

# Framing Same-Sex Marriage: A Comparative Textual Analysis of Maryland Newspaper

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Analysis

The coverage of same-sex marriage in mainstream American newspapers is a relatively recent, yet incredibly salient, topic. Until May 2004, no U.S. state administered or legally recognized gay marriage and, other than local policy battles regarding the issue, it was mainly left uncovered. As the movement for same-sex marriage recognition and equality has gained recent traction, through both victories and setbacks, media coverage of the fight for legally recognized marriage has increased.

In the November 2012 elections, four states had ballot questions regarding same-sex marriage<sup>1</sup>. Maine, Maryland, and Washington voters passed the ballot measures and these three states join six other states<sup>2</sup> and the District of Columbia in recognizing same-sex marriage. As more states begin to deal with judicial enactments, legislative action, and, in some cases, ballot measures pertaining to legal recognition of same-sex marriage, the electorate will continue to rely on the media to inform them about debates over social issues. The voting electorate will particularly rely on the media when these social issues pertain to their voting, especially in light of the recent same-sex marriage recognition questions, which were placed on multiple ballots in the 2012 elections.

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<sup>1</sup> Maine, Maryland, and Washington had ballot questions concerning the legalization of same-sex marriage. Minnesota's ballot question was whether to amend their constitution to define marriage as only between a man and a woman.

<sup>2</sup> The six states that recognized same-sex marriage prior to Washington, Maine, and Maryland were: Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, and Vermont.

By studying how a topic is presented to the audience and its effects, one can begin to understand the preexisting beliefs and attitudes of the consumers and how their media consumption affects those beliefs (Entman, 1993). The media's framing occurs on all levels of "media." The media is a vast field, ranging from everything from entertainment television to news magazines to weblogs (Brewer, 2002). News media is of particular interest because news media is partly how voters become educated regarding election issues. Research on the framing of news stories can show researchers and the public how different news outlets and organizations frame certain issues.

Framing is a twofold process as both the media and audiences "frame." The media framing occurs when a story is presented with a central idea and storyline: This includes what is emphasized, excluded, what sources are used, the headline, and how the lead is written (Entman, Matthews, & Pellicano, 2009). At the same time, audiences frame in their own way as they interpret and process the information they are consuming. This process coincides with each person's unique biases, opinions, and values concerning the issue in the story they have read and are processing, yet the initial framing is from the media's presentation and dissemination to an audience.

Framing is a particularly germane analysis for political stories because, as Dardis (2007) points out, "there are many competing ways (frames) through which individuals can interpret any aspect of reality (e.g., a sociopolitical issue), and this interpretation affects subsequent comprehension and perception of the 'reality'" (p. 248). For social issues in particular, framing is an appropriate theory because it highlights the supporters, opponents, and observers involved in the debate at hand.

In this vein, framing theory can help explain and show how newspapers frame sociopolitical issues, such as same-sex marriage legalization and recognition, for the voting electorate. Similarly, from a practical standpoint, this research can show *how* the media informs the electorate. The purpose of the current study is to conduct an in-depth textual analysis of how two widely-read newspapers, the *Baltimore Sun* and the *Washington Post*, covered the Maryland same-sex marriage ballot question during the November 2012 elections.

## **Literature Review**

### **Overview.**

Historically, civil rights coverage has been slow, at best, to begin coverage and maintain it over time. During the 1950s and 1960s, the media was slow to cover race relations, particularly in the south (Roberts & Klibanoff, 2006). As the civil rights movement gained support, and following the Supreme Court's landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision rendering school segregation unconstitutional, more papers began to send reporters to the south to cover desegregation and the movement generally (Grimes, 2005; Roberts & Klibanoff, 2006). The media eventually covered the Civil Rights Movement by framing the story as a group of people striving for equality, not as a movement of fringe extremists (Roberts & Klibanoff, 2006). In the same way, the same-sex equality movement's frame has evolved as an issue of civil rights, which has translated to some media outlets framing their stories as such.

### **Historical Context.**

The movement's recent focus on marriage equality has gained media coverage, yet prior to this recent development, coverage of the gay community generally has been

limited: the media, including movies, television shows, commercials, and news coverage, has tended to stereotype both gays and lesbians. While researching different forms of media coverage on gays and lesbians, Fejes and Petrich (1993) found television shows presented gay and lesbian characters as isolated, secondary characters that simply existed in a heterosexual environment. As the authors researched news media coverage of homosexuality, they discovered that prior to the 1960s there was close to no mention of homosexuality. When it was mentioned, however, it was portrayed and presented as “a sickness, perversion, or crime” (Fejes & Petrich, 1993, p. 402). During the 1960s, gay and lesbian activists began addressing these stereotypes, legal inequalities, and various forms of discrimination (Ross, 2012). Through gradual legal changes, allowing gays and lesbians to have greater equal protection under the law, and the higher prevalence of “out” members of the homosexual community, America began to see more openly out members of the gay community in public office and the public square generally (Ross, 2012).

Moving into the 1970s and 1980s, newspapers and other media outlets covered the 1980s AIDS epidemic, which strongly impacted the gay community, as thousands of gay men died from AIDS (Fejes & Petrich, 1993). As this health crisis progressed into the 1990s, in which the inclusion of homosexuals in the military was vigorously debated, the press continued to “heterosexize” gays and lesbians by presenting and framing their behavior within a heteronormative context (Fejes & Petrich, 1993, p. 405). The mid-1990s brought with it the debate over “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” regarding the military’s rule excluding homosexual people in the military (Ross, 2012). Then-President Clinton signed an Executive Order implementing “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” which instructed

homosexual men and women not to tell others about their sexuality (Ross, 2012). This executive order also banned asking about another's sexual orientation in the military.

In 1998, Matthew Shepard, a young Wyoming man, was savagely beaten to death due to his identity as a gay man. His beating was widely covered and increased the visibility of both homosexuality and homophobic violence against the gay community (Becker & Scheufele, 2009). His death, along with other violence against homosexuals<sup>3</sup>, brought with it a national conversation that continues today regarding hate crimes, hate crime legislation, and the impact and prevalence of homophobic violence in particular.

The heteronormative lens through which members of the gay community were and are viewed is further compounded by the negative story association that has been presented to audiences: The fight for equality, debunking the "sickness" myth, the AIDS health epidemic, the coverage of the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy debate, and stories about hate crimes against gay people has reinforced negativity over the course of four decades in stories dealing with the gay community (Ross, 2012). Although some of these stories were eventually seen as victories (for instance, DSM-III, the American Psychiatric Association's classification of mental disorders, dropping homosexuality as a mental disorder), the vast majority of these news stories presented the gay community from a negative standpoint: stories in which gays and lesbians were fighting to achieve something they did not have or, especially during the AIDS crisis and stories about hate crimes, dying from something. By continuing to present homosexuals situated within a heteronormative world, the gay community has consistently been framed as "other" and "different."

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<sup>3</sup> Another noteworthy, and highly covered, example of a hate crime was the brutal rape and murder of Brandon Teena, a transgender man who was born biologically female. His story was dramatized in the 1999 film, "Boys Don't Cry."

As recently as 2007, an Arizona television station was criticized for its coverage of a male “sex-posé” piece, which was about hetero- and homosexual Tucson men who had sexual encounters in local parks, yet the piece presented gay men as lurking in the shadows of the local Tucson parks (Chávez, 2011). A local LGBT support group labeled the piece as “sensationalistic and inflammatory” (quoted in Chávez, 2011, p. 8). Chávez noted that although heterosexual married men were mentioned in the story, the vast majority of men interviewed about their behavior in the park were gay yet their faces were blurred. These types of news stories reinforce negative associations people have about homosexuals and the gay community.

In August 2002, *The New York Times* announced that the Sunday Styles section, a portion of the paper dedicated to fashion, food and wine, home and garden, and wedding announcements, would begin printing commitment celebration announcements of same-sex couples (Gibson, 2004). In light of previous decades’ coverage of gays and lesbians, which was highly negative, this was one of the first pointedly positive editorial choices in general reporting on homosexuals. Yet, in a study comparing gay and lesbian journalists’ opinions with their senior editors’ opinions of newspaper coverage of the gay community, opinions differed widely (Bernt & Greenwald, 1992/1993). Forty-five percent of senior editors reported their papers devoted enough space to non-medical issues concerning the gay community, yet 83 percent of gay and lesbian journalists disagreed (Bernt & Greenwald, 1992/1993). In addition to disagreeing on the comprehensiveness and completeness of coverage regarding the gay community, senior editors also disagreed with gay and lesbian journalists over the acceptability of terms and words used to describe the gay community (Bernt & Greenwald, 1992/1993). These

disagreements over the type, amount, and tonality of coverage further highlight the negative association the gay community feels about what stories the media is covering and presenting, even when they are the ones presenting and framing the story as journalists.

### **The Fight For Marriage Recognition.**

Over the past few decades, the gay community has won numerous victories, yet the history of the American fight for same-sex marriage began less than 15 years ago through different state actions. The movement has been incredibly varied: Almost simultaneously, as some states legalized same-sex marriage, other states immediately banned it by defining marriage as solely between a man and a woman. In 1996, the United States Congress passed the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which defined marriage as only between a man and a woman for all federal purposes (Denniston, 2012). DOMA further allowed states to refuse to recognize same-sex marriages created in other states. The gay community fighting for same-sex marriage recognition challenges DOMA on the basis that it violates the Constitution, which provides each citizen equal protection, in every state, under the law.<sup>4</sup> In 1999, however, the Vermont legislature legalized same-sex civil unions soon after the Vermont Supreme Court found that “the state constitution prohibited denying to gay and lesbian couples the legal benefits attached to civil marriage” (Hester & Gibson, 2007).

The 2004 election cycle, however, dealt a major blow to the movement as 11 states<sup>5</sup> voted and passed constitutional amendments banning same-sex marriage (Hester & Gibson, 2007). Yet, almost immediately prior to the November 2004 elections,

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<sup>4</sup> The Supreme Court overturned DOMA in June 2013 in the case *United States v. Windsor*.

<sup>5</sup> The 11 states were Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Michigan, Mississippi, Montana, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Utah.

Massachusetts became the first state to legally recognize same-sex marriage through a ruling of the Massachusetts Supreme Court. During the October 2012 term, the United States Supreme Court considered ten same-sex marriage petitions to determine whether to hear the cases (Denniston, 2012). Eight of these cases dealt directly with DOMA and its constitutionality and DOMA was overturned in *United States v. Windsor* by a vote of 5-4 on June 26, 2013.

In 2008, California had a widely publicized debate on “Proposition 8,” a ballot question asking voters to define a marriage as only between a man and a woman. The Proposition 8 ballot question was in direct response to court action, which held that homosexuals had the same right to marry as heterosexuals. Over \$82 million dollars was spent informing the public about the ballot question. Opponents to the same-sex marriage ban spent over \$44 million dollars (Sayre, Bode, Shah, Wilcox, & Shah, 2010). In the end, California voters voted in favor of Proposition 8 and same-sex marriage was banned. A similar ballot question in North Carolina also passed in 2012 and defined marriage as only between a man and a woman.

In the recent 2012 elections, four states had a same-sex marriage question on the ballot, including Maryland. Maryland legalized same-sex marriage recognition through legislative action in 2011. Opponents of same-sex marriage gathered enough signatures to challenge the legislation and put the question on the November 2012 election ballot. The Maryland electorate voted in favor of recognizing same-sex marriage and, thus, the legislation went into effect in 2013.

After the election, in June 2015, the Supreme Court formally recognized the constitutionality of same-sex marriage. Two years prior, in June 2013, two Ohio men,



James Obergefell and John Arthur decided to get married after the Supreme Court's decision in the U.S. v. Windsor, which had overturned DOMA. Obergefell and Arthur were married in Maryland that July. When they learned Ohio would not recognize their marriage, they filed a lawsuit. Multiple cases were consolidated and renamed and, eventually, the Supreme Court heard Obergefell v. Hodges in April 2015.

In June 2015, the Supreme Court held that the Fourteenth Amendment requires all states to grant same-sex marriages and to recognize same-sex marriages performed in other states as a result of the Due Process Clause. In Obergefell v. Hodges, Justice Kennedy wrote for the majority, "No union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family." He continued that same-sex couples "seek to find its [marriage] fulfillment for themselves. ... They ask for equal dignity in the eyes of the law. The Constitution grants them that right." While most states immediately complied with the Supreme Court decision, there were a few notable examples of individuals who did not. In Kentucky, Kim Davis, a Rowan County clerk, refused to issue a same-sex license due to her religious beliefs. Davis spent five days in jail as a result of her refusal. In Alabama, Supreme Court Judge Roy Moore was suspended after he instructed probate judges to ignore the Supreme Court's ruling and refuse to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples.

As the gay community turned their fight toward the issue of marriage and demanded legal recognition of gay and lesbian unions, the media was also forced to shift their coverage towards this issue. The coverage itself and the study of framing are both particularly salient today as same-sex marriage became ubiquitous in each election

cycle, put on ballots, and legislative and court action was increasingly taking prospective action (either by supporting or opposing same-sex marriage recognition).

### **Framing Theory**

Framing theory lends itself to literature surrounding how the media covers certain stories and the media effects on the audience. Studies have also shown that simply the consumption of media itself has its own effects, even when the researchers are not interested in the particular frames the media is using to present stories. In a recent study, Lee and Hicks (2011) found respondents were more likely to be in favor of legalizing same-sex marriage if they used television as their primary form of entertainment, enjoyed watching political talk shows, were likely to read web blogs, and thought magazines were more interesting than television rather than those who consumed less media. The frames the media used were not predictive of supporting or opposing same-sex marriage, it was simply the consumption of media itself (Lee & Hicks, 2011).

Previous researchers have found framing affects the ways in which audiences discuss and frame their opinions. In one study, participants who read a story about same-sex marriage framed in equality language discussed their opinions about same-sex marriage using terms associated with equality. In the same way, research subjects who read a similar story framed in terms of morality, answered questions about their views using morality words (Brewer, 2002). A later study, however, manipulated a news story about same-sex marriage by analyzing participants' reactions to the types of sources quoted in the story (Gibson & Hester, 2007). In one version of the story presented to consumers, high-ranking officials and prestigious sources were quoted as supporting

same-sex marriage while less significant and nonofficial sources were quoted as arguing against same-sex marriage. A second group of participants read a story in which the sides were reversed: the high-ranking and prestigious sources were quoted as opposed to same-sex marriage and the nonofficial sources were in favor of same-sex marriage. Finally, the third group of participants read a balanced story with equal amounts of both prestigious and nonofficial sources quoted as supporting or opposing same-sex marriage (Gibson & Hester, 2007).

The authors found the participants' opinions of same-sex marriage did not differ across the three variables (Gibson & Hester, 2007). Gibson and Hester (2007) argued their study showed there is no foundation for the fear that news stories that feature quotes from prominent or "celebrity" sources who are opposed to same-sex marriage will taint consumers against same-sex marriage or the homosexual community generally. While each article was framed differently, through the use of sources (both the official nature of the source and the level of prestige associated with the source) and quotations used, the participants were not affected by the prestige of the sources and their supposed opinions of same-sex marriage recognition.

Research on media framing of the gay community is also nuanced: research on the media can include entertainment television or news media (and the many different forms of news media). As Fejes and Petrich (1993) pointed out, gay and lesbian characters were forced to adapt to their heterosexual environment. This heteronormative standard persists in more recent shows, like *Will & Grace* and *Ellen*, as gay characters are rarely shown in their own communities with other homosexual friends and that gay parents are portrayed as misfits (Landau, 2009).

In comparing representations of heterosexual and homosexual families, Landau (2009) found the media consistently portrayed homosexual parents as different and other, while situated within a heteronormative frame. She wrote that the articles she studied “favor[ed] mainstream heterosexist, heteronormative, biological explanations of human sexuality and reproduction. These constructions, deployed through textual and photographic images, visibly ‘other’ the range of origins of children of same-sex parents, thus relegating them to an outer social-scientific space” (Landau, 2009, p. 90). Framing the heterosexual lifestyle as ideal or “normal”, and presenting the homosexual lifestyle as “other,” perpetuates a worldview in which members of the homosexual community are devalued, seen as deviant, and as a minority. These frames, presented to audience consumers, continue to promote the homosexual community, especially gay parents, as other, different, and not “normal,” as compared to heterosexual parents and people (Landau, 2009).

These differences in frames are particularly relevant as research continues to show close to no difference between children of gay or straight parents (Landau, 2009). Additionally, when reporting on children of gay parents, newspapers have questioned obsessively on the sexuality of children, which is not done when reporting on the children of straight parents. Landau (2009) points out that a 2004 *Boston Globe* interview with the daughter of lesbian parents quoted the daughter as saying she was “very” straight, again normalizing heterosexuality and presenting it as ideal (Landau, 2009, p. 91). The implicit and explicit privileging of heterosexuality constantly makes homosexuals feel as though they must conform to heteronormativity or that they have to make up for their sexuality (Landau, 2009).

News media consumers also have frames presented to them through the news stories they consume. Many times, the coverage surrounding same-sex marriage consists of debates between two, often polarized, sides. When consumers are presented with issue frames, especially those in the public debate, audiences tend to form their opinion based on their association between the issue presented and the frames in which the issue has been covered (Brewer, 2003). Additionally, debates over issues regarding “values” tend to be shaped on the basis of knowledge of the public debate.

Brewer (2003) notes, “the role of political knowledge in shaping the impact of a value on opinion about a political issue can depend upon whether public debate offers one undisputed interpretation or two competing interpretations of the value” (Brewer, 2003, p. 174). Within the same-sex marriage debate, in particular, scholars must study the media frames presented because of the inherent debate over values. Becker and Scheufele (2009) point out:

“The relationship between predispositions and policy support may be especially relevant in the case of gay marriage given the media’s framing of the issue as a debate over moral values and the growing number of religious institutions that have become vocal participants in the gay marriage debate (Price et al. 2005)” (p. 188).

The question of whether the media provides fair, balanced, and equal treatment in coverage can be answered, in part, by analyzing the frames through which newspapers present the debates. American newspapers, in particular, can show how mainstream media has covered and framed the debate. Although the majority of mainstream newspapers take editorial positions, even on highly contentious issues, newspapers continue to maintain they report stories unbiased and fairly representative of both sides of the issue.

Previous research has used framing theory to guide its questions regarding civil rights questions generally, and coverage of homosexuals in particular, across a variety of media outlets (Brewer, 2002; Li & Liu, 2010; Price, Nir, & Cappella, 2005). As researchers begin to better understand how the media frames specific issues, journalists and reader/consumers are able to have a more informed understanding of media bias. Although journalists in the West, and particularly in America, are trained to be independent watchdogs without a bias, many believe the media is biased or slanted (Ho et al., 2011). This bias is particularly relevant when analyzing the media's heteronormative word choices employed, especially when discussing same-sex marriage. Liebler and colleagues noted that the presentation of same-sex marriage was framed from a heterosexual standpoint, implicitly privileging heterosexual norms and standards (Liebler, Schwartz, & Harper, 2009). Additionally, the media's strategy to present homosexual parents has, by and large, been to "normalize" these parents, which is another form of heteronormative standards being imposed on the homosexual community (Liebler et al., 2009). Their research, guided by framing theory, explicates the unique framing that occurs when discussing the sexuality of a group which has been ostracized in the past as well as show primary examples of framing. Textual analysis of the coverage of American newspapers, through a framing lens, allows for the media to self-critique in light of findings and allows readers to gain insight into the media's presentation of coverage by comparative analysis.

This paper sets out to explore two widely read Maryland newspapers that extensively covered the same-sex marriage debate around the November 2012 election. By examining and comparing the *Baltimore Sun's* and the *Washington Post's* coverage of

the ballot initiative, this paper hopes to show how the two leading Maryland papers framed the same-sex marriage debate. Thus, the research questions are:

**RQ 1:** How did The *Baltimore Sun* and The *Washington Post* coverage frame the same-sex marriage referendum vote during the November 2012 election?

**RQ 2:** How did the coverage framing differ, if at all, between the two papers?

## **Method**

To effectively analyze both newspapers' frames, the mode of analysis will be a comparative textual analysis between the *Baltimore Sun* and the *Washington Post*. The textual analysis will analyze the extent and type of coverage on the ballot question in both newspapers. In order to determine the slant of the published stories and to compare the newspapers against each other, analysis will consist of whether the story is for or against same-sex marriage, the points of views expressed in the story, the sources and quotations used, and the editorial positions the newspapers took prior to the vote.

The newspapers chosen for analysis are each widely read in Maryland: the *Washington Post* serves Washington, D.C.'s Maryland suburbs while the *Baltimore Sun* is Maryland's largest general-circulation daily newspaper ("Audience," 2012; "(Baltimore) The Sun," 2012). The *Post* is a unique paper because, although it is a local paper serving the District, Maryland, and Virginia, it is a national newspaper that is widely read across the country. Comparative textual analysis between these two papers allows readers to see the framing of news stories more clearly and definitively. Research concerning the *Sun* and the *Post*'s framing of the news can adequately inform or deny the bias many believe is present in newspapers.

Because there are no formal public debates for ballot issues, like there are for political candidates, media outlets are of substantial importance in educating the public about the issue, the opposing sides, and the disagreement itself. The differences between two highly-read newspapers will help inform how the media is presenting this often contentious issue. Previous literature about media coverage of same-sex marriage has used textual analysis to inform and guide its research. Liebler and colleagues (2009) used textual analysis to explore how marriage was presented in newspapers in states with anti-gay marriage ballot initiatives (Liebler et al., 2009). In a similar study also guided by framing theory, Li & Liu (2010) examined 209 stories from 5 different papers, including the *Washington Post*, through content analysis to determine how same-sex marriage was presented.

### **Sample.**

In the present study, the stories selected from both papers are from a 17-day period. The selected stories were published 14 days prior to the November 6, 2012 election and 2 days after the election. The sample includes Election Day (November 6, 2012) and that is how the 17-day sample is reached. In order to obtain this sample of stories from each paper, the data collection was a two-fold process. In the 14 days leading up to the election, multiple “Google Alerts” were set for both the *Baltimore Sun* and the *Washington Post* that contained the words “same-sex marriage,” “gay marriage,” “ballot,” “election,” and “Maryland.” The articles and blog posts from both papers that used any of these words anywhere in a story were emailed to the author. These emails with the Google Alerts continued until 2 days after the election.



Additionally, the author used the LexisNexis database to locate articles from the *Washington Post* and the *Baltimore Sun* that may have not been flagged from the Google Alert. The searches were similar to the Google Alerts and contained the phrases “same-sex marriage” and “ballot initiative” in the published stories. Further, after the data was collected, the author searched the online archives of both newspapers to ensure each article addressing the Maryland referendum vote on same-sex marriage was captured. The articles analyzed were all news stories, features, opinions, op-eds, letters to the editor, and editorial pieces published in the paper. The news stories and features were eventually grouped together as “news” pieces while the op-eds and editorials were considered editorial opinions. Letters to the editor were included in the sample as straddling the unique position of being reader responses, but included in the newspaper from an editorial decision.

In analyzing same-sex marriage ballot question for Maryland voters, the particular newspapers chosen represent widely read newspapers, both in Maryland and nationally. Limiting the data to the two-week window before Election Day was purposefully done. The two weeks prior to the election is when the coverage of a particular election issue (whether it be a candidate or a ballot question) is the most saturated. This two-week period is crucial for voters as they read the “last-minute” stories and the paper’s editorial position in preparation for their vote. The Election Day material is useful simply for having the exit-polling data stories and the eventual outcome of the election (in this case, upholding same-sex marriage in Maryland). Finally, the two-day period after the election is equally interesting because the newspapers are dealing with, in this particular case, implementation stories, lifestyle stories, and opposition reaction stories. These stories

also inform the public of the immediate reactions of those in favor and opposed to same-sex marriage as well as help the voters immediately see the impact of legalizing same-sex marriage.

This purposive data set includes the last-minute time before the election when voters are reading what the newspaper's editorial stance is as well as the immediate aftermath of the election, as the electorate learns of the impact of their vote. The newspapers chosen for the present study adequately represent Maryland newspapers that are widely read and reach Maryland voters. These papers' similarities and differences in their coverage of Maryland's same-sex marriage ballot referendum will show different types of framing and whether media bias exists (through unbalanced reporting).

#### **Data Analysis.**

The analysis of collected stories was done through comparative textual analysis. Coding each story through axial coding allowed the researcher to see major concepts develop and then categorize them. Coding occurred on multiple levels, including coding the amount of stories published on the ballot issue, the difference in amount of news stories and editorial stories, the sources and quotations used, whether celebrities or famous people were cited in the article, and word choices used describing the ballot referendum. Major themes and concepts were determined and put into categories, and the researcher compared the categories discovered between the two papers and whether the coverage and tone changed after the election when same-sex marriage was legalized. The frames that each paper used in their stories was compared against each other during the data analysis, in order to better understand if the papers used different frames and the manner in which the frames were employed in the stories.

## Results

### **RQ 1: Amount of ballot coverage.**

While both the *Baltimore Sun* and the *Washington Post* covered the 2012 election and Maryland's election issues, the *Sun* covered the same-sex marriage referendum much more extensively. Over the 17-day period sample, the *Sun* ran a total of 69 stories that either mentioned the ballot referendum or dealt with the ballot question exclusively. The *Washington Post*, on the other hand, ran 36 stories either mentioning the same-sex marriage vote or covering the ballot measure solely.

During coding, the stories were divided into five types of articles: news pieces, feature stories, letters to the editor, op-eds, and editorials. For the purposes of this paper, news stories and feature pieces were coded separately but considered under the umbrella of "news stories," while letters to the editor, op-eds, and editorials were grouped under "opinion pieces." The *Baltimore Sun* had a total of 20 news stories and eight features, for a total of 28 news items and 33 opinions. The *Washington Post* ran 13 news stories and two features, for a total of 15 news items and 13 opinion pieces. The *Sun's* news coverage of the ballot issue was almost double that of the *Post's* in news stories, with 28 news stories compared with 15 stories. The *Sun* also dominated the *Post* in opinion pieces, with over double the amount of coverage, although it was primarily in the form of letters to the editor. The *Post's* op-eds and editorials surpassed the *Sun*, both in total amount and in the amount published prior to Election Day.

## **RQ 2: Influencers in news stories.**

The data analysis also included an examination of types of influencers in the stories: word choice, sources and quotations used, including whether any celebrities or notable people were cited and/or quoted. These factors are what cause stories to be framed a certain way, and can by their very nature influence the reader. When an issue is framed in a positive or negative light, a reader can be swayed regarding the issue.

## **Discussion**

### **Purpose of study.**

The purpose of the present study was to examine the frames used analyzing the amount of coverage in the *Washington Post* and the *Baltimore Sun* concerning the ballot referendum measure on same-sex marriage in the 2012 election. Part of this analysis also included looking at the types of influencers the papers used, including the choice of words, quotes, and sources the articles used. Using framing theory, one can study how a controversial issue was presented to a reader in the critical weeks prior to an election.

### **Summary of major findings.**

#### ***RQ 1: Amount of ballot coverage.***

The difference in opinion coverage between the papers was striking for two reasons. As mentioned above, the *Sun* ran more opinion pieces (n=33) than news stories (n=28) in its coverage of the ballot measure. Although the *Post* ran more news stories (n=15), its coverage of the same-sex marriage ballot measure was almost equal to the opinion pieces the paper ran (n=13). What was additionally notable was the type of opinions each paper ran. Among its 33 opinion pieces in the 17-day period, the *Baltimore Sun* ran 27 letters to the editor, four op-eds, and two editorial pieces. The *Washington*

*Post*, alternatively, ran only one letter to the editor, but published seven op-eds, and five editorials. The *Sun* not only placed a greater emphasis on opinion pieces generally, but a significantly greater weight on letters to the editor.

*Op-Eds.* When compared to the *Post*, the *Sun* kept its paper's opinion pieces restrained. Of the *Sun*'s four op-eds, three were written by the same columnist (Rodricks) who supported same-sex marriage. The other op-ed that was published only mentioned same-sex marriage in passing and did not state an unequivocal position on the issue, but was seemingly for the ballot referendum. Three op-eds, two of which were written by Rodricks, were published prior to Election Day, which is stark contrast to the *Washington Post*'s five op-eds in the same timeframe.

The *Post*'s opinion pieces were much more directly related to the issue of same-sex marriage and more numerous as well. Of the seven op-eds published over the 17-day sample, five were published prior to Election Day and were written by five different columnists. Each of the op-ed writers approached the ballot issue from different perspectives: one coming from a Republican perspective, some focusing on the history of LGBTQ rights, and one addressing the historical significance of the ballot measure; yet each op-ed was in favor of same-sex marriage. Whereas the *Sun* only ran two op-eds that were directly related to the ballot referendum prior to Election Day (both written by the same writer in favor of same-sex marriage), the *Post* ran a plethora of op-eds, by five different writers, all in favor of same-sex marriage. In addition, the *Post*'s editorial decision to publish five op-eds by five different writers prior to Election Day shows editorial diversity, yet of only one opinion and without viewpoint diversity. The *Post* framed same-sex marriage from *different* opinion writers who all had the *same* opinion.

While it is unknown whether there was an opportunity for the *Post* to publish an op-ed from an opinion writer who was opposed to same-sex marriage (a paper cannot force its columnists to write about a specific topic, encourage a specific opinion, nor publish material it does not receive), the paper neglected to present that viewpoint in a longer form piece. It is also worth noting that after Election Day, the *Post* published two more op-eds, by the same author, celebrating Maryland's vote to uphold same-sex marriage in the state.

The *Sun* also presented a positive portrayal of same-sex marriage through their opinion writers, but in a more muted way. The two op-eds directly dealing with the ballot question were written by the same columnist and published prior to the election. While there was not diversity of opinion, there also was not diversity of viewpoint from opinion writers because there was only one writer. Additionally, after Election Day, the *Sun* published one more op-ed, also written by the same columnist, in praise of Maryland's vote.

*Editorials.* The editorial boards of both papers also published editorials about the issue, but as with the op-eds, the papers differed in the amount of coverage. While the tone of both papers' editorials were similar in urging Maryland voters to uphold same-sex marriage and vote "yes" on Question Six, they varied in amount. The *Baltimore Sun* published one editorial prior to Election Day and one editorial after Election Day, while the *Washington Post* published three separate editorials pre-Election Day and two more editorials after Nov. 6<sup>th</sup>.

The *Sun*'s editorial published prior to Election Day on Oct. 30, 2012 highlighted the importance of equality, the protection of religious freedom, and dismissed the

opposition's view of "unintended consequences" of same-sex marriage as "scare tactics." The editorial board emphasized the "principle that the law should treat everyone the same" and that gay Marylanders should not face "discrimination under the law when it comes to one of the state's fundamental institutions." The majority of the editorial board's argument is dismantling the opposition's argument of consequences related to gay marriage. The board cites three examples the opposition used and calls each of them "unfounded" and highlights the bill's religious freedom exemptions as legal protection against the threat of these possibilities. The day after Election Day, on Nov. 7, 2012, an editorial was published that praised Maryland's vote, describing it as a "watershed for civil rights."

The *Post* published three editorials prior to the election, each focusing on a different aspect of the vote. The first editorial, published on Oct. 23, 2012, profiled the gay rights movement in federal courts and called DOMA a "noxious federal law" and "inconsistent" with America's "foundational values." The *Post* described "cold discrimination" that gay and lesbians had faced and acknowledged a "natural resistance to changing traditional institutions," but noted Maryland voters had a chance to turn the tide towards acceptance of gay marriage. In a second editorial, published on Oct. 30, 2012, the editorial board directly dealt with Maryland's ballot question. The *Post* framed the vote as one akin to acceptance of interracial marriage, outlawing anti-Semitic discrimination, and promoting equality for women. Noting the "fast-shifting attitudes toward same-sex marriage," the *Post* wrote the "trend line is clear" and same-sex marriage is likely inevitable. Similarly to the *Sun*'s editorial, published on the same day, the *Post* also dealt directly with arguments posed by the opposition, and highlighted that

the “law has been written explicitly to protect clergy, churches, and affiliated entities.” The editorial closes by urging Marylanders to go against the tide of same-sex marriage votes, which had failed in “every state, 32 so far, where it has appeared on the ballot” and should “put themselves at the forefront of the move toward fairness.”

The *Post*'s final editorial was published Nov. 4, 2012 and briefly summarized the *Post*'s stance on all of Maryland's ballot questions. In addressing question 6, the *Post* “urge[d]” Maryland voters to uphold the law. Almost the entire summary dealt with the *Post*'s assurance of the protection of religious freedom for religious institutions in Maryland. The editorial stated:

“Here's what the law would not do: It would not force clergy to perform marriage ceremonies in violation of their religious beliefs. Nor would religious organizations be required to participate in such ceremonies if they objected. The law strikes the right balance by protecting religious freedom while granting the freedom to marry.”

While both the *Sun* and the *Post*'s editorials had similar themes regarding fairness, equality, the protection of religious freedom, and the historic nature of the vote, the *Sun* only presented the argument once to its audience prior to the election while the *Post* fleshed out those arguments, separately, in three editorials over the course of 14 days. Additionally, after the election, the *Sun*'s editorial board celebrated the decision with one editorial, while the *Post* wrote two editorials describing the vote as one of “tolerance” and noting, “it is now reasonable to imagine a day in the not-very-distant future when marriage for gay and lesbian couples across this country will be unexceptional, unencumbered and mostly unremarked upon.”

Although both papers urged the vote and celebrated its victory, the *Post*'s opinion, both through its editorial board and its opinion writers, was more saturated both through



volume of writing and over the number of days it published the pieces. In publishing more opinion writers with the same perspective, and writing its own editorials more often, the *Post* was likely able to reach a greater audience simply through greater amounts of publication. In addition, for readers who read all of the pieces leading up to the election, the *Post* presented multiple views with the same viewpoint. The *Sun*, on the other hand, only presented one editorial and one columnist's opinion in the lead up to the election. While it was a consistent view, and the same as the *Post*'s view, it was only printed three times over the course of 11 days.

*Letters to the editor.* The major difference in amount of coverage between the *Sun* and the *Post* was the publication of letters to the editor in the lead up to Election Day. While the *Sun* did not publish as many op-eds or editorials as the *Post*, it dominated the *Post* in this category. The *Sun* published 27 letters to the editor, of which 23 were published prior to Election Day, compared to the *Post* publishing just one letter on Nov. 3, 2012. While the *Post*'s lone letter was against same-sex marriage, the *Sun*'s letters were divided: 16 supported same-sex marriage while 11 were opposed to the ballot question.

The *Sun*'s heavy reliance on letters placed a significantly greater weight and reliance on the voice of the reader in the paper's opinion pages. While, overall, the *Post* had exactly double the amount of op-eds and editorials (n=12) compared to the *Sun* (n=6), the *Post*'s editorial focus was not on the voice of the lay reader. The *Post* framed the issue around what its own opinion writers and editorial board believed about how Maryland voters should vote, not what letter writers believed Maryland voters should do. The *Sun* published the majority of its opinion pieces from voices of the community,

arguing for or against the ballot measure, rather than its own stance or that of the paper's columnists.

As mentioned above, some of this discrepancy may be due to who letter writers were actually writing letters to (the *Post*, again, cannot publish letters it does not receive), but it is also likely that editorial decisions were made about which letters to publish. It is not possible to know which letters the *Post*, or the *Sun*, declined to publish; it is only possible to see what was published and that is clear: over 17 days, the *Sun* published 27 letters while the *Post* published one.

It is worth noting, however, that the sole letter the *Post* published was opposed to the ballot referendum. The letter writer based his argument on natural order and concerns over children being raised in a home with same-gender parents. This is notable not because of the writer's position, but because the *Post*'s published so much from its editorial and op-ed pages in support of same-sex marriage.

Part of framing occurs in editorial decisions regarding the presentation of the issues. Obviously, the editorial stances of papers frame an issue for readers, and in this case the editorial boards were in agreement, however the *Post* far surpassed the *Sun* in the amount of editorials and op-eds they published. Framing also occurs in decisions about which letters to the editor to publish and the balance and tone of each letter. In the present case, the *Sun* framed the debate around voices from Maryland, both pro and against, same-sex marriage, while the *Post* almost entirely opted out of publishing the perspectives of letter writers.

The *Post*'s decision to almost exclusively rely on their editorial board and opinion writers as the voice of debate framed the same-sex marriage debate away from lay

readers to, one could argue, more elitist opinions. Opinion writers, who are paid by the paper to present their opinion in a compelling and well-written way, can be viewed differently by the reading audience as compared to letter writers, writing to a newspaper. Relying so heavily on its own paper's opinion of the issue detracted from local voices as well as giving the impression other opinions did not exist. A person who read the Washington Post opinion pages in the days leading up to the election would have only had one opportunity to see a dissenting view on same-sex marriage. Every other opinion piece in the 14 days prior to Election Day argued for same-sex marriage in Maryland. The *Sun*, on the other hand, framed the issue as a community debate, laid out in the pages of the newspaper for readers to read and see.

### ***RQ 2: Influencers in News Stories***

*Word Choice.* Both the *Sun* and the *Post* covered the ballot question in the days leading up to the election as a controversial issue, fraught with moral and religious implications. The *Post* consistently referred to the ballot initiative as one surrounding "marriage equality," a word the advocates of same-sex marriage used to diffuse the highly-charged "gay marriage" term. In news and feature stories, the *Post* called the issue "controversial" (10/23, 11/3) leading up to the election. On Election Day, the *Post* said the issue "shook up usual alliances" (11/7). On the editorial page, the *Post*'s writers consistently bashed the anti-same sex marriage side as intolerant and described DOMA as a "noxious" law that contributes to discrimination, while praising the advocates for same-sex marriage.

The *Sun*, meanwhile, was similar in tone but extensively highlighted the issue as deeply divisive, particularly in the Black church. The *Sun*, however, on Oct. 26 featured a

story about same-sex marriage advocates, Maryland Governor O'Malley and New York City mayor Bloomberg, and noted the ballot initiative had "popular support" from a recent poll. The very next day, on Oct. 27, the *Sun* reports on a new poll that found Maryland voters were "evenly split" on the issue. While sloppy reporting may be to blame for misleading and contradictory statements, this example also highlights a frame of the divisiveness of the issue, which the *Sun* seemed to purposefully report on.

*Sources And Quotations Used.* When covering the issue, both the *Sun* and the *Post* relied heavily on quotes from both sides, yet both papers quoted more heavily from the advocates of same-sex marriage. As stated previously, the sources used in news stories can frame an issue in terms of importance and notoriety. When issues like same-sex marriage are at stake, voters may pay more attention when noteworthy people, like elected officials or celebrities, weigh in on the issue. In the present case, both the *Sun* and the *Post* used these types of sources when covering the story. On October 24, for instance, the *Baltimore Sun* used a quote from the police captain in Prince George's County, Maryland in support of same-sex marriage. In that case, the police captain was also openly gay, which may have contributed to why the *Sun* used the captain as a source. Regardless, police captains are not typical "man on the street" interviews and do not have a seemingly public interest in whether or not same-sex marriage is approved by voters (as contrasted with, for example, clergy members). In addition, the *Sun* quoted or cited as supporters of same-sex marriage professional athletes who played for the Baltimore Ravens and celebrities like Brad Pitt, Susan Sarandon, Lady Gaga, and Whoopi Goldberg.

The *Washington Post* did not use celebrity sources nearly as much as the *Sun*, and when they cited supporters of same-sex marriage, the celebrities were notable people who tended to be well-known in the political field generally. Both the *Sun* and the *Post* cited New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg as a supporter of same-sex marriage, and the attention Bloomberg paid to Maryland's ballot initiative. Other than noting other political leaders who support same-sex marriage like President Obama, Mayor Bloomberg, and Maryland governor O'Malley, the *Post* only cited two other notable people in their coverage in 2012. One was Brad Pitt's backing of gay marriage and the other was a column referencing political pundit David Brooks' support for marriage equality. While both Pitt and Brooks are famous in certain circles, these two mentions are hardly the coverage the *Sun* devoted in showing the support for same-sex marriage.

The sources cited in both papers that opposed same-sex marriage were predominately religious leaders, many from the black church. The *Post* almost exclusively cited religious leaders as those who were in opposition to the ballot initiative. However, on Oct. 25, the paper reported Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s niece was opposed to the legal recognition of same-sex marriage. The *Sun*'s coverage, while similar, was more nuanced. The *Sun* had more sources who were opposed to same-sex marriage in their coverage, as well as more diversity. In addition to religious leaders and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s niece, the *Sun* also noted Gov. O'Malley's brother was in opposition to the ballot measure. Further, the *Sun* reported Baltimore Ravens center Matt Birk was against gay marriage as well as politicians like Florida Senator Marco Rubio and Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee.

### **Theoretical Implications**

While same-sex marriage is now settled law in the U.S., these findings help show journalists and the public the importance and need for reporting on civil rights issues. Word choices, opinion pieces, sources, and amount of coverage matters when informing the electorate. Since the Maryland same-sex marriage ballot question, the transgender movement has begun its own civil rights fight: notably over bathroom usage. The journalists covering these stories must be sensitive in appropriately researching and reporting these stories to include a variety of thought and opinion. Each story's frame has an impact on the reader, and thus on the voting public. Regardless of whether issues, like Maryland's same-sex marriage question, is on the ballot, this study shows the importance of covering a minority group that feels unheard or less privileged than the majority.

### **Practical Implications**

The coverage of a contentious issue is one that reporters must deal with almost daily. News stories that are fraught with legal, moral, and religious considerations demand fair, balanced, and nuanced reporting. As framing theory shows us, it can be inevitable that journalists frame stories in certain ways. In the present situation, the *Baltimore Sun's* coverage of the 2012 Maryland referendum vote on the legality of same-sex marriage was covered more extensively, and with greater nuance, than the *Washington Post's* coverage.

While it is unknown exactly how readership of the *Post* or the *Sun* influenced voters, it is clear from the data analysis that the papers used editorial stances, word choices, and source decisions in their coverage of same-sex marriage. The *Post's* decision to rely almost exclusively on news items and opinion pieces, without a voice for the reader, reflects a decision to present same-sex marriage from a one-sided perspective.

The *Sun*, while also editorially in favor of same-sex marriage, went the other direction and presented readers' opinions consistently and pervasively, framing the issue as a community debate.

There are multiple reasons for these findings, including that the *Washington Post* is trying to serve the District of Columbia, and is not solely focused on Maryland or the state's ballot initiatives. In addition, the 2012 elections was also a presidential election year, and the *Post*'s coverage was inundated with stories about President Barack Obama and Governor Mitt Romney. As a national paper serving a local jurisdiction, the *Post* must balance the needs of its local readers with that of its national audience. Its Maryland coverage was grouped together with its coverage of other ballot initiatives and election coverage. While it could have done more to serve its Maryland readers, the *Post* did address, as shown above, the Maryland ballot measure.

The Baltimore *Sun*, on the other hand, is a Maryland newspaper, solely focused on the state. Its focus was, and should be, the issues that affect the state of Maryland. The *Sun*'s coverage on the ballot was framed as a local debate between those opposed and in favor of the same-sex marriage initiative. By its very nature as a local paper, the *Sun* chose to frame its coverage of the referendum as a local issue.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

While the present study was limited to a 17-day sample, one obvious limit was the length of the sample during a period of time that was hyper-focused on the election and ballot issues. Having a larger sample, including data from alternative newspapers in Maryland and other national news sources, would present a greater picture of the framing decisions more media outlets used. In addition, since same-sex marriage was ruled

constitutional in June 2015, one area of research that is particularly salient currently is how the coverage has changed and shifted both in tonality and amount around a “debate” of same-sex marriage. While people still disagree with the Supreme Court’s decision, it is now the law of the land.

Future research can and should look at how these dissenters are presented in news stories. Many of the dissenters have religious objections to same-sex marriage, and some want to deny some business services to gay couples, usually around a wedding ceremony. Future researchers should consider whether news agencies are able to coherently frame these constitutional rights, the right to marriage and the right to religious freedom, as equal but competing rights in this new reality in which we live.

In addition, social issues are trending currently about the “trans” movement, particularly around inclusivity and bathrooms. This current research leads directly to the framing of trans stories, legal battles, and outcomes. The trans community has similarly framed their battle for legal recognition as one of civil rights and the present study is a solid basis to further examine the trans movement and its media framing.

## **Conclusion**

As this study shows, research about how a story is framed has value for journalists to self-reflect and critique their own frames when covering a story. Journalists should take the opportunity to analyze previous writing and constantly check whether they are framing a story in a way that is fair and balanced. Additionally, reporters can use this research and determine other areas where minority voices are not heard in the public square, which is dominated by the majority. Journalists are responsible for the



dissemination of issues like same-sex marriage, which once seemed impossible, but as both research and time show us, is possible.

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