

A Meeting of Broadcast and Post-Broadcast Media in the 2004 American Presidential Election

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The ways in which individuals interact with political media has changed significantly over the last 30 years. With the advent of cable television some scholars have argued that television's influence on political opinions can now be defined by the specific, niche audiences of the cable channels, instead of the vast, general audience of network television channels (Prior, 2007). Using the 2004 NAES debate panel survey, this article argues that, although the shift from reach to specificity might be occurring, political debates still serve an important reach function in American elections. Further, the tested model also displays different paths of influence for FOX News verse CNN viewers on their opinions of President Bush. Specifically, FOX News viewing was found to directly influence individuals' opinions of Bush, while CNN indirectly affected individuals' opinions of Bush by positively influencing debate viewing.

Keywords: Cable TV News; CNN; Debate Viewing; FOX News; Ideology

The American political media landscape is in a constant state of flux with new media forms, technological advancements within media forms, and new content outlets being introduced with each election cycle. Prior (2007) offered an empirical case for how an increase in media choice in a post-broadcast television environment has had profound effects on a series of important democratic outcomes. His argument focused on television's influence, which was once defined by reach

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(i.e., generalized content for mass consumption), but is now being driven by specificity (i.e., content for specific, niche populations). Prior's argument can be seen most vividly in the inverse rating trends of national nightly broadcast TV news programs (i.e., reach) relative to cable news programming (i.e., specificity).

Although the shift from reach to specificity in television may be ongoing (see Schooler, Chaffee, Flora, & Roser, 1998), this alteration of the media landscape does not mean the positive benefits we associate with the broadcast tradition (i.e., reach) are gone entirely from the political realm. More specifically, this article argues that political debates serve an important reach function in political elections. We should not view the broadcast and post-broadcast ages as disparate eras relative to the functioning of American political campaigns. Instead, there are political media outlets (e.g., debates) that reflect the original nature of broadcast television influence (i.e., high effective reach), and there are outlets that are more specificity-oriented (e.g., CNN and FOX News). By using the 2004 National Annenberg Election Study (NAES) data, we examine the interplay of specificity-based (e.g., FOX News and CNN) and reach-based (e.g., presidential debates) political media and assess the potential for differential processes of influence associated with reach- versus specificity-oriented outlets.

The Role of Reach Versus Specificity for FOX News Versus CNN Viewers

One point of focus for this article is whether unique effects are generated within the specificity-based medium of cable television news. In particular, focus is given to two different cable TV news outlets (FOX News and CNN). Morris (2005) analyzed 1998 through 2004 Pew Research data and found unique causes for why audience members tune in to view FOX News relative to CNN News. In addition, Morris revealed important differences in public opinion outcomes for those who stated an affiliation with FOX News relative to other TV news sub-populations (see perceptions of Iraq War casualties). The Project for the Excellence in Journalism (Journalism.org, 2006) also studied the CNN audience versus the FOX News audience and reported some important differences in terms of how and why people tune in to watch these distinct political communication information outlets. The group's combined analysis of traditional ratings and cumulative audience levels resulted in a conclusion that "FOX has a more loyal audience that watches for longer periods of time. . . . Yet CNN commands a larger pool of casual viewers who tune in for key news moments" (Journalism.org, 2006, para. 10). This finding highlights the fact that cable TV news use can serve different purposes for self-described FOX News versus CNN viewers within a process of political media influence.

Political Ideology as Predictor

Given this study's focus on CNN versus FOX cable television news viewers, political ideology becomes an important individual-difference variable. FOX News is defined as a conservative news media outlet whose origins and dominant message are

beholden to a specific brand of political ideology (Auletta, 2003). Indeed, Farhi (2003) argued that FOX News has discarded the traditional objective journalism model for a discussion–opinion model that allows for the presentation of stories with a clear ideological bent. In addition, Wearthery, Petros, Christopherson, and Haugen (2007) offered a series of findings pointing to liberal slant contained within CNN headlines. Other scholars have argued that CNN as a political information source has had a unique effect on a host of democratic outcomes (e.g., the CNN effect and media-inspired humanitarianism; Robinson, 2005).

A news outlet that offers a specific ideological message is more likely to attract a more ideologically extreme audience. Thus, if FOX News and CNN are ideologically biased, differential viewing of the networks should be predicted by the ideological biases of the individual. However, as indicated by Morris (2005) and the Project for Excellence in Journalism study (Journalism.org, 2006), the strength of ideology as a predictor of FOX News should be much stronger than that of CNN—the stronger ideological connection is what creates the more loyal base of viewers for the conservative outlet relative to the more general news outlet of CNN. Ideology will also serve as an important predictor of attitudes toward political candidates (Minar, 1961), such as individual-level attitudes toward President Bush as examined in this study. Thus, the following two hypotheses are offered:

- H1: Political ideology (highly conservative coded high) will have opposing predictive value for cable TV news viewing for self-identified FOX News viewers (i.e., positive) versus self-identified CNN viewers (i.e., negative).*
- H2: Political ideology (highly conservative coded high) will positively predict post-debate attitudes toward President George W. Bush.*

Cable TV News Viewing as Predictor

As Holbert and Benoit (2009) found, all types of political media consumption prior to a debate should predict debate viewing. Across multiple datasets, the authors found that all types of political media use, whether one-sided (e.g., FOX News) or two-sided (e.g., national broadcast TV news) in orientation, positively predict debate viewing. Therefore, pre-debate cable television news viewing, regardless of being FOX or CNN, should positively predict debate viewing. The predictive value of pre-debate cable TV news consumption for debate viewing reveals that broadcast (i.e., reach) and post-broadcast (i.e., specificity) media are not wholly distinct of one another in the production of processes of media influence—the two types of media remain connected to one another within today’s political media environment. In particular, consumption of specificity-oriented political media in the pre-debate phase of an election lead to greater use of reach-oriented debate viewing:

- H3: Pre-debate cable TV news viewing will positively predict debate viewing.*

There is also the ability of specificity-oriented cable TV news to generate a reinforcing or strengthening effect on political attitudes. As argued for by Holbert, Garrett,

and Gleason (2010), attitude reinforcement should be viewed as a persuasive act. Self-described FOX News viewers who consume more cable TV news should come away from these media experiences feeling all the more positive about the 2004 incumbent presidential candidate. Conversely, self-described CNN viewers who consume more cable TV news should be influenced in the opposite direction, thinking all the worse of George W. Bush as a presidential candidate. Thus, the following is posited:

H4: Pre-debate cable TV news viewing will have opposing predictive value for post-debate attitudes toward George W. Bush for self-identified FOX News viewers (i.e., positive) versus self-identified CNN viewers (i.e., negative).

Knowledge as Mediator of Debate Viewing and Bush Attitudes

It is clear that debate viewing serves as a strong predictor of voter knowledge about candidate policy positions (Jamieson & Adasiewicz, 2000), with the most convincing evidence coming from the Benoit, Hansen, and Verser (2003) meta-analytic findings that reveal a positive effect size for debate viewing relative to political knowledge. Therefore, we predict the following:

H5: Debate viewing will positively predict post-debate political knowledge.

Benoit et al. also showed debate viewing to have a rather sizeable influence on post-debate perceptions of political candidates (see character findings, pp. 340–341). Within the hierarchy of effects and the basic learning model (i.e., knowledge → attitudes → behaviors; McGuire, 1989), it is argued that knowledge influences attitudes. As a result, knowledge of candidate issue stances on a host of domestic policies will serve to impact attitudes toward that candidate. Indeed, extant work has revealed political knowledge to have an influence on political attitudes (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). It is important to assess levels of post-debate candidate domestic policy issue stance knowledge as a potential mediator of the relationship between debate viewing and attitudes toward George W. Bush. Thus, we offer the following hypothesis:

H6: Post-debate political knowledge will positively predict post-debate attitudes toward President George W. Bush.

Method

Data

A debate panel survey from the 2004 NAES was used for this study (Romer, Kenski, Winneg, Adasiewicz, & Jamieson, 2006). Only those individuals who stated an allegiance to FOX News or CNN as a dominant cable television news source in the pre-debate phase of the design and who were asked the full battery of major party candidate knowledge questions in the post-debate phase were part of the analyses (FOX, $N=196$; CNN, $N=258$).¹ The first phase of the two-stage panel study was in the field from September 20, 2004 until September 29, 2004.

All participants were then attempted to be re-interviewed between October 14, 2004 and October 24, 2004.

Measures

Political ideology. A 5-point scale measured this individual-difference variable. The scale ranged from 1 (*very liberal*) to 5 (*very conservative*). The combined set of FOX and CNN viewers fall roughly in the middle of this ideological spectrum ($M=2.22$, $SD=0.99$).

Pre-debate cable television news exposure. Participants were asked their level of pre-debate exposure to cable television in the form of how many days in the past week they had viewed this political information outlet ($M=4.92$, $SD=2.20$). In addition to the general exposure item, participants who stated that they watched cable television news at least once in the past week were asked if a specific cable TV news outlet was used predominantly. Two types of cable viewers were isolated to assess the moderation effect of use of different cable stations, FOX News and CNN.

Debate viewing. Each respondent was asked the degree to which they viewed each of the three presidential debates, with possible responses being 1 (*did not watch*), 2 (*some*), 3 (*most*), and 4 (*all*).² A three-item additive index was formed from the three debate viewing items ($M=2.74$, $SD=1.07$). The index was reliable (Cronbach's $\alpha=.84$).

Post-debate domestic policy stance knowledge. A series of domestic policy stance knowledge questions were asked of each respondent relative to the major party candidates in the 2004 presidential election. The post-debate questions concerned the following public policy areas: general tax policy, social security, overseas tax breaks, health insurance, the importing of prescription medications, income limits for the repealing of tax cuts, and an assault weapons ban. All responses were recoded to form dichotomous correct (1) and incorrect (0) responses. The final additive index ranged from 0 (*no correct responses*) to 7 (*all correct responses*), and the respondents retained a moderate level of general domestic policy knowledge ($M=4.46$, $SD=1.52$). However, the additive index retained a low reliability (Kuder–Richardson = .54).

Post-debate attitude toward Bush. Respondents were asked to rate the incumbent President Bush in the post-debate phase of the study. Possible responses ranged along a 0 to 10 thermometer rating, with higher scores reflecting a more positive attitude toward the candidate. The mean rating falls toward the middle of the scale ($M=5.53$, $SD=3.75$) among the combined CNN and FOX viewers.

Analysis

A series of ordinary least squares regression equations were run to assess the relationships outlined in this work. First, Bush-attitudes was regressed on to ideology to establish the main ideology viewing–debate viewing relationship. Second, cable TV

viewing was regressed on to ideology, and this equation was run twice (once for FOX viewers and a second time for CNN viewers). Third, debate viewing served as the dependent variable in a hierarchical regression equation that included ideology (Block 1) and cable TV viewing (Block 2). Fourth, Bush-attitudes was regressed on to ideology and cable TV viewing to assess the direct influence of this type of news consumption on post-debate attitudes toward the incumbent president. This equation was run twice, for the FOX and CNN viewers, respectively. Fifth, a hierarchical regression equation containing ideology (Block 1), cable TV viewing (Block 2), and debate viewing (Block 3) for post-debate candidate knowledge as dependent variables was separately tested for the FOX and CNN viewers. Finally, the criterion variable of Bush-attitudes was regressed onto the previously described equation with knowledge added as a lone Block 4 predictor variable. This last equation was also run twice to assess distinct predicative values for the FOX and CNN viewers.

A formal analytical assessment of a comparison of predictive values between FOX versus CNN viewers for potential moderation was completed using Fisher’s *z* test (Cohen & Cohen, 1983, p. 111).³ The finding of a *z* score of 1.96 or greater signals a difference in predictive value between groups, and indicating type of cable TV news viewing (FOX vs. CNN) serves as a moderator variable.

Results

Confirming *H1*, ideology (very conservative coded high) has a very strong and positive main effect on post-debate attitudes toward Bush ($\beta = .58, p < .001$). Ideology was also found to have divergent main effects on cable TV news viewing for the FOX versus CNN viewers, with the predictive value being positive and statistically significant for the FOX group ($\beta = .28, p < .001$) and negative and nonsignificant for the CNN group ($\beta = -.08, p > .15$). The Fisher *z* test reveals there to be a statistically significant difference between the two groups, $z = 3.79$ (*H2*). In short, ideology is driving FOX News consumption, but not CNN viewing (see Figure 1).

As per *H3*, cable TV news is found to be a statistically significant and positive predictor of debate viewing ($\beta = .17, p < .001$). In addition, cable TV news viewing

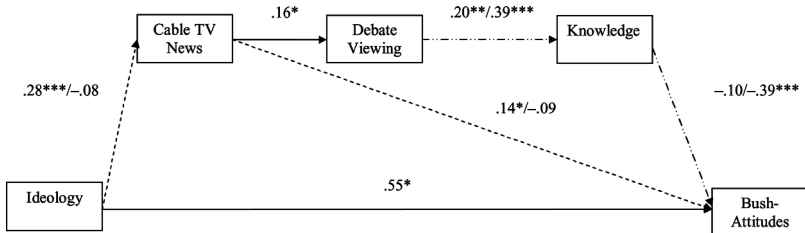


Figure 1 Competing Paths of Influence: FOX News Versus CNN Viewers. *Note.* Standardized path estimates reported: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, and *** $p < .001$; dotted paths identify a statistically significant difference in estimates across the FOX and CNN groups. Where moderation is assessed, FOX estimates are reported on the left and CNN estimates reported on the right; - - - = dominant FOX News group path through cable TV news viewing; = dominant CNN group path from debate viewing and through knowledge.

among the FOX News viewers is found to have a statistically significant main effect on post-debate Bush-attitudes ($\beta = .14, p < .05$), even after accounting for the influence of ideology. The direct effect of cable TV news on post-debate Bush-attitudes is non-significant and negative ($\beta = -.09, p > .10$). The difference in cable TV news predictive value on Bush-attitudes is significantly different between the two groups, $z = 2.61$. It is the combination of the statistically significant main effect of ideology on cable TV news viewing and cable TV news viewing influence on Bush-attitudes for the FOX News viewers only which is representative of post-broadcast, ideologically driven, heuristic effect of cable TV news viewing on political attitudes (Petty & Cacioppo, 1996).

As for the more centrally oriented path of influence initiated by the broadcast, reach-oriented debate viewing, this is where we see the CNN group begin to stand out relative to its FOX News peer group. Debate viewing has a positive and statistically significant main effect on post-debate knowledge for both groups (*H4*), FOX ($\beta = .20, p < .01$) and CNN ($\beta = .39, p < .001$). However, its effect among the CNN viewers is almost twice as great; and, indeed, this difference is statistically significant, $z = 2.21$. In addition, the influence of post-debate candidate policy knowledge on Bush-attitudes is far greater for the CNN viewers ($\beta = -.39, p < .001$) than the FOX News group ($\beta = -.10, p > .15$). This difference in path estimates is also statistically significant, $z = 3.63$. The dominant path of influence on Bush-attitudes for the CNN group does not start with ideology. It starts with cable TV news viewing leading to debate viewing, and then debate viewing having a rather large effect on post-debate candidate knowledge. As predicted in *H5*, knowledge then serves as a statistically significant predictor of Bush-attitudes for the CNN viewers. This process is best reflective of a more broadcast (i.e., reach)-oriented, central route of influence. For the FOX News viewers, this mediation route is comparatively weaker leading to post-debate knowledge, and then fizzles out entirely when assessing the influence of knowledge on Bush-attitudes (see Figure 1). It is clear that the dominant path of influence for the CNN viewers works through debate viewing and includes knowledge in the mix, while the prime route of influence for the FOX viewers begins with ideology and includes a main effect for cable TV news viewing (and no knowledge influence).

Discussion

The model offered in this study presents a link between broadcast (e.g., debate viewing) and post-broadcast (e.g., cable TV News) political media outlets during the 2004 U.S. presidential election in that cable TV news serves as a statistically significant and positive predictor of debate viewing. However, the similarity in paths of media influence by which self-identified FOX News versus CNN consumers come to view the incumbent President Bush end there. Viewers of Fox News and CNN were found to follow very different paths when forming attitudes about President Bush. In short, the FOX viewers tended to take the post-broadcast low road. Their attitudes toward Bush were primarily driven by ideology and their cable TV news viewing. With CNN

viewers, the dominant path of media influence was through the broadcast-based debate viewing high road. Exposure to CNN had little direct influence on what citizens felt about the incumbent Bush, but it predicted debate viewing, which lead to knowledge. Knowledge was then found to be a strong and statistically significant predictor of attitudes toward Bush for the CNN viewers.

This general pattern of findings points to a post-broadcast political communication information source like cable TV news exposure serving distinction functions for different sub-populations relative to a broadcast-oriented information source like debate viewing. Debate viewing, as well as the knowledge about candidates it can generate, is relegated to the sideline for the ideologically driven self-described FOX News viewer (political media influence dominated by specificity for this sub-group). Conversely, it is debate viewing (i.e., reach) that maintains a dominant role among the self-described CNN crowd. The two types of political media outlets are linked in that one predicts the other, but their influences vary widely within the citizenry. These findings point to a much more complex picture of how reach and specificity as concepts which define campaign media influence (see Schooler et al., 1998) will continue to play out in political elections. Prior (2007) argued for a clean shift from reach to specificity in describing the movement from a broadcast to a post-broadcast age, but those concepts that best define each age (reach and specificity) remain relevant and intricately connected to one another in American political elections.

This research, like all single studies, is limited in numerous ways. Most important, this research only looks at these questions in the context of the 2004 election. Further research should replicate these finding across other elections to dispel this criticism. In addition, further research should examine other media-use to media-use relationships (e.g., conservative talk radio and debate viewing) to understand how citizens integrate these various media forms into their media diet and how they affect important democratic outcomes (Holbert & Benoit, 2009). With these limitations in mind, this research makes a strong case against treating the broadcast and post-broadcast eras as being entirely distinct entities—reach and specificity are still prevalent in today's media environment and their influences are in some sense distinct, but also related to one another. Future research needs to continue to advance our understanding of how reach and specificity are related to one another in the production of a wide range of democratic outcomes.

Notes

- [1] A total of 250 CNN and FOX News viewers were not asked any of the post-debate battery of public policy issue stance knowledge questions. As a result, these participants were not included in the study.
- [2] The three 2004 general election American presidential debates were held on the following dates: September 30, 2004; October 8, 2004; and October 13, 2004.
- [3] The formula for Fisher's z test is $z = \frac{B_1 - B_2}{\sqrt{SEB_1^2 + SEB_2^2}}$, where B s stand for regression coefficients from two independent samples and SE s indicate their corresponding standard errors.

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