

ONLINE MEDIA AS GATEKEEPERS IN THE 2016 PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE

Yizhu Wang

Prof. Barbara Cochran, Project Supervisor

ANALYSIS

Spending the semester in Washington D.C., I was surrounded by political news, especially about the presidential election. Candidates are being exposed in media through debates, campaigns and interviews. Journalists play a significant role in vetting the qualifications of the candidates and assist voters in making decisions. Through this research, I want to look at what are the difference and similarities between digital media and the traditional newspaper.

My research subject is the third Republican presidential debate on CNBC. It attracted a lot of coverage because the candidates accused the CNBC moderators of asking disparaging questions and interrupting too often. Afterwards, the Republican National Committee suspended its cooperation with NBC Universal, the parent company of CNBC, for a future debate due to the “disservice” of the network.

Also, the rankings of candidates were complex at that time. Donald Trump stayed as a front runner with lots of questions; Jeb Bush’s support kept declining once he joined the race; Marco Rubio was catching up as a new political star; and Ben Carson was the number one candidate who received top ranking in a national poll. Media coverage focused on the candidates’ policy positions as well.

I conducted the exploratory study news coverage of the debate, to measure how it was presented in digital and traditional media. I used gatekeeping theory as the background

information of my analysis. Gatekeeping is a mechanism in mass media communication where journalists significantly influence the flow of information. I tried to figure out: Between coverage of traditional media (USA Today and New York Times) and online media (Slate and Politico), what are the differences and similarities in genres, discourses and styles?

I chose two traditional newspapers, USA Today and the New York Times, and two news websites that were born on the Internet, Slate and Politico. The four media outlets are dedicated to reporting the 2016 election including the CNBC debate, and represent a mixed political alignment. I collected 156 stories that are particularly about this debate from the four publications. Most of the stories were published between Oct. 26 and Nov. 3, a period that included Oct. 28, the date of the debate. I divided the stories into three categories based on the main framings: introductions about the debate regarding rules and how to watch it, candidates' performance during the debate and the dispute afterward between the Republican party and the television network.

There are three main issues in the media coverage of the presidential elections. First, gatekeeping bias exists in every step of news collection and is reflected in the stories reported (D'Alessio & Allen, 2000). Second, stories are more about the form of elections over the core values, known as "horserace journalism" (Broh, 1980). Third, digital technology provides more resources of information for journalists to process, including social media and visualization techniques. Digital technology is an important instrument, but also a challenge to journalists' power of gatekeeping and can impair the quality of coverage (Lawrence et al., 2013).

Literature Review

Background: The role of journalism in presidential elections

Media play an important role in the presidential elections. The gatekeeping process involves the information flow and influences the audience's opinions on candidates. Before I compare the media of different kinds, I reviewed previous research to understand gatekeeping in political reporting. Politicians make effort to influence the media, and information delivered by the media influences audience's recognition of the candidates. This final point needs to be made clearer; it is vague now.

Candidates are the first gatekeepers to build up their images, by using certain rhetorical discourses to emphasize their positions and to distinguish the image as the future president (Spielvogel, 2005). These discourses exert strong influence on voters' decisions. In the 2004 presidential election, George W. Bush narrowly won reelection over John F. Kerry by highlighting the morality value of the war against Iraq.

Bush argued that waging war was about "good and evil," and defined the war as a part of the anti-terrorism action in the post-9/11 era. It fit with the conservative morality of the Republican, Bush. Kerry, on the other hand, applied a "progressive" worldview saying that the war would hurt innocent people in the Middle East and caring should be the priority.

As Bush's moral frame prevailed, Kerry's anti-war stance was judged as an evil tolerance of the terrorism (Spielvogel 2005).

Media also helped politicians' efforts on the issue of agenda setting. Bedingfield and Anshari (2014) explained that in the 2012 election, Barack Obama set the frame on Romney that he is a "vulture capitalist." Media exposure of this framing of Romney significantly enhanced the influence of this framing.

News coverage influence the audience's voting decisions by provoking emotional reactions from readers toward political figures (Namkoong, Fung & Scheufele, 2012). Through analysis of the audience's response to the media coverage, researchers found that negative emotions toward Kerry increased over time, and it was accompanied by an increase in positive emotions toward Bush (Namkoong, Fung & Scheufele, 2012). As long as the news content makes voters feel angry or afraid of one candidate, voters tend to favor the opponent.

However, this can be misleading. Media frame the candidates based on the existing stereotype of an issue. But this distorts the reality because candidates tend to be unique and may not be able to represent the situation generalized from stereotype (Sisco & Lucas, 2015).

An example is the feminism framing in the 2008 presidential election. Feminism was in the spotlight because two female candidates, Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin, were featured in the Democratic and Republican contests, respectively. When talking about Barack Obama's attitude toward feminism, media built up a positive image based on the fact that Obama has a competent wife and was raised by a single mother. But in fact, his background does not necessarily make Obama in favor of feminism. The authors draw a conclusion that news coverage oversimplified feminism, made the concept of feminism fractured because these "nontraditional" candidates are not representative enough to reflect the current situation in feminism (Sisco & Lucas, 2015).

Graber (1987) analyzed broadcasting news of the 1984 presidential election, and found that good and bad news changed the public's political thinking. Previous research considered that the reelection of President Reagan was partly because the good news on television illustrating his success, and the meaning delivered by the good news and bad news is actually identical. Every

time Reagan showed up on television, no matter whether the news about him was good or bad, he received a favorable public impression.

Gatekeeping theory

First put forward in sociology, gatekeeping in journalism referred to the role of journalists performed as information processors in the chain of communications. Wire editors selected or rejected stories as part of daily routines (White, 1957).

As gatekeeping evolved, researchers extended the focus of the theory to the entire information transmission process. For example, as media construct the social reality, not only when editors pick up wire stories, but also all points where journalists make decisions on story development to writing (Shoemaker et al., 2001).

The gatekeeper delivers information in three ways: perceiving a role as an observer, a participant or a catalyst (Cohen, 1963). As observers, journalists take a neutral stand in producing foreign policy news. If official policy makers utilize the press to deliver messages, the press is regarded as a participant. If it is the public who uses the press to satisfy its interests in politics, the press is the catalyst in the process of political policy development.

Five factors in the gatekeeping process influence the information transmission hierarchy. They are a) individuals, b) routines of communication work, c) organizational characteristics, d) social institutions, e) and the social system (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Shoemaker and Reese (1996) found that the newsworthiness depends more on editors' routine assessments over individual staff writers, but Relly, Zanger and Fahmy (2015) argued that individual journalist's attitudes and values have the most influence, and that organizational characteristics of the media hardly influence individuals' attitudes in reporting.

The five factors sometimes help gatekeepers to comply with journalistic principles, while sometimes intervene not the best verb here the news judgment. In the media coverage of 2008 presidential elections, journalists used their gatekeeping influence to balance the reporting intentionally. Media exposure is not positively related to the endorsement of a newspaper of a certain candidate. On the contrary, editors tend to select op-ed pieces that are different from the newspaper's political stance (Butler & Schofield, 2010).

During the 2008 presidential elections, Butler and Schofield (2010) sent letters to editors presenting support of either Obama or John McCain, and then observed whether editors would publish the letter in the op-ed page of the newspaper. They found that among their samples of 100 newspapers, although 70 percent of the newspapers expressed endorsement on Obama, pro-McCain letters were more likely to get published than pro-Obama letters. Editors in this experiment did not take advantage of their gatekeeping power to strengthen the opinions of the newspaper, but used the practice to promote diverse points of view.

Ownership of the media constrained the *Washington Times* to keep neutral in the 1988 presidential campaign. *Washington Times* was biased in favor of the Republicans according to a content analysis of its headlines and stories (Kenney & Simpson, 1993). *Washington Times* was launched in 1982 to provide "conservative alternative voice," as a rivalry to the liberal-left *Washington Post*. The management philosophy influenced the reporting and writing patterns. However, researchers found that the *Washington Post* managed to keep neutral and well-rounded in the same case.

Critiques of traditional media: Gatekeeping bias in media coverage of elections

Gatekeeping bias is among the three types of media bias in coverage of the presidential elections since 1948, which means that journalists tend to select stories from one party or another

(D'Alessio & Allen, 2000). An example of this type of “selectivity” is the television news about the 1972 presidential election, when television networks emphasized major candidates and exclude the others in the election. Among the two finalists, television news set the tone for Richard Nixon, the GOP candidate, as the president but treated George McGovern in his role as the Democratic candidate (Hofstetter & Zukin, 1979). The other two are coverage bias, which is the amount of the media exposure, and statement bias, where writers interject their own opinions.

For print media, gatekeeping bias occurred both in news gathering and news writing, which are addressed as “selection bias” and “presentation bias,” respectively (Groeling, 2013). In gathering, the media have a tendency to go after the dramatic moments and cast the world with “villains, heroes, and plots” (Larson, 1974). Reporters are also criticized in heavily relying on those who are media-related professionals and public figures, namely the elite sources. Sources determine the framing of stories. In the 2008 vice presidential campaign, Democrats were surprised that Republicans nominated Palin for vice president and withdrew their attacks on her in fear of losing female voters. *ABC World News* only had two democratic sources who criticized Palin during that week. This is a strategic framing using elite sources (Entman, 2010).

In the news writing process, editorial policies in a news organization can effectively prevent bias. The *Washington Post* had a policy on attributing to male and female sources equally in courtesy titles, and this language planning solution reduced the gender differences in the articles and made the language of *the Washington Post* less sexist (Fasold, 1990).

Social identity of journalists is a significant factor in structural bias. Whether journalists perceive the story is an “in-group” or an “out-group” one influences their attitudes. Individual journalist’s social identity and judgment on whether “in-group” or not subconsciously affects the news decision (Cuillier, 2012). In hometown games, sports reporters of local newspapers showed

more favorable attitudes in their writing than reporters of The Associated Press, who targeted national audience (Reinardy, 2005).

In political reporting, structural bias is reflected as “political favoritism”. In the Republican presidential nomination campaigns in 2000, traditional media showed favoritism to John McCain, which influenced many Republican voters to support McCain (Barker & Lawrence, 2006).

Demographic factors of the reporters will also influence the reportage. Gender influences the reportage. In four presidential elections from 1994 to 2004, there were more male reporters involved than female reporters, but female reporters had a tougher tone when criticizing. Male reporters also preferred a masculine approach where they emphasized the competition against candidates (Grabe, Samson, Zelenkauskaitė & Yegiyan, 2011).

Gatekeeping in the digital era

In the 2008 presidential election, a Pew research showed that 40 percent of all Americans have gotten news about the campaign from the Internet, 7 percent higher than in the 2004 election. Online political videos and engagement via social networking were two emerging trends (Rainie & Smith, 2008), which reflects the diversification of information genres in coverage of presidential elections (Hussain, 2012). While the young voters, who are better at using technologies, tended to support Obama more than Clinton and the Republican McCain, online campaigns of Obama got the best effect.

While citizen bloggers occupied part of the gateway of gatekeeping, journalists can hardly control the traffic as the only gatekeeper (Hussain, 2012). Traditional journalists also ignored diversifying the presentation of information. However, campaign videos were welcomed by all types of blogs in Hussain’s research (2012), including journalism, political, entertainment

and lifestyle, which means readers showed more interest in directly hearing from the candidates. Functions on social media, for example, “Like” or “Friend” on Facebook, also make the audience feel closer to the candidates (Enda, 2011).

In the digital era, technologies changed the gatekeeping method as a process of information, communication and gradual elimination (Bro & Wallberg 2014). Digital devices and software help in selecting, rejecting or generating stories. The audience is able to join the communication more effectively, and new subjects like participatory journalism emerged. The management of news organizations also evolves, with social media, search engine companies and digital media joining the battle in the media market. Scholars discussed whether machines will replace journalists’ intelligence in the post-industrial journalism era (Anderson, Bell, & Shirky, 2012).

In terms of coverage of presidential elections, digital media doesn’t improve the gatekeeping process from the root (Landreville et al., 2015). Regarding to the platform of the stories, there is also research on the role of social media in framing the presidential election. Sivek (2012) found that in the 2012 presidential election, magazines promoted printing stories by publishing briefs of their articles on Twitter, which reinforced political mobilization and affected the longevity of their publications.

Reporters who used Twitter to report information in the 2012 Republican and Democratic conventions were less likely than traditional reporters to comply with the rules to strengthen the objectivity (Lawrence et al., 2013). Reporters who published information on Twitter also did not effectively use interactions on Twitter between reporters and readers, and maintained the one-way gatekeeping flows (Lawrence et al., 2013).

Analysis

I focused on a particular event in the campaign, the third Republican debate on CNBC. I used gatekeeping theory as background information to compare the difference and similarities between traditional media and digital media regarding coverage of this debate. Analysis was informed by research into gatekeeping bias.

In each category, I compared how the genre, discourse and style analyze are respectively reflected in the stories.

Category I: to inform readers of the hard information about the debate

This category covers informational content in which reporters introduced the focus and rules of the debate, so that readers would know what to expect, and also gave some basic information about how the debate would work.

There were four main topics that were covered by all four publications: lineups and principles of the debate, candidates' poll rankings, negotiations between the Republican party and the network, and the ratings for this debate.

USA Today

Although basic information about the debate, including rules and lineups, was covered by all four sample publications, USA Today's coverage was newsier, which means that reporters kept publishing stories as long as CNBC or the candidates announced something new.

USA Today elucidated CNBC's early decision on the format and principles very well. Reporter Donovan Slack published the first story about this debate as early as on Sept. 30. It was the earliest one among the four publications. The story explained the first round of decisions made by the network, including the threshold for candidates' participation of 2.5 percent in the polls, and the format of two debates for all eligible candidates, which was applauded by

Republican National Committee Chairman Reince Priebus. In a story 21 days later, another reporter introduced the topic of the debate (“Your Money, Your Vote”) and the participants who would attend the debate and who would not.

As in the other three publications, Trump made the headline by bargaining over the length of the debate and threatening to quit if CNBC insisted on three hours. The short story didn’t include original reporting, but quoted tweets from Trump and RNC chairman Priebus about the RNC’s negotiation with the network. It is an example of the use of social media to strengthen the story.

There was also a series of stories analyzing candidates’ standings in the polls. Reporters aggregated candidates’ recent coverage in media, and covered all front runners in a balanced manner. No single candidate dominated the coverage.

New York Times

The Times had a surprising feature to show what core people in Jeb Bush’s campaigns were doing. Last fall was a critical time period for Bush. Expected to be the front-runner, once he entered the race his poll numbers fell.

As in USA Today, the Times also introduced the rules of the debate and candidates’ standings in polls. Stories were not updated frequently, but information was well organized in a few long pieces. The first article published on the Times website in this category was one week before the actual debate. Reporter Alan Rappeport introduced lineups, time and place of the debate, and addressed candidates’ complaints about the length of the debate, with a brief update on their rankings in polls.

The Times was the only publication among the four to provide full transcripts along with complete video of the debate. It served as an archive, a benefit of the digital platform, on which

such long-form articles did not take up too much precious space as they would in the newspaper. Readers can also easily manage to search certain keywords, as well as highlight, copy and paste.

Slate

Slate's writers set the agenda beforehand and made Ben Carson and Trump the two main rivals. Carson hit the top in a national poll over Trump at that time. Readers had an incentive to get to know him better and the debate would provide an opportunity to do so. How Carson would perform thus became a focus that Slate writers recommended readers pay attention to. There was another story with lively video interpreting Trump's hand gestures. It was an interesting angle to explore his personality. In general, the Carson vs. Trump storyline was so dominant that other candidates were not covered sufficiently.

Politico

The format of stories under this category on the Politico website was more flexible. For example, there was a Q&A story about basic information like moderators, front-runners' status, time and location of the debate. It was shared 4,600 times on social media platforms. In another informational story, reporter Mike Allen showed up in front of the camera to talk about “*6 things to watch for in tonight's debate.*”

Politico reporters went deep into new rules about the debate. Reporter Kelsey Sutton reported that CNBC would hold live polls on Twitter during the debate, reflecting the audience's real-time opinions on TV.

Category II: to interpret candidates' speeches in the debate.

In this category, reporters recorded candidates' performance in the debate, checked the facts and explained the stance of candidates on policy issues. There is an overlap between

Category II and Category III, which especially discussed the conflict between Republicans and CNBC, but these articles in Category II are all about what happened on the stage.

USA Today

There are six stories from USA Today falling into this category. Two of them are memorable quotes of candidates. Two stories described the conflicts between candidates and moderators on the stage. The other two focused on the policies discussed in the debate.

Four candidates were featured in the headlines: Jeb Bush, Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio and John Kasich. USA Today did not give any special attention to Donald Trump in terms of candidates' performance on the stage, although there were many dramatic moments involving him. Trump just appeared in some collections of highlights together with all other candidates. If readers only saw stories from USA Today, they would not realize that Trump was standing at the center of the stage at that night.

One main issue of this particular debate is that the moderators and host network became a target of the candidates. When describing the battle on the stage, more stories took a stance which favored the Republicans and there was no opportunity for CNBC to respond or explain. Candidates' and moderators' relationship was naturally unbalanced during the debate, because a debate is supposed to be a platform for candidates to have conversations. But it does not mean that moderators could not defend themselves when being criticized. The loopholes of the rules created a dilemma to moderators: when they tried to stick to the rules, stopped someone and allocated the time to others, which was designed to be fair, they were recognized as interrupting.

The reporter wrote, *“Twice, CNBC moderator Carl Quintanilla held up his note card reminding Cruz he was using all his time, and that he had asked a legitimate economic question.”*

Also, candidates are naturally the focus in the debate over moderators. When reporters wrote about candidates, they were writing about their criticisms of CNBC.

For example, in one article, USA Today explained how Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio and Chris Christie expressed their frustration that moderators' questions were not substantive and unfair to Republicans. It was a recap of the debate so there were no external sources. The only voice came from someone who did not attend the debate was from a letter from Republican National Committee. The letter praised candidates' reaction in the debate and attacked CNBC on the confrontations as unprofessional. Emotional words in the letter include "*extremely disappointing*", "*did a disservice to their network*", "*deeply unfortunate*", and "*CNBC should be ashamed.*"

USA Today also had critiques of candidates' policy positions. The policy-related highlights that USA Today picked up include government regulation, tax plans, and whether candidates were part of "the establishment" of the party.

In general, USA Today's coverage of candidates' performance on the stage shed more light on candidates' complaints against CNBC moderators, but failed to balance that with the CNBC moderators' explanation or responses. Though several candidates were enraged about them, it did not necessarily mean that they asked wrong questions. Because of the unbalanced chances to voice between CNBC and Republicans, bias was delivered that CNBC did not perform well in organizing questions, debate rules and thus enraged candidates.

Regarding the style, USA Today inserted photos, videos and GIFs in the articles. These visual elements featured special moments during the debate. There are compelling captions on GIFs, which are quotes from candidates in the debate. The quotes picked up and made into GIFs are mostly about candidates' complaints of about CNBC, like Ted Cruz's "The questions that

have been asked thus far in this debate illustrate why the American people don't trust the media", which appeared twice in two articles. There are also interesting quotes like Bush's "You find me a Democrat willing to cut spending \$10 ... I'll give them a warm kiss", and Trump's "I trust people too much."

There are video montages with a few articles that summarized the debate. Videos featured the dynamic on the stage including conflicts between moderators and candidates and jests aimed at the Democrats and each other.

New York Times

There are 11 news stories from Oct. 27 to Nov. 3 describing the debate specifically. Republican or G.O.P. are most frequently used in headlines referring to candidates, and only two stories among the 13 put candidates' names in the headline, mentioning Cruz, Trump and Carson.

Compared to coverage from USA Today, there are more critiques of policies and topics are more varied, including tax reform, climate change and candidates' profiles.

Because this debate emphasized economics and finance issues, tax reform is a focus not only on the stage but also in the Times' coverage. Two stories discussed tax cuts, and both of them are collected in the Upshot section, which features analysis in texts and graphics based on data and historical background. One story fact-checked whether candidates' exchanges with moderators during the debate are misleading or incorrect. The other story explained how these tax plans are "Republican": big tax cuts for middle class, plus risking the loss of revenue. The author compared the Republican style of tax plans with Mitt Romney's tax proposal when he ran for president in 2012 - more risk of losing revenue, with fewer promises to offset the loss. The

analysis is based on historical facts, specific quotes and numbers that are mentioned in the debate or other occasions.

In terms of dynamic on the stage, the conflicts between moderators and candidates are only a sidelight, which is mentioned somewhere in the overview of the debate, and the main focus is the battle between candidates. The overview story not only summarizes the signature moments of every candidate, but also explains their conversations flowed, including how they compared themselves to each other and how they argued. No stories focus on the conflicts between CNBC moderators and candidates, and there is only one paragraph with a general assessment of the hosts - they lost control over the debate.

Additionally, the Times collects voices from nonparticipants in the debates. Reporters interviewed voters' and other Republicans, which provided an envision on which candidates would lead or fail the Iowa caucus based on their performance so far. This story analyzed the situation of the main candidates, and featured the top two at that point – Trump and Carson. Sources include a lawyer, a businessman, an executive in university, and other politicians. By interviewing both the supporters and opponents of different candidates, the Times gave a conclusion that the top two “underwhelmed Iowa Republicans in debate”. It is informative but not misleading because the projection was based on interviews and substantive analysis.

In general, coverage of the Times of candidates' performance on the stage emphasized policies and provided detailed analysis of their plans, which is more systematical and profound. Furthermore, the profound analysis did not leave space for bias. There is an insight in the stories pointing to predict the person selected as the final nominee, by weighing who has gained or lost points in elucidating policy proposals and leaving favorable impressions.

Regarding the style, interactive graphics, photos and videos are inserted in the stories.

Surprisingly, Ted Cruz is the only candidate who gets a feature story about his debate strategies. There is [a one-minute video](#) named “How to debate like Senator Ted Cruz”. It is originally produced by the Times for this specific debate. It lists three characteristics of his performance in the debate, illustrated by fragments from the debate video. The text story explains the origin of this style, including his previous experiences of debates, his overall campaign strategies and how he spent money on making headlines.

Illustrations are also informative and support the argument in the story. In [a story](#), when the author said that Bush’s campaign manager was angry with CNBC for the unfair allocation of speaking time, there is a clear-cut illustration showing how long each of the candidates spoke in the debate. Bush spoke the second longest in the first two debates and was allocated the least time this time.

Also, [an interactive graphic](#) is linked to multiple stories. It is a real-time data dashboard integrating rankings of the polls, endorsements and money raised.

Slate

There are 15 articles in Slate in this category from Oct. 28 to Nov. 3. Slate did not emphasize the conflict between moderators and debaters on the stage as USA Today did, but focused on the battle between Republicans. There is a clear framing that Marco Rubio won this debate while Jeb Bush lost this one.

It was a difficult time period for Bush around the third debate. He was expected to be one of the most electable candidates in early 2015 after candidates announced their campaigns one after another. In mid-October, a few weeks before this debate, campaign finance data showed that Bush had burned through 86 percent of the money he has raised so far, which was \$11.5 million, [according to Washington Post](#). But his support kept declining. In the CNBC debate,

Bush was assigned the least amount of time to speak, which infuriated his campaign manager. In spite of various issues, his performance in the CNBC debate definitely failed to win him support among voters. In a survey released on Nov. 4 by Quinnipiac University, Bush's support plummeted to low single digits, according to Politico. Among his competitors, Trump continued to make headlines by his troubles with CNBC moderators, and Carson was rising as the most "honest and trustworthy" one, according to the Quinnipiac survey.

With this background, it makes sense why Slate focused on Jeb Bush's performance in this debate. But as one of Slate's headline suggested, "the 'Jeb Bush Is Doomed' narrative Is dooming Jeb Bush." Slate is among those who consolidated this narrative.

Bush was featured in the headlines of four articles out of 17, and all four articles delivered negative messages about him. One article simply described a moment where Rubio censured Bush's criticism to him was just playing politics without reasonable arguments, which won audience's applause. This scene appeared many times in other articles, one of which has a more direct headline – "Jeb died on that stage".

Winning and losing is the fundamental framing in Slate's campaign coverage. The slogan of Slate's "Politics" section is "who's winning, who's losing, and why." The coverage of the CNBC debate reflected its spirit very well, but here are some problems. First, "who's winning and who's losing" is basically the principle to select who and what to write about in Slate's coverage. This principle is subjective and has a strong editorial judgment. It is where selection bias exists. Second, those dramatic moments like in a horse race are not always worth further discussion. Bush and Rubio were just playing politics by disparaging each other and praising themselves.

Also, such a specific goal of explaining winners and losers created redundancy among articles. In seven articles out of 15 which recapped the debate or explained why Rubio won or why Bush lost, the authors mentioned or described the scenario where Bush was accused of playing politics.

In terms of the conflict between CNBC moderators and candidates, Slate made a fair description by recording the back and forth between them. In an article, the author first summarized what moderators target with each question, and then reported how candidates shifted the focus to attack moderators “in response”.

“Trump and Carson have proposed massive tax cuts that nonpartisan and even conservative analysts have said would raise the deficit by trillions of dollars; Cruz has famously pushed the U.S. to the brink of defaulting on its debt, which almost everyone—including the leaders of his own Republican Party—agrees would be a catastrophe. CNBC also asked Marco Rubio a pointed question about his frequent, well-documented absences from the Senate, asked Carly Fiorina about her widely criticized performance as CEO of Hewlett-Packard, and pressed Jeb Bush on his campaign's poor poll numbers.”

In the above paragraph, we can see some implications. First, moderators’ harsh questions were not groundless. The issues in their tax plans and economics policies that CNBC addressed have already created the broad concerns, even inside the Republican party. Therefore, moderators did not intend to embarrass candidates, and it could have been a solid discussion on the federal budget and tax cuts. But Rubio and Cruz shifted the agenda to media bias, which the audience at the debate bought.

It is a typical “Slate Pitch”, where reporters encourage readers to think in an alternate way and be open to diverse opinions (Goldenberg, 2014). While the audience applauded Cruz for

criticizing the media agenda, the author pointed out that candidates were actually avoiding answering harsh questions.

Overall, there is a predominate framing pattern of candidates' performance on the stage—Rubio won and Bush lost.

Regarding the style, Slate inserted various multimedia elements in stories, including videos, photos, interactive charts and Tweets. The length of articles varies a lot. There is one article which is quite short and just described the argument between Rubio and Bush, illustrated by the video clip. Slate also produced a 90-second video recapping the debate, with a text explanation of 99 words. Video clips were usually directly cut from the debate, without additional reporting or editings.

According to the listed time of publication, seven articles out of 15 were published in the debate night. It is a productive team but there were tiny mistakes in three articles, which were marked by corrections, including misspelling Tennessee and a person's first name, and misstating the date of the debate. These mistakes are tiny but could have been easily avoided. It is a problem with quick updates.

In four long stories, there are text boxes inserted to emphasize the core opinions of the story. The three featured quotes summarized the basic framing of Slate's coverage on the debate: determining the winner and loser: "*Rubio showed he could go toe-to-toe,*" "*Any wind Bush had—any fire or spirit—was gone,*" defending the press: "*Presented with facts and figures that didn't fit their story, the leading Republican candidates accused the moderators of malice and deceit,*" and a general analysis of the position of Republicans: "*The Republican Party has moved backward in its relationship with Latino Americans.*"

Politico

Politico had the largest number of articles among the four publications, 38 articles between Oct. 28 and Nov. 3. The stories were published mainly on the night of the debate. Politico watched closely candidates' conversations on stage, as well as on other occasions like on Twitter. Opposite to the New York Times' style with comprehensive background information, Politico's stories usually focus on a single real-time moment on the stage, which could be a conflict between candidates, or discussions under a single issue or a single question. There is a strong sense of live news in Politico's stories about candidates' performances in the debate.

Politico's coverage had main framings like what other gatekeepers established, including the pattern of Bush losing and Rubio winning that Slate featured, and the conflicts between moderators and candidates that USA Today featured. In addition, Politico also made Trump the star in the debate.

Trump took up a lot of space in Politico's coverage. None of the other three publications highlighted Trump. Why did he receive so much attention from Politico's reporters?

During the debate, one of Trump's signature moments was when he blasted CNBC, which of course got an entry on Politico: Donald Trump boasts about limiting the debate 'so we can get the hell out of here'. It is a very short article of 161 words. The author described the back and forth between moderators and candidates – while candidates complained that they should have had more time to speak, they also thought that debate should be shorter. In this story, the author gave both sides a paragraph about their complaints, which keeps the balance.

However, although Fiorina, Trump and Carson were all mentioned in this article, Trump got the headline with his blunt quote in it. Carson and Trump issued a joint letter about the

debate format, but Trump became the only focus because of his quotable speeches. This is where gatekeeping bias appeared. For reporters, quotes made a candidate stand out.

Also, Politico framed a tension between Trump and Carson. The retired neurosurgeon was once considered a layman in the economy and foreign affairs. But his poll numbers peaked during last October and November. He once exceeded Trump become number one in a poll after the CNBC debate. In news about Republican polls, as Trump was always the front-tier candidate, he made headlines even if he was not the focus of the story. Trump was in the headline of a story where the reporter explained why Rubio won – Trump? Carson? Rubio Steals the Debate Show.

Even after the debate, Politico did not miss Trump's comments and interactions with reporters on Twitter. They even did a specific story on what Trump tweeted after the debate. In an online poll of MSNBC after the debate, Trump was voted as the person who could handle the economy best based on his performance in the CNBC debate. Without any surprise, he retweeted it and commented "very true, thanks!" In another tweet, Trump wrote "*Marco Rubio will not win.*" It is very clear to me that Politico's dominant news judgment on Trump is to report the eye-catching stuff that Trump said or did, no matter whether these opinions were reasonable and newsworthy. I cannot say the consequences of these stories, because I did not research on audience's reactions to these stories. But researchers have found in previous presidential elections that the more news coverage a candidate got, no matter positive or negative, the more favorable public impression he/she received (Graber, 1987).

Another article featured an interview of Trump with ABC after the debate, where Trump made some comments on his Republican colleagues and shot back against President Obama's comments – "And then it turns out they can't handle a bunch of CNBC moderators."

"I think that Ben just doesn't have the experience," Trump said.

“Jeb is not the man that’s gonna make it. He’s wasting his time, he’s wasting a lot of money. I say Rubio is highly overrated. I think there are some people that actually do have talent in the group,” Trump said.

“As far as President Obama saying what he said, he can’t handle the country. I mean, he’s doing a terrible job running the country,” Trump shot back.

Judgment on candidates is everywhere. Everyone wants to know their positions in this battle. That is why there are polls and debates all the way through the election. But these comments of Trump are personal, subjective, strategic and not fair. Trump made some eye-catching comments. He looked down on every other candidate. These sarcastic comments made him look different from his colleagues who behaved political correctly. But this personality is just what he is selling to the voters. It is not a meaningful piece of news for voters, because not being political correct does not mean that Trump is honest on other issues and qualified to be the president, though it can be a merit to someone.

This story was shared on social media more than 1,000 times, but I do not think that the popularity of this story made it successful because of its gatekeeping bias in two aspects. First, it is not newsworthy that Trump just said something negative about other candidates that others would not say, which was picked up by Politico out of all other candidates’ interviews. Second, it is unfair that only Trump was selected for his disparagement. If Politico does not mind helping a candidate disseminate his message, why did only Trump get exposed?

In general, Politico chased after controversial moments. They put Trump on their radar first, and gave Trump a priority in their news agenda.

There was a type of stories simply describing scenes in a way the same as what people could see on TV. Many of these entries were published during the debate, short and simple,

aiming at telling readers what was happening on the stage. For example, one article simply summarized candidates' answers to a question without additional reporting and commentary: what is your biggest weakness. This was indeed a highlighted moment on the stage, because it was the only question that everyone gave an answer to, and it reflected characteristics of candidates with a little humor or seriousness.

But this text piece did not deliver more information than the video clipping, which was inserted at the top of the story. It might be easier to read for users of mobile devices. But technically, it does not add value to the video clips, which seems redundant to me.

Category III: to assess the confrontation between candidates and CNBC

During and after the debate, candidates were clearly dissatisfied with CNBC moderators. Their complaints were mainly about the questions and rules of the debate. Moderators stuck to the rule that each candidate should have a firm 90-second time period to state their arguments, but there was no timer on the stage and candidates didn't know how much time they had used, so that moderators had to interrupt when time was up, even though they had not finished their arguments. In terms of the questions, criticism was more direct. Ted Cruz asked that "How about talking about the substantive issues? Nobody believes the moderator will vote in the Republican primary. It shouldn't be about tearing into each other."

Afterwards, the dispute drew attention from various parties. Republican National Committee chairman Reince Priebus issued a statement saying that "the performance by the CNBC moderators was extremely disappointing and did a disservice to their network, our candidates, and voters." The party then suspended its cooperation with NBC for another debate scheduled on Feb. 26. NBC spokesman Brian Steel responded, "People who want to be president of the United States should be able to answer tough questions." President Obama said that the

problem was about Republicans' capacity to communicate and negotiate. "Then it turns out they can't handle a bunch of CNBC moderators at the debate. Let me tell you, if you can't handle those guys, then I don't think the Chinese and the Russians are going to be too worried about you," Obama said.

The chaos on the stage and afterwards drew a lot of media coverage. I collected stories about the back and forth between CNBC and Republicans on the USA Today, the New York Times, Slate and Politico websites. I try to look at the differences and similarities in the focus and approach of the four publications, and whether the nature of the media as a traditional one or a digital one made a difference.

USA Today

There were six news stories from USA Today especially about the relationship between candidates and the network, which amounted to almost one third of the newspaper's coverage of this debate.

One story addressed how specifically Republican students were not happy with the CNBC moderators' questions. The reporter interviewed young campus Republicans who attended the debate Colorado University in Boulder, where the debate was hosted. All sources, in their 20s, was disappointed by CNBC moderators. They did not think the discussion was fair and healthy, and they thought that moderators called too much attention to themselves, which went against the mission of a presidential debate – to let candidates showcase their opinions so that the audience could know them better. The reporter also inserted a quote from Ted Cruz on the stage, in which he harshly criticized moderators' questions that they made the debate a "cage match" and instigated candidates to attack each other.

There was a visual element inserted in the article, which was a tweet from College Republicans. It was a live vote asking if you think CNBC moderators were fair in the debate, and 85 percent of 994 votes went to “No.” There was no balance at all in this story. CNBC became the only target to be held accountable for the unsmooth debate. Gatekeeping bias existed in this story due to the way the reporter selected sources.

But in general, this group of stories avoided gatekeeping bias.

USA Today provided context showing that the communication between the party and CNBC was not smooth from the very beginning. The first story of the relationship between CNBC and Republicans came out on Oct. 15. Donald Trump was featured because he allegedly was planning to boycott the debate together with Ben Carson if CNBC insisted to make it two hours long. In this story, reporters were fair by covering both sides. Republicans were not satisfied with the original plan and CNBC reacted to the complaints by adjusting the rules.

Although there was a story solely blaming CNBC, USA Today published a comedic op-ed in showing what candidates asked for too much as infants. It was a third-party audio program that was not a property of USA Today. In the brief introduction of the program, the reporter wrote in a humorous and editorial way to mock Republicans saying that “in the late-night comics' eyes, this makes the party look like a bunch of babies. Although, according to Larry Wilmore and his National Council for Babies, that comparison is an insult to infants.”

In terms of the visual elements, live quotes from Twitter drew a lot of attention. Some quotes were informational, linked to related documents, such as Reince Priebus' letter to NBC to suspend the partnership with debates in the future.

In the story about the communication between the party and CNBC, USA Today quoted three tweets from Trump simultaneously, which was very eye-catching, because Trump said that

the debate terms were “ridiculous”, Democrats’ debate was “boring”, and CNBC asked for longer time to “sell more commercials.” Quotes selected here were personal opinions from Trump. The reporter chose to put Trump in the center of the communication between the party and the network.

New York Times

Regarding the communication between CNBC and Republicans, there were 11 articles from the New York Times between Oct. 16 and Nov. 2 covering this issue. The main controversies that the Times addressed included early negotiation over the length of the debate, RNC chairman’s letter to CNBC and Obama’s response.

A letter to NBC News issued by the chairman of RNC, Reince Priebus, was a key and direct contention between RNC and CNBC after the debate. The coverage was fair because reporters considered the situation from both sides.

Reporters analyzed what went wrong on both sides. In a story, John Koblin and Ashley Parker reported why CNBC “lost.” They gave candidates, experts and CNBC the chance to speak. But on the other side, reporter Ashley Parker pointed out in a story that “*the action by the party leadership seemed designed in part to redirect Republican anger away from the national committee, which many believe has bungled the debate process.*” CNBC was not the only one to blame, according to the Times, and they held Priebus accountable. It is because he did not give each campaign enough room to leverage with the network by themselves. The story made clear that it was Priebus, not CNBC, who donors were not happy with: “*After the CNBC debate, Mr. Priebus raced to the spin room to criticize the network, but donors were already grumbling that one of the evening’s biggest losers was their party chairman.*” And also, Republicans customarily attack liberal media to raise money, according to the story.

The Times eliminated gatekeeping bias by fair and logical analysis. Reporters created space for conversations and let both sides have a voice. When they examined the problem, they checked both sides with solid evidence. The writing style was not sensational, and every judgment made by reporters addressed the sources.

The New York Times is also adjusting its reporting and writing style to meet the needs of digital readers. Its digital end was operated as a breaking news platform. In an article right after the debate, the reporter interviewed Priebus. The 130-word story only had a lead, two quotes and an ending paragraph. Among the four media, the Times was the first one that reported Priebus's disappointment on moderators and support on his candidates before he released the official letter to CNBC, which made them efficient gatekeepers.

The Times is flexible in styles and types of stories, and taking advantage of the convenience of the digital platform. In a recap story of the debate, reporter Alan Rappeport collected quotes on Twitter and blogs of various people on the Internet, and pulled these quotes together into a story explaining why Marco Rubio won and CNBC lost.

What made The Times stand out were stories that really added value by original interviews and angles. Reporters told stories from the perspective of insiders. When everybody learnt in the national news that RNC suspended a future debate with NBC due to their dissatisfaction with CNBC, reporter Ashley Parker contacted campaign managers and told people how they negotiated with networks. It was not only interesting but also informational. For example, Trump's campaign manager Corey Lewandowski said that they usually negotiated with the network directly, not through the party. It verified that Trump and his team did not tend to rely on the party. They made decisions by themselves and it reflected the character of the team led by Trump. It also reminded people of the situation before the CNBC debate, where Trump

and Carson complained that a three-hour debate in their original plan would be too long.

Background information made people understand how it worked, not merely what happened.

Another example is the story by Peter Baker on President Obama's comments on CNBC debate. He said at a Democratic National Committee event that if a candidate could not handle a CNBC moderator, they would not be able to deal with other tough foreign leaders like Russia president Vladimir Putin. It was a public occasion and the other three publications also did not miss president's remarks. But the Times was the only one that provided additional information that Obama was involved in the campaigns by visiting important fund raisers of Democrats.

Slate

There are no immediate stories from Slate about the CNBC moderators' performance. Slate writers didn't publish immediate stories, and had six concise and comprehensive stories.

In general, stories on Slate were well-organized, and did not just catch up every new piece of information to publish. Information in each article did not overlap. The six articles discussed why it was not a successful debate, what RNC's issues were, how RNC suspended partnership with NBC due to this debate, and what campaigns were doing to prevent their candidates from being uncomfortable again in another debate. Writers reduced gatekeeping bias by analyzing problems of the both sides in a calm, balanced and humorous tone.

In one story, Slate writer Helaine Olen analyzed how moderators failed, from their tones to questions. But Slate looked into the Republican side as well. In another story, Slate writer Jamelle Bouie interpreted moments where candidates managed to avoid answering the tough questions frankly, but took advantage of the anger on the stage. For example, moderators asked Carson about his endorsement of a private company making nutritional supplements. Though it

was a real issue for Carson to maintain his image of honesty, he still did not give a candid explanation to the public but made a detour by calling this question propaganda.

Impressively, reporter Ben Mathis-Lilley wrote a piece about tweets with hashtag “CNBCGOPDebate” scrolled at the bottom of the screen during the debate. With his keen observations, Mathis-Lilley found that though the network put on this novel feature, many tweets that showed up were about how people disliked CNBC moderators. A person pointed out in a tweet that the moderator said that Trump’s tax plan is unrealistic, but a CNBC commentator contradictorily said in a program that it’s great. The reporter, as acutely as the audience, captured the moment when this tweet was shown on the screen.

These tweets are hard evidence showing how CNBC moderators failed to lead the discussion and engage people from the perspective of audience. There were tons of complaints on Twitter, but Mathis-Lilley did not simply collect random tweets to show the audience’s responses, but found a string, which was ironic and interesting, to connect the tweets. I personally did not notice this scene by myself when I watched it. Some of the tweets did not gain lots of attention with very few retweets. The reporter add value by writing about what people may have ignored by his gatekeeping.

In the visual part, the writer inserted live tweets that he mentioned in the article. The story flows well with illustrations like tweets and external links. Through live tweets, readers could click any links or hashtags in it. They could also see how many times the tweet was liked or Retweeted.

Politico

There are 20 stories of Politico featuring the contention between CNBC and Republicans, faithfully recording each step in the development of the situation between the two sides.

Compared to the other three publications, Politico's dedication to reporting on politics in detail resulted in exhaustive coverage. Only Politico reported on how Trump performed in other programs of CNBC as a TV star. Hadas Gold, the reporter, drew the conclusion that "*CNBC is friendly turf for Trump*." Trump displayed his "softer side" as "a doting father and devoted family man." CNBC was also the network which picked the rerun of Trump's TV show "The Apprentice" and boosted his career in broadcasting. One of the moderators Becky Quick, was the co-host in "Trump Tuesdays" on its signature show "Squawk Box." Gold's intention was expressed clearly in the subhead: "*Moderators vow to be impartial, despite the network's past ties to 'The Apprentice' star*." It suggested that readers should keep an eye on whether the close connection between Trump and CNBC would lead to favoritism in the debate. That is a scrupulous gatekeeping monitor for public purpose.

Also, Gold did not just talk about the history. She also reported Trump's attitude towards CNBC about this specific debate and it was pretty straightforward: "*Donald Trump: CNBC debate will be 'unfair'*." The two stories from both sides eliminated the gatekeeping bias and showed the complete picture, and it had a news hook.

Some stories overlapped in content, which highlighted certain information. The same content was published in different stories. Under some circumstances, the overlap is a result of chasing after dramatic moments. For example, the moment when Ted Cruz said "this is not a cage game" was covered in three stories.

However, it is easy to tell if there is solid reporting. For example, reporters Hadas Gold and Kyle Cheney did a good job of avoiding bias by conducting well-rounded interviews. The full story not only included the two statements from RNC and NBC, but also explained the consequence of the suspension – the only Hispanic TV network involved in holding the debates

would have to quit along with NBC as its partnership with RNC suspended. In addition, the reporter touched on how RNC made the decision to suspend the debate by interviewing other leaders about their comments on the CNBC debate.

The design of the website encouraged readers to share stories on Facebook, Twitter and Google Plus. Stories were promoted in different platforms, which reflected the digital nature of Politico. Reporters sometimes curated their own stories for promotion, which created repetition.

For example, a story about the fact that the RNC had suspended its partnership with NBC was published at 1:04 p.m. on Oct. 30 by reporters Hadas Gold and Kyle Cheney. It included RNC's statement letter, NBC's response, interviews with a leader in RNC and spokesman of CNBC. It was a balanced and informative story. In addition, there was another story published by Hadas Gold as a brief of this story, where Gold introduced the statement letters of the two parties. The story started with "Breaking news this afternoon," and was published in another category at 2:52 p.m. It looked like a briefing of the main story to spread the word. Such strategies could bring in gatekeeping bias, because repetition makes certain information exposed more than others.

Another article proved the digital nature of the media with only three line:

"What the campaigns are saying:

A tippy-top official, from inside the hall, agrees with Twitter pans of CNBC: 'Too many interviewer interruptions.'"

It was published by Politico's chief White House correspondent Mike Allen during the debate at 8:46 p.m. It was immediate, real-time and informative. Although it was not a detailed news story, the reporter delivered this before RNC and media framed the debate as a failure of

CNBC afterwards. Most importantly, digital platform reduced the cost of time and efforts to publish such a piece news to a large extent.

Findings

I collected 156 stories on the four publications specifically about the CNBC debate, and then categorized them into three genres based on the purpose of the story. Stories in the first category were hard information about the debate. Stories in the second category assessed candidates' performance on the stage of the debate. Also, there were some stories reported the dispute between CNBC and Republican National Committee, which led to the suspension of a future debate.

In each category, stories on every publication had differences and commonalities, and the digitalization of contents helps and hurts. Here are my findings.

Genres

1. Digital platforms, especially referred to websites in this research, better served the public by enhancing the diversity of stories' genres, which confirmed Hussain's observation (2012) on the diversification of information.

The publications provided various ways for the audience to review the debate afterwards. All four publications produced video recaps aggregating the special moments during the debate, such as when Ted Cruz accused the moderators of disparaging candidates with their questions. They also inserted video clippings of the debate into certain stories. Video clips were used to illustrate the points made in the story, or replay the moment mentioned by the reporter. It shows their efforts in delivering information of different kinds to readers, and also combines the realism of video with the ability to provide context in print.

In addition, the New York Times also provided the full transcription of the debate in text on its website. Digital platforms like websites were significant for such types of sharing. Texts were searchable and easy to copy and paste. Readers were given more options to review the quotes within the context.

No matter whether the publication has the nature of digital media or not, multimedia skills have been commonly applied in producing contents. From the perspective of public service, these contents were more engaging and the combination of videos and texts was convenient for readers to gain information.

2. However, there were repetitions when reporters present stories in multimedia ways, which presented the same information too many times in different genres of stories.

It especially happened in the second category, and it was an issue for both digital and traditional media. There were certain scenes that were extremely highlighted in multimedia contents, mainly video clips and GIFs. There were some signature moments of candidates, for example, when Marco Rubio criticized that mainstream media favored Hillary Clinton in reporting, leading public opinions as her personal super PAC. Ted Cruz also expressed his complaints about moderators' questions. These two moments were not only described in many stories, but also featured in many multimedia contents.

Repetitive multimedia contents created both selection bias and presentation bias, and especially appeared in web stories on USA Today and Politico. On Politico, those moments were picked out, written into a story, and illustrated with the video clip when the candidate was actually saying that. On USA Today, these moments of disputations were also made into gifs with striking captions showing the quotes. For example, a moment when Rubio and Bush

attacked each other was mentioned in seven of the 15 stories on Slate in the category about candidates' performance in the debate. Rubio's quote was also made into a GIF on USA Today.

The problem was that these multimedia elements were usually lack of further discussions. The one-sided quotes were personal opinions and could be interpreted in different ways without the context.

3. Differences in genre observed in this study are not necessarily determined by the nature of the media, like digital or traditional media, but is depended on the digital strategies and reporting tenets of the publication.

Genres reflect "the way of acting." (Fairclough, 2003) In this research, the specific angle of genre is the digital strategy of the publications, including how they implemented multimedia skills in presenting information. As all four publications have sophisticated websites, and thus all of them face this risk.

Among the four publications sampled, both USA Today and Politico used many video clips to show candidates' performance on stage. The video clips captured the tensions between moderators and Cruz, Rubio and Bush, but all had issues of redundancy as these multimedia materials of tensions were used in many different stories, and explained again by texts.

Discourse

4. Compared to traditional media, presentation in digital media is more dramatic.

Basically, stories on the Times and USA Today are more comprehensive and well-rounded. The Times' stories emphasized candidates' policy positions, and USA Today did not shed more light on few certain character but covered everyone fairly.

Because Slate set out as an explicit purpose of its election coverage that reporters would declare winners and losers, the selection bias was very obvious. The core framing for this debate

was that Rubio won and Bush lost, and the discourse was explicit and assured, like “*Jeb died on that stage,*” or “*Jeb Bush Is Doomed.*” Reporters set up a conclusion first, and then looked for evidence to prove it.

These strong words were usually followed by dramatic moments, such as when Rubio won applause for saying that Bush was just playing politics with his attacks on Rubio. But first, Rubio was being honest about a political trick, but he was also one of those who played politics. We have seen how he played politics to attack Trump in the Fox debate this February. Second, such a frame resulted in redundancy in the overall coverage. This moment between Rubio and Bush was mentioned in seven of the 15 stories on Slate about candidates’ performance in the debate. Writers held a bias to strengthen the narrative that “Jeb Bush is doomed.”

For Politico, reporters focused on Trump too much, and took his dramatic speeches very seriously without providing context or outside voices. For example, Politico reported an interview of Trump with ABC after the debate, and quoted him:

“As far as President Obama saying what he said, he can’t handle the country. I mean, he’s doing a terrible job running the country,” Trump shot back.

He definitely could question Obama’s political competence as a president, but in this story there were no further discussions at all. Readers got this knowledge but did not know why - just because Trump said so.

5. Aggregating has become a norm, but journalists should find a balance between original reporting and aggregating.

All of the four publications produced excellent and solid feature stories with original reporting, but meanwhile, aggregating information online from Twitter or from interviews with other news outlets was very common.

Selectivity, which was particularly obvious in the third category about the dispute between the RNC and CNBC after the debate. USA Today lacked original reporting on the issue, and the main sources were public letters. RNC chairman Priebus used extreme words in this letter, including “*extremely disappointing*”, “*did a disservice to their network*”, “*deeply unfortunate*”, and “*CNBC should be ashamed.*” While NBC only had a short response, the coverage made CNBC look like the troublemaker.

By comparison, the Times dug deeper in the dispute, and managed to get information from other occasions, like a donors’ meeting with the party officials, where object of donors’ unhappiness was actually Priebus, not the network. The reporter also pointed out that Republicans were accustomed to attacking liberal media to raise money.

Aggregating is helpful in the era of Internet. However, reporters should be cautious of the information sent to them. In many cases, aggregating is not “gatekeeping,” but being guided by the information providers.

6. Among the four publications, chasing after dramatic moments was particularly a problem for Politico, while the New York Times was the best in explaining what happened backstage.

The New York Times did the most original reporting among the four publications. USA Today did many aggregating stories, but the sources were conventional - candidates, leaders in the party and the network. Also, USA Today reported most on the debate itself but did not reveal much information from behind the scenes.

For Politico, nine articles among 39 put Trump in the headlines. Politico’s reporters gave Trump most attention, and faithfully recorded his speeches in different occasions. For example, Politico used this quote:

“Jeb is not the man that’s gonna make it. He’s wasting his time, he’s wasting a lot of money. I say Rubio is highly overrated. I think there are some people that actually do have talent in the group,” Trump said.

This was from an interview with ABC News after the debate. Trump did not give any reasons for his judgment, and Politico also did not follow up with him for further discussions. Thus the story just helped Trump spread his message, but did not help readers tell if Trump’s judgment was fair. It reinforced the selection bias.

For Slate, the spirit of the publication is to encourage readers to think in an alternate way and be open to diverse opinions, known as “Slate pitch” (Goldenberg, 2014). For example,

“CNBC also asked Marco Rubio a pointed question about his frequent, well-documented absences from the Senate, asked Carly Fiorina about her widely criticized performance as CEO of Hewlett-Packard, and pressed Jeb Bush on his campaign’s poor poll numbers.”

The reporter provided the statement with hard evidence to remind people that the CNBC moderators’ challenging questions were not groundless, but candidates avoided giving direct answers. In the situation where CNBC was regarded to fail in organizing the debate, Slate tried to guide the audience back onto the track to discuss real issues.

7. Reporters in digital media tend to find more unconventional and interesting angles, while reporters in traditional media preferred more comprehensive stories.

For the New York Times and USA Today, stories tended to be more conventional and followed the traditional flows. But digital media took many new pathways in reporting the debate. The diversification of information helped reduce the gatekeeping bias.

For example, Slate had a story about how viewers were disappointed by CNBC. The reporter noticed that while CNBC tried to be innovative and showed live tweets with a certain

hashtag at the bottom of the screen during the live broadcasting, many tweets were people's complaints. While most of the stories focused on official voices from RNC and NBC, this story provided another angle by reporting on the audience's response.

Style

8. News publications have different preferences on the frequency of publishing stories, but pursuit of timeliness cannot sacrifice accuracy.

Politico published the most stories of the four publications. Their stories tended to be more quick and immediate but less collaborative. Conversely, stories from the New York Times and USA Today tend to be more exhaustive.

Slate tried to keep pace with the live debate, and published 15 stories about what happened on the stage, but corrections were seen in three articles. These were all minor mistakes, like misspelling the word "Tennessee," but reporters should definitely pay attention to basic accuracy.

9. Digital publications tend to quote content from social media, and inserted live tweets in the article.

Live tweets usually served as direct quotes. Readers could view how popular the tweet was and even retweet it themselves. In the third category about the dispute between the party and the network, live tweets were used a lot.

The New York Times hardly quoted tweets and inserted live tweets. But USA Today, Politico and Slate borrowed many tweets and displayed them directly in articles. Trump's Twitter was on Politico's radar and even a single tweet could make a story on Politico.

To quote tweets directly required the reporter to provide context, or it could lead to both selection and presentation bias. For example, Politico had a story about an online poll of

MSNBC after the debate, where Trump was voted as the person who could handle economy best based on his performance in the CNBC debate. Politico quoted his retweet saying “*very true, thanks!*” In another tweet, Trump wrote “*Marco Rubio will not win.*” But the Politico reporter did not explain why he said so and whether it was a fair judgment.

Limited by the number of words, tweets could only show the most apparent results briefly. It depended on the reporters to explain what the number or a quote meant. If reporters selected tweets only based on who published it, like Trump, it created selection bias. Also, just because the information was contained in a tweet, the message could be inserted as a live tweet, with interactive buttons and larger space in the layout. it led to presentation bias.

10. Characteristics of digital tools made both traditional media and digital media more flexible in style.

The format of “lede” emerged in the era of telegram, when delivering a message was expensive with limited channels. Although reporters nowadays can publish stories simply by clicking a button, the pursuit of delivering immediate and accurate information is still kept in journalism.

Compared to publishing stories on newspapers, publishing web stories is easier. Gatekeepers have more tools to deliver information efficiently and reach out to readers quickly. Short informational stories with few sentences were seen on both Politico and the New York Times.

In the second category about candidates’ performance, there was a story with only 161 words, published by a Politico reporter during the debate. The reporter described the back and forth between moderators and candidates right in the debate – while candidates complained that they should have had more time to speak, they also thought that debate should be shorter.

Although it was a common frame of the debate afterwards, such a message delivered during the debate was still newsy.

The New York Times also utilized the digital platform to meet readers' demands for immediate news. In an article right after the debate, the reporter interviewed Priebus. The 130-word story only had a lead, two quotes and an ending paragraph. It was published before Priebus issued the official statement to the network. While readers could feel the obvious tension between moderators and candidates, such a story show them the official attitudes from the party.

Conclusion

As the literature review shows, the mutual influence between media and politics has been a hot issue in the research regarding presidential elections for a long time. The series of presidential debates which started from August 2015 not only provided a stage showing the dynamic between candidates and journalists, but also drew considerable discussions and media coverage afterwards. I chose the third Republican debate on CNBC to study, because of the confrontations which reflected the relationship between media and politicians. I hope that a deep look into the discourse of the stories can provide journalists with a review of the merits and lessons learned in the coverage of this particular event. There are also some implications on how political reporting can enhance the public integrity and serve the public better.

Also, more and more news outlets employ digital storytelling. Many researchers are exploring how news in digital formats change the storytelling and readers' cognition. In this study, I compare the coverage between traditional and digital media in detail. The evidence-based study could contribute to further qualitative research regarding selectivity and bias in political news stories, or how digital strategies of news outlets make a difference in the coverage.