving audience, though it is not likely to have a universal effect on all” (Entman, 1993, p. 54) Ross (1992) concluded that other outside forces, besides the media, can affect public perception. “The major problem is establishing that change in public opinion is due to prior media coverage rather than to social processes or reactions to political events themselves” (Ross, 1992, p. 71). Golan and Wanta (2001) agreed: “positive media coverage did not always lead to positive public perceptions” (Golan & Wanta, 2001, p. 257). Therefore, other variables beside the media may be at play when public opinions are developed.

Media Bias

Invariably, the question is asked as to whether Republican candidates receive more negative coverage than Democratic candidates. In other words, does the media have a “liberal bias”? Obviously, a bias of any kind would not be in the best interest of the voters or democracy as a whole. “It [is] reasonable to suggest that when news clearly slants, those officials favored by the slant become more powerful, freer to do what they want without the anticipation that voters might punish them” (Entman, 2007, p. 170). Therefore, news

organizations must aim to keep all biases at a minimum in order to fulfill their mission of properly informing the public.

Determining the presence of a bias has remained elusive in academic research. When D'Alessio and Allen (2000) conducted a meta-analysis study – or a comprehensive review of studies dealing with presidential coverage over a range of time – they concluded that “on the whole...there is only negligible, if any, net bias in the coverage of presidential campaigns” (D'Alessio & Allen, 2000, p. 148).

The authors of this study were also quick to point out that these results did not advocate that every reporter and every newspaper was unbiased; merely that newspapers with favorable Democratic coverage offset newspapers with favorable Republican coverage. For example, when analyzing the *New York Times*, Benoit et al. (2005) found that while the amount of coverage was equal among Democratic and Republican candidates, evaluative comments were more negative toward Republican candidates than Democratic candidates (Benoit et al, 2005, p. 368). When examining the 2004 presidential campaign coverage, Weatherly et al (2007) concluded that headlines from CNN were significantly more liberal – or more positive toward Democratic nominee John Kerry - than those from FOX News. On the other hand, Brandenburg (2006) extrapolates that FOX News was systematically biased against Kerry and Democrats. “With regard to the presidential candidates, no significant bias against Bush exists amongst the ‘liberal media’, but once FOX enters the picture, it tilts the overall media opinion against Kerry, and quite significantly so” (Brandenburg, 2006, p. 20). One plausible reason for this discrepancy could be that Weatherly et al. (2007) examined only story headlines, while Brandenburg (2006) analyzed news stories in their entirety.

Taking a more cynical perspective, Patterson (2002) claimed that the media did not possess a liberal or conservative bias, rather a preference for the negative. For example, in the 2000 presidential election, many Republicans denounced national television coverage of George Bush as being too negative. However, research found that Al Gore received just as much, if not more, negative coverage than Bush during the primaries and general election coverage (Patterson, 2002, pp. 63-64).

Regardless, the notion of a “liberal media” persists. Entman (2007) place some blame on the media itself, as it has curiously accepted this frame. “The allegedly liberal media ironically and consistently slant in favor of conservatives’ preferred framing when the media themselves are on the agenda as a political issue” (Entman, 2007, p. 165-166). As previous studies have shown, such framing may lead the public to accept the “liberal media” label as valid.

Other scholars point out that the presence of a media bias may be in the eye of the media consumer. Vallone, Lepper & Ross (1981) first document the “hostile media phenomenon” when examining the 1980 presidential election. They found that most registered voters “claimed that the media generally had been fair and impartial...[However], when partiality was perceived, it was almost always perceived to be against the respondents’ favored candidate” (Vallone, Lepper & Ross, 1985, p. 578). A subsequent study that assessed pro-Israeli/pro-Arab sentiments after the 1982 Beirut massacre lent support to this theory, especially since the subject matter evoked strong emotions and partisanship (Vallone, Lepper & Ross, 1985, p. 579).

Such a phenomenon can pose special challenges for the media in its attempt to offer fair, balanced coverage. After finding the presence of the hostile media effect in the 1992 presidential election, Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt (1998) assert: “it is possible for the media to be both more neutral in their reporting of events and increasingly criticized by partisans for their (perceived) bias.” (Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998, p 124). In other words, the more neutral a news outlet is, the more biased it may be perceived to be; creating a near impossible obstacle for the media to overcome.

With this in mind, this study will test the agenda-setting, second-level agenda setting and framing theories as they apply to *The Indianapolis Star* and the *Fort Wayne Journal Gazette*'s presidential coverage. For example, how do the two newspapers compare in setting the election's agenda at the local level? What topics did the newspapers cover more frequently: important political issues or easy campaign tactics? Also, did the newspapers frame one candidate in a more positive manner, while framing the other more negatively? By investigating these questions, this research will better explain and define the agenda-setting, second-level agenda setting and framing theories as they apply to local coverage of national candidates.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

Content Analysis

When examining media coverage in presidential elections, many past studies do so with a content analysis (Just et al, 1999; Benoit et al, 2005; Coleman & Banning, 2006; Golan & Wanta 2001; Ross 1992). Graber (2004) explains the dual nature of content analysis as being both qualitative and quantitative:

Often, it is a mixture of both designed to take advantage of the strengths of each approach...[Qualitative analysis] has the advantage of allowing researchers to employ many of the intuitive skills for message interpretation that humans possess. These skills include understanding the connotations that are attached to messages, sensing their emotional impact, and spinning out widely believed implications and their consequences.” (Graber, 2004, p. 53).

Graber also points out that while qualitative interpretation can be subjective, it can be done accurately with systematic interpretation and well-defined criteria. (Graber, 2004, p.53).

Quantitative analysis provides this necessary framework. “[It] involves establishing readily measurable, minimally judgmental, criteria for defining the message elements to be detected and the indicators that signal the presence or absence of these elements. Selection criteria are then used for systematic examination of the chosen content” (Graber, 2004, p. 54). Additionally, “rigorous quantitative procedures also make it feasible to apply complex mathematical tests to the findings” (Graber, 2004, p.54).

These quantitative frameworks for interpretation are often laid out in a codebook guide, one of the most important aspects in any content analysis. “Preparing a codebook that describes in detail how the research must be executed is a crucial aspect of content analysis

because the ultimate value of most studies hinges on the insight and skill with which variables that are important for the investigation have been identified and defined.” (Graber, 2004, p.55)

In some of the studies examined, random samples of news coverage were selected and analyzed (Benoit et al, 2005; Coleman & Banning, 2006). Graber (2004) discourages such methods because of the very nature of the news. “In mass media news content analysis, ordinary sampling methods may be inappropriate because newsworthy events are not randomly distributed” (Graber, 2004, p. 49).

Newspaper Selection

The content analysis will focus on Indiana’s two largest daily newspapers, as per the Audit Bureau of Circulation (2008) – *The Indianapolis Star* and *The Fort Wayne Journal Gazette*. As demonstrated by Table 1, these newspapers were also chosen for the different ideological and geographical audiences in which they serve: *The Indianapolis Star* predominantly covers Marion County, which voted strongly for Democratic candidate Barack Obama, 64% to 35%. On the other hand, Allen County, where *The Fort Wayne Journal Gazette* is located, went for Republican candidate John McCain, 52% to 47% (CNN Election Center, 2008). Aside from the reach and potential influence of these two newspapers, their different audiences and subsequent news coverage provide an interesting basis for comparison.

Table 1: Newspaper Demographic and Geographic Information

Newspaper	County Served	County Population (2008)	Newspaper Circulation (Daily/Sunday)	2008 Voting Results for County Served
<i>The Indianapolis Star</i>	Marion	883,107	193,525/ 289,017	Obama/Biden
<i>Fort Wayne Journal Gazette</i>	Allen	351,148	63,046/ 105,462	McCain/Palin

The decision was made to examine newspaper coverage in lieu of the rising Internet medium. While the prevalence of online news and blogs have surged, traditional print newspapers still have a prominent place in news dissemination. Studies have shown that newspapers are not only perceived as more credible than online sources (Jo, 2005; Anderson, 2007), they are also often supplemented with – not replaced by – online news (Johnson & Kaye, 2002; Stavrositu & Sundar, 2008; Anderson, 2007). Put simply, “if a citizen wanted information about the substance of policies, newspapers were clearly the medium of choice” (Just et al., 1999, p. 31).

Timeframe

Due to the unusually long Democratic presidential primary campaign between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, which lasted approximately four months longer than the Republican primary campaign, the study will examine only general election stories. Also, because each party receives a coverage boost during and immediately following its convention, the analysis will examine articles after the conclusion of the Republican Convention on Thursday, September 4th. Therefore, the targeted articles in this study will be general presidential election stories taken from *The Indianapolis Star* and the *Fort Wayne*

Journal Gazette from Sunday, September 7 through Tuesday, November 4, 2008. While the analysis will examine news and opinion stories, letters to the editor will be excluded.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

A content analysis of *The Indianapolis Star* and *The Fort Wayne Journal Gazette* will focus on the election coverage in terms of topics, tone, and coverage amount to determine what (if any) significant differences exist. Specifically, the study will assess the following:

RQ1: Did the two newspapers differ significantly in their utilization of locally-written and wire stories, as well as news and opinion stories?

RQ2: Did the two publications differ significantly in the amount of coverage – overall and between presidential and vice presidential candidates?

RQ3: Did the two newspapers differ significantly in topic coverage – overall and between presidential and vice presidential candidates?

RQ4: Did the two newspapers differ significantly in terms of negative, neutral and positive tone – overall and between presidential and vice presidential candidates?

Since this study is determining whether a significant difference, rather than a casual relationship, exists between the two newspapers and their election coverage, a chi-square test will be used. Statistically different chi-squares would suggest the two newspapers experienced a meaningful variance in their election coverage. If this is the case, the researcher will examine whether the differences coincide with the voting behavior of individuals in the newspaper's region. For example, significantly more positive Obama stories in *The Indianapolis Star* than *The Fort Wayne Journal Gazette* would coincide with

Obama's high vote count in Marion County, thus giving greater credence to the power of framing and second-level agenda setting.

Non-significant chi-squares would demonstrate that the two newspapers offered their readers similar coverage. If media consumers received the same information and yet exhibited different voter behavior, then the results would call into question the power of local newspapers on influencing voter behavior.

CHAPTER 5

PRE-TEST

Two coders – of different ages, education levels and opposing political leanings – completed a pre-test of the content analysis by examining over 70 articles (or 10% of the total articles pulled) from *The Indianapolis Star* and *The Fort Wayne Journal Gazette* to ensure reliability of the content analysis codebook.

In accordance with other similar studies (Kim & McCombs, 2007; Coleman & Banning, 2006), intercoder reliability was determined by using Scott's Pi. As Table 2 shows, the category average was .95, ranging from a low of .89 to a high of a perfect 1.0.

Table 2. Intercoder Reliability Scores

Category	Scott's Pi (π)
<i>Indianapolis Star</i> or <i>Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette</i>	1.0
Local or Wire Stories	.89
News or Opinion Stories	.98
Candidate with most mentions	1
McCain Topic Coverage	.96
Obama Topic Coverage	.94
Palin Topic Coverage	.95
Biden Topic Coverage	.97
Overall Tone	.89
Category Average	.95

It should be noted that, due to Scott's Pi's limitations, non-nominal categories, such as the candidate count and line count, were excluded from these calculations.

The final codebook guide, as well as the coding sheets, utilized in this study can be found in Appendix.

CHAPTER 6

RESULTS

In this census analysis – comprised of general presidential election stories taken from *The Indianapolis Star* and *The Fort Wayne Journal Gazette* from Sunday, September 7 through Tuesday, November 4, 2008 – 695 articles were examined; 329 from the *Indianapolis Star* and 366 from *The Fort Wayne Journal Gazette*. Articles were manually pulled via microfilm by searching each daily publication of the newspapers between the aforementioned time period.

Source and Type of Articles

The RQ1 asked whether the two newspapers differed significantly in their utilization of locally-written or news wire stories, as well as the type of stories (news versus opinion). Table 3 shows the number and percentage of wire and local stories that appeared in both newspapers. The Table shows that both publications used a higher proportion of wire stories, as compared to local stories.

Table 3: Number of Wire and Local Stories

Source of Story	Indianapolis Star	Fort Wayne J-G
Wire Stories	247 (75%)	312 (85%)
Local Stories	82 (25%)	54 (15%)
Total	329	366
X ² (1, N=695) =11.39, p<.05		

A chi-square test conducted on the above variables yielded an X^2 of 11.39, making the figures significantly different. The *Gazette*'s clear preference for wire stories (85%) as compared to the *Star* (75%) created the statistical difference.

The newspapers also varied greatly in the proportional amount of news and opinion stories, as illustrated in Table 4. While the *Star* offered more opinion stories than the *Gazette* (35% and 27% respectively). However, both newspapers dedicated considerably more space to news stories than opinion. This produced a slight statistical difference, with an X^2 of 5.44.

Table 4: Number of News and Opinion Stories

Type of Story	Indianapolis Star	Fort Wayne J-G
Opinion	114 (35%)	97 (27%)
News	215(65%)	69 (73%)
Total	329	366
$X^2 (1, N=695) =5.44, p<.05$		

To gain a better understanding and a more comprehensible view of these significant differences, the newspaper articles were broken down into four categories: Local news stories, local opinion, wire news and wire opinion. Table 5 demonstrates the results.

Table 5: Source and Type of Articles

Source/Story Type	Indianapolis Star	Fort Wayne J-G
Local News	52 (15%)	30 (8%)
Local Opinion	30 (10%)	24 (7%)
Wire News	163 (50%)	239 (65%)
Wire Opinion	84 (25%)	73 (20%)
Total	329	366

This breakdown offers a much clearer explanation of the statistical differences in each newspaper's coverage. For example, in terms of percentage, the *Star* gave almost double the

amount of local news stories (15%) than the *Fort Wayne Journal Gazette* (8%). The *Gazette* also dedicated much more space to wire news stories (65%) than the *Star* (50%). Both papers offered the least amount of coverage to local opinion (10% and 7%). Table 6 shows the four chi-square tests conducted and validates the significant differences between wire news/opinion stories ($X^2=7.68$), as well as between local/wire news ($X^2=14.43$).

Table 6: Chi-Square Calculations for Source and Type of Articles

Category	Chi-Square Calculation
Local News/Local Opinion	$X^2 (1, N=136) = .84, p>.05$
Wire News/Wire Opinion	$X^2 (1, N=559) = 7.68, p<.05$
Local News/Wire News	$X^2 (1, N=484) = 14.43, p<.05$
Local Opinion/Wire Opinion	$X^2 (1, N=179) = .14, p>.05$

Amount of Coverage

The RQ2 questioned whether there is a difference in the amount of coverage – overall and between presidential and vice presidential candidates. Table 7 reveals the amount/percentage of stories in which each candidate appeared, as well as the amount/percentage of stories in which each candidate received the most mentions.

Table 7: Number of “Candidate Appearance” and “Highest Mentions” Stories

Candidate	Number of Articles in which Candidate Appeared		Number of Articles in which Candidate Received Highest Mentions	
	Indy Star	FWJG	Indy Star	FWJG
McCain	290 (88%)	296 (81%)	129 (39%)	134 (37%)
Obama	279 (85%)	294 (80%)	180 (55%)	172 (47%)
Palin	149 (45%)	192 (52%)	59 (18%)	92 (25%)
Biden	65 (20%)	63 (17%)	12 (4%)	16 (4%)

It should be noted that the “Candidate Appeared” and “Highest mentions” percentages were configured as a proportion of the newspapers’ total articles. For example, McCain appeared in 290, or 88%, of the *Star*’s 329 total articles. He received the most mentions in 129, or 39%, of the *Star*’s total articles.

As shown in Table 8, two chi-square tests – one that examined the number of stories between McCain and Obama, the other between Palin and Biden – revealed no significant differences in the two newspapers coverage; X^2 ranged from .07 to 1.88. Both papers devoted most of their coverage to the presidential candidates. John McCain appeared in the most articles in the *Star* (88%) and the *Gazette* (81%); Barack Obama received the most “highest mentions” in both publications (55% and 47%, respectively). Biden was the least covered of all candidates, appearing in the fewest stories (20% and 17%, respectively) and garnering the smallest number of “highest mention” stories (4% in both newspapers).

While the analysis reveals that some candidates received far more coverage than others – Palin for example received a far greater amount of story appearances than Biden - both papers were proportionally comparable in terms of coverage of the four candidates.

Table 8: Chi-Square Calculations for “Candidate Appearances” and “Highest Mentions”

Category	Chi-Square Calculation
McCain/Obama “Candidate Appearances”	$X^2 (1, N=1159) = .07, p > .05$
McCain/Obama “Highest Mentions”	$X^2 (1, N=615) = .26, p > .05$
Palin/Biden “Candidate Appearances”	$X^2 (1, N=469) = 1.88, p > .05$
Palin/Biden “Highest Mentions”	$X^2 (1, N=179) = .14, p > .05$

Next, the articles were examined for the story length, calculated by the number of lines devoted to each candidate. The *Star*’s 329 articles contained a total of 25,668 lines,

making the average story 78.02 lines in length; the *Gazette* had 36,039 total lines in its 366 stories, with an average story length of 98.47.

To calculate the line count for each candidate, their perspective “highest mention” articles were examined. The decision was made to use the “highest mention” articles in this calculation because, unlike the “candidate appearance” articles where the candidate could theoretically play a small role in the story, these articles placed greater focus on an individual candidate. Therefore the “highest mention” articles for each candidate were tabulated and averaged. For example, in the *Gazette*, Obama was the “highest mention” in 172 stories, which contained a total of 17,977 lines. The mean of these two figures yielded an average line count of 104.52 lines. Obama received the greatest amount of line space in both the *Star* and *Gazette* (82.32 and 104.52, respectively), while Biden received the fewest in the *Star* (64.25) and Palin in the *Gazette* (82.07). The total line count and line average for all candidates is illustrated in Table 9.

Table 9: Total Line Count (and Average) for All Four Candidates

Candidate	Indianapolis Star	Fort Wayne J-G
McCain	9,957 (77.19)	13,859 (103.43)
Obama	14,817 (82.32)	17,977 (104.52)
Palin	4,039 (68.46)	7,550 (82.07)
Biden	771 (64.25)	1,316 (82.25)
Newspaper Total	25,668 (78.02)	36,039 (98.47)

Topic Coverage

The RQ3 examined whether the two newspapers differed significantly in topic coverage – overall and between presidential and vice presidential candidates. Each article was examined for candidate references in the following areas: personal qualities, horse race,

campaign factors and stance on issues (see codebook for precise definitions of these categories). Tables 10 and 11 display the total number of articles in which a particular topic was discussed about a certain candidate, as well as the percentage in terms of “candidate appearances.” For example, of the 290 articles in which McCain appeared in the *Star*, 42% (or 123 articles) focused on personal qualities.

Table 10: Topic Coverage from *The Indianapolis Star*

Topic	McCain	Obama	Palin	Biden
Personal Quality	123 (42%)	146 (53%)	94 (63%)	27 (42%)
Horse Race	94 (32%)	115 (41%)	13 (9%)	3 (5%)
Campaign Factors	225 (78%)	203 (73%)	118 (79%)	53 (82%)
Stance on Issues	136 (47%)	141 (51%)	36 (24%)	15 (23%)

Table 11: Topic Coverage from *The Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette*

Topic	McCain	Obama	Palin	Biden
Personal Quality	132 (45%)	160 (54%)	119 (62%)	26 (41%)
Horse Race	81 (27%)	90 (31%)	13 (7%)	5 (8%)
Campaign Factors	249 (84%)	238 (81%)	157 (82%)	52 (83%)
Stance on Issues	131 (44%)	126 (43%)	52 (27%)	12 (19%)

Next, a chi-square test was conducted between the presidential and vice presidential candidates among the four topic categories. The results, showed in Table 12, show no significant differences; X^2 ranged from .007 to 1.76.

Table 12: Chi-Square Calculations for Topic Categories

Category	Chi-Square Calculation
McCain/Obama Personal Qualities	$X^2 (1, N=562) = .007, p > .05$
Palin/Biden Personal Qualities	$X^2 (1, N=266) = .79, p > .05$
McCain/Obama Horse Race	$X^2 (1, N=380) = .22, p > .05$
Palin/Biden Horse Race	$X^2 (1, N=34) = .38, p > .05$
McCain/Obama Campaign Factor	$X^2 (1, N=915) = .19, p > .05$
Palin/Biden Campaign Factor	$X^2 (1, N=380) = 1.76, p > .05$
McCain/Obama Stance on Issues	$X^2 (1, N=534) = .19, p > .05$
Palin/Biden Stance on Issues	$X^2 (1, N=115) = 1.8, p > .05$

Campaign factor stories were the dominant topic for all candidates, ranging from 78% to 83% of a candidate’s overall coverage. Biden had the highest percentage of campaign factor stories in the *Star* (82%) and McCain had the highest in the *Gazette* (84%). The *Gazette* also gave McCain the highest percentage of “stance on issue” stories (44%), while Obama had the highest in the *Star* (51%). Of all the candidates, Palin garnered the highest percentage of personal quality stories in both publications (62% and 63%). Horse race stories were the least covered topic among all candidates.

Looking at the overall topic coverage, the *Star* and *Gazette* were analyzed for total number of topic categories, as illustrated in Table 13. As per the coding instructions, more than one topic could appear in an article, thus allowing for the overall topic totals to exceed the total number of articles pulled from each paper. Percentages were therefore configured as a portion of the total topic reference for each newspaper.

Table 13: Topic Breakdown

Topic	Indianapolis Star	Fort Wayne J-G
Personal Quality	391 (25%)	437 (26%)
Horse Race	225 (15%)	189 (12%)
Campaign Factor	599 (39%)	696 (42%)
Stance on Issues	328 (21%)	321 (20%)
Total Topic References	1543	1643
X ² (1, N=3186) =9.90, p<.05		

The results show a slight statistical difference (X²=9.90), mostly likely due to variance among topic categories rather than between the two newspapers. For example, both publications offered an almost equal, high proportion of “campaign factor” stories (*Star*: 39%, *Gazette*: 42%) yet almost half the number of “stance on issues” stories (*Star*: 21%, *Gazette*: 20%). Therefore, it can be concluded that both papers were comparable in their topic coverage.

As demonstrated in the candidate/topic chart (Tables 10 and 11), campaign factor stories received the most coverage (39% and 42%), while horse race received the least (15% and 12%). Personal quality and stance on issues were the second and third most covered topics, respectively.

Tone

The final research question asked whether the two newspapers differed significantly in terms of negative, neutral and positive tone – overall and between presidential and vice presidential candidates. Each article was rated for the overall tone in which a candidate was referred (see codebook for precise definitions of these categories). Table 14 displays the total number of candidate reference to a particular tone category, as well as the total tone count for

each newspaper. Candidate percentages were configured as a proportion of each candidate's overall appearance count. For example, McCain appeared in 290 articles in the *Star*.

Therefore, his percentage of negative stories was 21%, or 61 stories.

Table 14: Total Tone References for Each Candidate/Newspaper

Tone Category	Candidate	Indianapolis Star	Fort Wayne J-G
Negative	McCain	61 (21%)	74 (25%)
	Obama	42 (15%)	27 (9%)
	Palin	23 (15%)	58 (30%)
	Biden	10 (15%)	6 (10%)
	TOTAL	136	165
Neutral	McCain	204 (70%)	207 (70%)
	Obama	168 (60%)	187 (64%)
	Palin	103 (69%)	105 (55%)
	Biden	46 (71%)	48 (76%)
	TOTAL	521	547
Positive	McCain	25 (9%)	15 (5%)
	Obama	69 (25%)	80 (27%)
	Palin	23 (15%)	29 (15%)
	Biden	9 (14%)	9 (14%)
	TOTAL	126	133

Next, the net yield of positive and negative stories for each candidate was configured and is illustrated in Table 15. This figured was calculated by subtracting the number of each candidates' negative stories from his/her positive stories. For example, McCain's 61 negative stories from the *Star* was subtracted from this 25 positive stories, yielding an overall -36.

Table 15: Net Yield of Positive and Negative Stories for Each Candidate/Newspaper

Candidate	Indianapolis Star	Fort Wayne J-G
McCain	-36	-59
Obama	27	53
Palin	0	-29
Biden	-1	3

A chi-square test was conducted between the presidential and vice presidential candidates among the three tone categories. The results, showed in Table 16, reveal significant differences for both presidential ($X^2 = 4.49$) and vice presidential candidates ($X^2 = 6.92$) in the negative tone category.

Table 16: Chi-Square Calculations for Tone Categories

Category	Chi-Square Calculation
McCain/Obama Negative Tone	$X^2 (1, N=204) = 4.49, p < .05$
McCain/Obama Neutral Tone	$X^2 (1, N=766) = .41, p > .05$
McCain/Obama Positive Tone	$X^2 (1, N=189) = 3.31, p > .05$
Palin/Biden Negative Tone	$X^2 (1, N=97) = 6.92, p < .05$
Palin/Biden Neutral Tone	$X^2 (1, N=302) = .01, p > .05$
Palin/Biden Positive Tone	$X^2 (1, N=70) = .18, p > .05$
<i>Star/Gazette</i> Overall Tone	$X^2 (1, N=534) = .19, p > .05$

While the presidential candidates appeared in almost equal number of articles in both newspapers, McCain received almost three times the amount of negative coverage (74 articles) from the *Gazette* than Obama (27 articles). While the *Star* offered readers significantly more negative Obama stories than the *Gazette* (42 and 27, respectively), McCain still garners more negative stories in the *Star* (61 articles) than his Democratic rival (42 articles).

This same statistical difference is found when examining negative stories between the vice presidential candidates, particularly in the *Gazette's* coverage of Palin. In terms of percentage (done due to the unusually high amount of coverage Palin received), Palin received three times the amount of negative coverage (30%) from the *Gazette* than Biden (10%). The *Gazette* also had double the amount of negative Palin stories than the *Star* (30%

and 15% respectively). Unlike the *Gazette*, the *Star* offered an equal percentage of negative stories (15%) between the two vice presidential candidates.

Table 15 demonstrates this disparity even further. McCain yielded a high number of negative stories from the *Star* and the *Gazette* (-36 and -59, respectively), while his rival netted more positive (27 and 53). The *Star* offset its positive and negative stories with the vice presidential candidates, while Palin netted significantly more negative coverage from the *Gazette* (-29) than Biden (3).

The results also showed no significant differences in neutral and positive stories among the presidential and vice presidential candidates; X^2 ranged from .01 to 3.31. Both publications portrayed McCain in neutral stories 70% of the time and Obama between 60% and 64%. Biden received the greatest percentage of neutral stories in the *Star* and *Gazette* (71% and 76%, respectively), while Palin had some of the fewest neutral stories (69% and 55%, respectively).

Examination of positive stories also revealed no significant differences. However, some variance was found between the presidential candidates, not the newspapers. For example, in terms of percentage, both the *Star* and *Gazette* offered Obama near equal amounts positive stories (25% and 27%, respectively). However, these percentages are much greater than those of McCain (9% and 5%, respectively). The vice presidential candidates received almost identical the percentage of positive stories in both publications. Positive Palin stories in both the *Star* and the *Gazette* accounted for 15% of her news articles; positive Biden stories accounted for 14% in both papers.

CHAPTER 7

DISCUSSION

As Graber observed in her 1971 study, newspaper reporters and editors often agree on what stories are newsworthy and how they should be presented to their readers. Almost 30 years later, the content analysis of the *Star* and *Gazette* only confirms this sentiment. Despite the geographical and ideological differences of their audience, both publications offered remarkably similar coverage of the 2008 presidential election.

Source and Type of Articles

Although the *Gazette* serves a small, more rural audience, the paper offered its readers more, lengthy presidential articles than the *Star*. With 366 election stories averaging over 98 lines in length, the *Gazette* outpaced the *Star*'s election coverage of 329 stories, 78 lines in average length. These results contradict Graber's (1971 and 1976) earlier findings that smaller community newspapers create "news-poor areas" by covering fewer presidential campaign stories.

While the *Star* did dedicate much more space - and likely financial resources - to local coverage than the *Gazette* (25% and 15%, respectively), both papers were severely lacking in local opinion pieces. While there can be many causes for this deficiency, the high cost involved with local coverage - especially at a time when newspapers are struggling financially and laying off reporters - is the most likely culprit.

Unfortunately, both newspapers missed the opportunity to delve into local issues and educate readers on how the presidential race impacts their community. For example, how

will Obama's proposed health plan affect Indianapolis residents? Or will McCain's tax plan bring manufacturing jobs back to the Fort Wayne area? In doing so, the two papers gave readers few exclusive stories and therefore little incentive to purchase their local publication versus a national one.

Amount of Coverage

While McCain appeared in more stories than his Democratic opponent, Obama outpaced McCain in "highest mention" stories. McCain simply played a smaller role in more stories than his rival. Several factors could have contributed to this finding, including McCain's long-standing position in congress and his well-documented stance on issues. Obama, on the other hand, was a relative newcomer to the political arena and had the distinction being the first African-American to receive a national party's nomination. His hometown of Chicago and its close proximity to the state also likely played a role in Obama's increased coverage.

However, the actions of the candidates themselves may be the most likely culprit. For example, Obama traveled to Indiana far more times than his Republican rival; in the year leading up to the election, Obama visited the state 48 times while McCain only made 3 stops (Schneider 2008). In other words, not only did his unknown record and local connections make Obama more newsworthy, but the Democratic candidate's frequent visits and rallies also gave the local papers more reasons to cover him.

Palin was clearly the star of the vice presidential candidates. She appeared in almost double the number of stories and received over four times the amount of "highest mention" stories than Biden. Like Obama, Palin's relative obscurity - as well as the historic

implications of being the first female Republican vice presidential running mate - most likely attributed to her newsworthiness and subsequent proliferation of media coverage. Like McCain, Biden was a well-established political figure when he was tapped to be Obama's running mate. Therefore, the media may simply have had less reason to cover the seasoned politician than his unknown Republican opponent.

Topic Coverage

As discussed in the results section, campaign factor stories dominated the *Star* and the *Gazette's* election coverage (39% and 42% respectively), while horse race received the least (15% and 12%). These findings coincide with earlier studies that observed a propensity of campaign factor stories and less horse race coverage in presidential elections. (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Graber 1976; Benoit, Stein and Hansen, 2005).

Also of note was the fact that Palin, followed by Obama, received the most personal quality stories in both publications. The candidates' race/gender, audience appeal, and analysis of their qualifications justifiably received much coverage. Palin's family – including her daughter's pregnancy and brother-in-law's firing scandal – as well as Obama's personal and professional ties – including his relationship with Rev. Jeremiah Wright and William Ayers – were also the focus of many articles. As previously mentioned, both candidates were relatively unknown political figures before the 2008 race and both possessed historic nominations. Therefore, the press likely had more reason and opportunities to cover their personal lives than better known candidates, McCain and Biden.

While both newspapers offered readers similar topic coverage, articles that focused on the candidates' stance on issues articles - while receiving more coverage than horse race

stories - still remains lacking. As earlier researchers lamented (Benoit et al, 2005; Graber, 1988), this void of substantial news coverage undermines a newspaper's vital function of providing citizens essential information to make educated voting decisions. Additionally, less substantive stories limit newspapers in their agenda-setting role.

Tone

Perhaps the more interesting finding in this study was the difference in negative tone coverage between the presidential and vice presidential candidates. While McCain and Palin appeared in more articles than their perspective Democratic revivals, the two had decidedly more negative coverage, especially from the *Gazette*. For example, on September 27, Palin appeared in 4 negative stories from the *Gazette* and only 1 from the *Star*. The *Star*'s negative article on this day focused on Palin's dipping poll numbers as well as her lack of media interviews. The *Gazette*, on the other hand, not only covered her lack of media interviews, but her poor performance on those interviews, her abuse of power/firing scandal, and opinion pieces denouncing her qualifications to be president.

For McCain, November 4 – Election Day, no less – revealed the largest discrepancy in negative tone coverage, with 4 negative stories from the *Gazette* and none from the *Star*. All 4 of the *Gazette*'s negative McCain stories focused on his low poll numbers and the unlikelihood of a Republican victory. The *Star*, on the other hand, used its Election Day coverage more neutrally, focusing on McCain's recent Indiana visit, his qualifications to be president and recent poll numbers showing the state's race in a dead heat.

Overall, McCain's lagging poll numbers was not the largest contributor to his negative coverage. When examining the Republican candidate's negative stories in both

publications, campaign factor articles were the most dominant. Of McCain's 61 negative articles in the *Star*, 84% dealt with campaign factors, followed by personal quality stories (61%). Of the *Gazette's* 74 negative McCain articles, 82% focused on campaign factors and 57% on stance stories. Horse race articles contributed to the least number of negative McCain stories in both the *Star* (39%) and the *Gazette* (35%).

These findings fall in line with earlier studies that observed more negative stories directed toward Republican candidates than Democratic candidates (Benoit et al, 2005; Weatherly et al, 2007), as well as the media's preference for the negative (Patterson, 2002). The "2008 State of the Media" report found also similar findings when examining overall 2008 election coverage. "The media coverage of the race for president has not so much cast Barack Obama in a favorable light as it has portrayed John McCain in a substantially negative one."

This proliferation of negative coverage did not seem to affect voter behavior, however. As previously mentioned, a disproportionately higher amount of negative articles geared toward the Republican candidates was found in the *Gazette*, which serves Republican strong-hold Allen County. The *Star*, on the other hand, serves Democratic leaning Marion County and offered significantly more negative Obama stories than the *Gazette* (42 and 27, respectively). In other words, readers in Allen County were exposed to more negative McCain/Palin stories while readers in Marion County saw more negative Obama stories; yet more Allen County residents voted for McCain, while more Marion County residents voted for Obama. (It should also be noted that the *Gazette* endorsed Obama in its editorial pages, while the *Star* declined to endorse either candidate.)

While the study is not determining a direct correlation between newspaper readership and voting behavior, the results do call into question the second-level agenda setting and framing theories as they pertain to local newspaper influence. Unlike in previous studies (Graber 1998; Golan & Wanta, 2001; Coleman & Banning, 2006; Kim & McCombs, 2007), a proliferation of negative stories did not necessarily yield negative perceptions in a voter's mind; at least, not to the extent to where it would influence voting behavior. In other words, citizens might have a negative perception about a candidate and yet still vote for him. Future studies might explore this idea further.

CHAPTER 8

LIMITATIONS

This study examined election coverage in local newspapers and its possible impact on voting behavior. However, it should be noted that the typical newspaper reader does not reflect the general voting population. According to the Scarborough Research Center, print news consumers tend to be older (over age 65), more educated (at least some post-graduate work) and white. Therefore, generalizations made about voting behavior through newspaper coverage might be skewed.

Other news media, such as television or the internet, may also play a stronger role in influencing voters. According to the 2009 State of the Media Report, solid majorities find local and cable television broadcasts are mostly or somewhat believable. During this election cycle, significantly more individuals turned to the internet as a source of news, which will be discussed further in the next section. A shift in media consumption away from newspapers might be placing greater agenda setting power on other news media.

As earlier scholars (Entman, 1993; Ross, 1992) have pointed out, other factors beside the media may be at play when determining voting behavior. These factors can include anything from socio-economics and upbringing to the influence of one's peers. As such, the diminishing number of manufacturing jobs, Obama's local affiliation as well as overall dissatisfaction with the Republican Party could have contributed to Indiana's historic presidential shift.

CHAPTER 9

FUTURE RESEARCH

The rise in the internet as a legitimate source of news might also play a greater role in shaping political opinion and voting behavior. According to the Pew Research Center, “more than a third of Americans said they got most of their campaign news from the Internet in 2008 — triple the percentage from previous presidential election year.” Young voters helped to fuel this growth, as “nearly three times as many people ages 18 to 29 cited the Internet (49%) as their main campaign news platform as mentioned newspapers (17%).”

As other studies have pointed out (Jo, 2005; Anderson, 2007; Just et al., 1999), while newspapers remain for now the best source of in-depth news coverage, the power of the internet cannot be understated. Future studies on election coverage should examine online election coverage – its usage, accuracy as well as potential impact on voting behavior.

Future studies should also explore how cost-cutting measures are affecting election coverage. Are there less original stories, such as investigative and local opinion stories? Will wire stories and campaign tactic coverage – that are inexpensive to acquire – continue to rise? In short, will a smaller, profit-minded newsroom be better able to inform voters before Election Day? The 2008 State of the Media report asserts that quality, substantive stories are “diminishing as the press suffers cutbacks in resources. To that extent, the agenda-setting influence of the media may be diminishing.” The business model of newspapers during the next presidential election in 2012 will no doubt be very different than the one in 2008; further analysis and discussion will determine if these changes have been for the better.

CHAPTER 10

CONCLUSION

In-depth analysis of presidential newspaper coverage is nothing new to academic study. For more than 40 years, countless scholars have examined how the theories of agenda setting, second-level agenda setting and framing influence voting behavior. As long as democracy thrives in this country, such studies must continue. All media, especially newspapers, must be willing to evaluate its coverage of elections and how that coverage influences voters. Were certain stories left out? Did one candidate receive more, better coverage than his/her opponent? Most importantly, did the media fulfill its role in effectively informing citizens about their candidates?

The results of this study suggest that the role of local newspapers in this critical democratic process may be waning. The observed negative coverage simply did not turn voters away from particular candidates. Furthermore, the fact that two local newspapers can offer very similar coverage, yet yield different voting preferences illustrates a lack of influence over media consumers. In other words, while Indiana experienced a historic voter shift in the 2008 presidential election, the influence for this shift did not likely come from its two largest newspapers.

The uncertain, evolving nature of the current newsroom business model is no doubt taking its toll on the quality and breadth of stories newspapers are able to offer. However, whatever form or business model the media may take in the future, one thing is for certain: all media outlets – whether it be the internet or television, radio or newspapers - must offer

their audience quality, unique coverage in order to compete and stay viable. Regardless if the media succeeds in telling consumers how or what to think, the media's vital democratic role of informing citizens must remain its top priority.

APPENDIX

Code Guide

2008 Presidential Newspaper Coverage

Question 1

List the title of the newspaper article. Subtitle need not be included.

Question 2

List the date the article appeared.

Question 3

Select which newspaper – the *Indianapolis Star* or the *Fort Wayne Journal Gazette* – in which the article appeared.

Question 4

Choose the source of the story. Was the story taken from a wire service, such as the Associated Press or another major newspaper (e.g. *Washington Post*), or was the story written by a local reporter with the respective newspaper (*Indianapolis Star* or the *Fort Wayne Journal Gazette*)? The researcher will note the author and his/her affiliation at the very beginning/ending of each article and code accordingly.

Question 5

Indicate the nature of the story: news or opinion. A news story will be defined as one that relays specific, undeniable facts about an event, circumstance, individual, etc. An opinion piece will be defined as an article that is written in the first person and expresses a view or judgment that may be open for dispute. Opinion stories may also be labeled as “Analysis” or “Opinion”.

Question 6

The research will count the number of times each candidate is mentioned in the article. Only references to the candidates’ proper name – such as “Barack Obama”, “Barack”, “Obama”, “John McCain”, “John”, “McCain”, “Sarah Palin”, “Sarah”, “Palin”, “Joe Biden”, “Joe”, “Biden” – will be counted. Phrases such as “Republican candidate”, “senator”, or “I” (in reference to one of the candidates) will **NOT** count.

Additionally, mentions of the candidates’ spouses – Cindy McCain, Michelle Obama, Todd Palin, Jill Biden – and/or their children by their proper names **WILL** count toward their perspective spouse/parent. For example, if Michelle Obama is mentioned 5 times in a particular article, the count for “Obama” will be marked as 5. If Sarah Palin’s daughter – Bristol - is mentioned 7 times in an article, the count for “Palin” as 7.

If a candidate does not appear in the article, then their section will be marked as 0.

Question 7

Based on the count from Question 6, the researcher will select the candidate who received the most mentions in the article. If two candidates were tied for the MOST mentions, the researcher will mark “Tie” and list the candidates in the space provided.

Question 8

Determine the article length by counting the number of lines in the actual story. The articles’ title, subtitle, captions, bylines or sidebar quotes will **NOT** count. Section headers and/or dividers in lengthy articles, as well as the city in which the story takes place **WILL** count. After tallying the lines, the researcher will mark the final number in the space provided.

Question 9

Select the topics covered in each news story, as they pertain to each candidate. Topics will be counted when an explicit statement – not an inference – is made about a candidate. The topic coverage will be broken down into four categories and defined as follows:

1. **Personal qualities**, referring to:

candidate’s personality	professional/personal awards
personal background	professional experience
qualifications	family, pride in family
personal/professional ties	scandals
leadership	competence
credibility	age
morality	caring about people
communication skills/gestures	being a non-politician
personal style	roots, and/or ethnic background
appearance/clothing	tangible possessions
temperament	personal finances property
threats made against candidate	judgment

2. **Horse race strategy**, or mentions of a candidate’s:

poll numbers	expectations, chances or strategies for winning
why a candidate is winning/losing	the political advantages of winning/losing
the polling empirical data	media estimates
exit polls	pre-election day polls
state electoral votes	“carrying” a state
opinion polls	approval ratings

3. **Campaign factors**:

finances,	candidate’s campaign staff
campaign strategies/message	how the campaign is operating in general
changes campaign staff	fundraising events and rallies
staff interactions with the media	internal/external campaign strife
volunteer enthusiasm	volunteer efforts
campaign stops	grassroots events/efforts
	rally events

debate logistics/preparation
voter fraud
members
clenching the nomination
advertising spending
voter outreach
conventions

voter turnout/participation
selection of running mate/possible cabinet
candidate's message
opening/closing offices
mobilizing the base
endorsements

4. **Candidate's position on issues:** substantive comments referring to a candidate and a major issues, such as the economy, foreign policy, and social issues. References to pork barrel projects, senate voting record and earmarks will also count toward this category.

The coder will be charged with marking **ANY MENTION** of the above topics for both candidates and their running mates on the coding sheet. For example, if a story mentions John McCain's war background along with Joe Biden's stance on foreign policy, then an "X" will be placed next to "personal qualities" under "**McCain**" and another "X" will be placed next to "candidate's stance on issues" under "**Biden**". If a candidate is not mentioned in an article, then the option "Candidate not in article" will be selected.

While these categories are mutually exclusive, it is feasible that a single article will cover more than one topic. Therefore, any mention of these categories will be coded, and a given story may be counted in more than one category. For example, shortly after receiving the republican vice-presidential nomination, Sarah Palin announced that her teenage daughter was pregnant and that she was keeping the baby in accordance to her faith. In this situation, an article could be labeled both "personal qualities", as it mentions her family, and "candidate's stance on issues", because it discusses her pro-life position. Similarly, when Hillary Clinton was running for the democratic nomination, several stories discussed the state of her campaign, as her finances were running low and her poll numbers were suffering. In this case, the story would be labeled both "campaign factors", due to the reference of her campaign's finances, as well as "horse race strategy", because it mentions her poll numbers.

Question 10

Finally, the researcher will code the coverage tone of each candidate using a 3-point scale: positive (1), neutral or unclear (2), and negative (3). While previous studies have evaluated news articles sentence by sentence, this study will focus on the overall tone of each candidate mentioned in the article.

Due to the subjective nature of tone coding, previous studies offer some insight. Farnsworth and Lichter (2005) coded news stories as positive or negative "if they conveyed an unambiguous assessment or judgment about an individual, an institution, or an action." (Farnsworth & Lichter, R. 2005, p. 106). Ross (1992) judged coverage based on how the

candidate and the candidate's campaign would perceive them. (Ross, 1992, p. 95) Just et al. (1999) offered more precise definitions for tone coding. In their research, positive stories "expressed vitality, optimism or excitement" while negative messages "were pessimistic and contained jaded perspectives or portrayed self-interested motivations." (Just et al, 1999, p. 28)

Coders in this study will use these previous findings to help guide the analysis. More specifically, a coder will mark a story as:

- **Positive** if a candidate is portrayed in a mostly positive manner. Verbs directed toward a candidate that indicate a positive tone may include, but not limited to: agrees, calls for action, hopes, praises, proposes, reassures, recommends, uses humor, supports, thanks, wins. Articles that include both positive and neutral statements will count as positive.
- **Neutral or unclear** if a candidate is portrayed in a mostly neutral manner, in an equally positive and negative manner, or if the overall tone is in any way unclear. Verbs directed toward a candidate that may indicate neutral coverage include: addresses, analyzes, describes, introduces, paraphrases, predicts, quotes, speaks, states, motions.
- **Negative** if a candidate is portrayed in a mostly negative manner. Verbs directed toward a candidate that may indicate a negative tone may include, but not limited to: attacks, criticizes, denies, disagrees, expresses contempt, expresses frustration, loses, misspeaks, threatens. Articles that include both negative and neutral statements will count as negative.

If a candidate is not mentioned in an article, then the option "Candidate not in article" will be selected.

Coding Sheet
2008 Presidential Newspaper Coverage

1. Name of article _____
2. Date article appeared: _____
3. In which newspaper did the story appear? (Mark one)
 Indianapolis Star (1)
 Fort Wayne Journal Gazette (2)
4. What is the source of the story? (Mark one)
 Wire story: AP, Rueters, another newspaper, etc.(1)
 Local reporter: Indianapolis Star or Fort Wayne Journal Gazette (2)
5. Was the story a news or opinion article?
 News (1)
 Opinion (2)
6. How many times were the candidates mentioned in the article?
 McCain Obama
 Palin Biden
7. Based on Question 6, which presidential candidate was mentioned the most? (Mark one)
 McCain (1)
 Obama (2)
 Palin (3)
 Biden (4)
 Tie between candidates _____ and _____ (5)
8. What was the line count of the story? _____
9. What topic was covered in the story, as they pertain to each candidate? (Mark all that apply)

McCain <input type="checkbox"/> Personal qualities (1) <input type="checkbox"/> Horse race strategy (2) <input type="checkbox"/> Campaign factors (3) <input type="checkbox"/> Candidate's stance on issues (4) <input type="checkbox"/> Candidate not in article (5)	Obama <input type="checkbox"/> Personal qualities (1) <input type="checkbox"/> Horse race strategy (2) <input type="checkbox"/> Campaign factors (3) <input type="checkbox"/> Candidate's stance on issues (4) <input type="checkbox"/> Candidate not in article (5)
Palin <input type="checkbox"/> Personal qualities (1)	Biden <input type="checkbox"/> Personal qualities (1)

- _____ Horse race strategy (2)
- _____ Campaign factors (3)
- _____ Candidate's stance on issues (4)
- _____ Candidate not in article (5)

- _____ Horse race strategy (2)
- _____ Campaign factors (3)
- _____ Candidate's stance on issues (4)
- _____ Candidate not in article (5)

10. What was the overall coverage tone of each candidate? (Mark one for each candidate)

McCain

- _____ Positive (1)
- _____ Neutral or unclear (2)
- _____ Negative (3)
- _____ Candidate not in article (4)

Obama

- _____ Positive (1)
- _____ Neutral or unclear (2)
- _____ Negative (3)
- _____ Candidate not in article (4)

Palin

- _____ Positive (1)
- _____ Neutral or unclear (2)
- _____ Negative (3)
- _____ Candidate not in article (4)

Biden

- _____ Positive (1)
- _____ Neutral or unclear (2)
- _____ Negative (3)
- _____ Candidate not in article (4)

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