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# Sourcing and Framing the 2012 Battle for the White House: A Student Media Analysis

Aimee Burch  
*Iowa State University*

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**Sourcing and framing the 2012 battle for the White House: A student media analysis**

by

**Aimee Elizabeth Burch**

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
MASTER OF SCIENCE

Major: Journalism and Mass Communication

Program of Study Committee:  
Raluca Cozma, Major Professor  
Dirk Deam  
Daniela V. Dimitrova

Iowa State University

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## ABSTRACT

Communication research has largely neglected a type of news organization whose editorial output has potentially far-reaching and indelible effects both on its receivers and its creators: student newspapers. In contrast, coverage of the presidential election cycle is widely studied by scholars. Drawing on scholarship on framing, sourcing, and bias in election coverage, this content analysis seeks to study student newspapers by examining them in the context of the 2012 presidential election. The analysis of college newspapers in three swing states found that election stories in these newspapers focus more on human interest and issue coverage than their professional counterparts, are more neutral in tone, and are more richly sourced.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **College Students and Newspapers**

Researchers agree that campus newspapers are a main source of information on college campuses (Lipschultz & Hilt, 1999). Though this insight is fifteen years old, college students' news habits have not changed. College and university newspapers are one-stop shops for students looking for information on campus happenings, news about their community, sports scores, and views about local, national, and international happenings.

Newspapers, both professional and student-led, are beginning to shift their focus and resources from the print product to the online presence (Chyi, 2012). This is in contrast of recent research citing how people find the print product more “useful, satisfying, likeable, and enjoyable” than the online format (Chyi & Chang, 2009; Chyi & Lasorsa, 2002; Chyi & Yang, 2009; DeWaal, Schoenbach, & Lauf, 2005). If this is the case, why is there this huge push for online content? Many in the field believe that the way to reach this younger demographic is by pushing the online content. However, this “technology first” approach may actually hinder, not help, the industry because this demographic reports reading the actual print newspaper in record numbers. Of students with access to a campus newspaper, 93 percent of those students report reading the publication (ReFuel Resource, 2013). The print publication is the overwhelming preference of students (60 percent) with another 24 percent reporting they like the print publication and the digital counterpart equally. This is one reason for examining the news habits of the college age demographic.

Despite the level of prominence newspapers hold on most college campuses, studies looking at the content of the newspapers are sparse. Many studies exist investigating a student paper's First Amendment rights to free speech and press (Click, 1993; Stern, 1997; Bickham, 2008). Diddi and LaRose (2006) explored where college students go to find information and what they use those sources for, be it information, entertainment, or otherwise.

The content of student media is an area that scholarship has generally overlooked. This study aims to fill some gaps in the scholarship, as well as provide some insight into how a campus newspaper finds and decides what information to put in front of students in the context of one of the most important national news topics regardless of newspaper type: general elections.

### **The College Electorate: Swing States and News Habits**

Investigating the quality of information this demographic receives in campus newspapers is important because members of this group are not only the future market for news, but, more importantly, this demographic makes up a considerable portion of the current and future electorates (Bennett, Lawrence & Livingston, 2007). In the 2012 presidential election, the age demographic of 18-29 year olds (the ones who would presumably be reading campus newspapers), comprised 19 percent of the total electorate, with 60 percent voting for the incumbent Barack Obama and 37 percent voting for Republican challenger Mitt Romney (Roper Center, 2012). To compare that to the 2008 election, this demographic made up about 18 percent of the electorate (Roper Center, 2008), with a breakdown of 66 percent voting for Democratic candidate Obama and 32 percent for Republican John McCain. The percentages for this demographic can be decisive particularly



in swing states, further demonstrating the importance placed on this coveted portion of the electorate.

While every vote in every state matters, a group of nine to twelve states are always of particular interest. These “swing states,” as they are commonly called, are the most competitive places on an electoral map; however, the number of “swing states” varies between election cycles, making a concrete number almost impossible (Mahtesian, 2012). The one thing strategists and scholars do agree on is how essential these states are in the outcome of a presidential election. Much of a campaign’s time, money, and resources get spent in these states, resulting particularly in more visits to these areas by the candidates themselves and a heightened campaign presence.

It is important to look at what sources journalists in general turn to when finding information for articles, particularly when it comes to governmental and political issues. Journalism is widely considered to be the “Fourth Estate” of the government, and with such a role journalists must exercise oversight as to what information they present to the public and who exactly is giving such information. Essentially, “the press plays a central role in the management and maintenance of a representative democracy” (Schultz, 1998, p. 15). Politicians, regardless of what branch of government they represent, who “wish to use the media’s power for their own goals must accommodate themselves to the institutional needs of the news media—much as each branch must do when they wish to do the same with one of the other three established constitutional branches” (Cook, 1998, p. 2).

With this role as the “Fourth Estate” comes the ability to shape and influence public debates, something newspapers cannot take lightly. The news media becomes a political entity in the coverage of politicians and political activities. As Timothy Cook said in his book

*Governing with the News* (1998), “the news media are political because the choices they end up making do not equally favor all political actors, processes, and messages. Far from holding up a mirror to external political actions, the news media are directly involved in instigating them” (p. 165). In other words, instead of reporting on what is happening, journalists instead are influencing the actions of their subjects.

Source diversity is a key element of reporting that affects news frames and public perception of reported issues, but also media credibility (Kurpius, 2002; Cozma, 2006; Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Noredenstreng, & White, 2009). Analyses of news content have found that professional journalists are inclined to rely on “the usual suspects” (Freedman & Fico, 2005) such as politicians and other high-ranking officials, and those sources in authoritative positions are more likely to get their voices heard (Gans, 1979).

In the journalistic coverage of campaigns, there is an ongoing struggle between the various actors involved in the campaign, from the journalists and editors on the media side to the candidates, staffers, and party officials on the campaign side (Gulati et al., 2008). They all play a role in the news-making process. The public statements of government officials can manifest themselves within the coverage and in the news judgment of reporters (Althaus, 2003). With such a carefully choreographed routine of various sources and perceptions, journalists struggle to provide different perspectives on the same information. Put another way, when it comes to political news, “the thread that connects those in the journalistic mainstream—starting with the elite newspapers and flowing through thousands of daily local print and broadcast outlets—is that they report much of the same stories in much of the same terms...” (Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2007, p. 4). From the normative standpoint of democratic theory, the public can be well served by a press that reports, first and foremost,

what its elected officials are saying and doing (Hamilton, Lawrence, & Cozma, 2010), but in the context of elections, whose aim is the selection of officials, it is important to offer audiences a diversity of viewpoints from all walks of life. In knowing the views held from the candidates all the way to everyday citizens and in researching those views further, voters can make an informed decision.

When it comes to campus newspapers, this is important not only because the paper provides information to a community of students, but also because in many cases the reporters are students learning how to be journalists. The students are preparing for the “real world,” gaining practical experience they will take with them upon entering the workforce. It is the time when they practice “textbook journalism,” as student media organizations are in a sense practicums where the young reporters get to put the theory learned in classrooms into practice. Because the skills and habits they pick up in the halls of their campus’ journalism building will be carried with them for years to come, it is important to look at how these students are doing their jobs and how they bring one of the most important national stories to their student audiences. As Gulati, Just, and Crigler (2008) point out, “over time new journalists learn common scripts for campaign events” (p. 242). By studying the work of student journalists at campus newspapers, we can see how they are covering these events from their practicum perspective. We can see how they are taking the skills learned in the classroom and using them in actual reporting situations.

Iyengar, Woo, and McGrady (2005) argued that “local papers provide a different kind of election coverage to their readers than the national press” (p.5) Perhaps this is because they know the issues pertinent to their community and what information members of the community need in order to make decisions. This could also be said of campus newspapers.

As students, these reporters know what their peers will find interesting and what information they will consider important in the decision-making process come Election Day. Framing research can help us uncover the gatekeeping patterns of student journalists, because it allows us to study what sources they put in front of readers and how the journalists rely that information to the audience.

### **Goals of Study**

Keeping in mind that student newspapers' audiences consist of a sizeable cohort of first-time voters, this study explores the sourcing, framing, and bias of student media coverage of the 2012 election by campus newspapers in three swing states by conducting a content analysis. The six newspapers under examination regularly publish a print edition widely and readily available to students. The study looks to fill gaps in the scholarship on student media and contribute to the sourcing and framing literature while providing insight into what kind of information is made available to a highly coveted age demographic (Pew Research, 2012) in electoral politics.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### College Media

There have not been many studies conducted that focus on college media outlets. One study, conducted by Lipschultz and Hilt (1999), looked at the readership of college newspapers on campuses. They found that 92 percent of the students surveyed read the local community paper with regularity. As was stated in the introduction of this paper, this statistic has stayed relatively steady, if not risen slightly, over the last 12 years, with 93 percent of students reporting that they read the community paper regularly (ReFuel Resource, 2013). Given this popularity of college newspapers among the student population, it is important, then, to consider what kinds of information this group gets from college papers and how the information is being cited and portrayed within them, because it can and does play a role in the decision-making process.

Another study by Diddi and LaRose (2006), explored the formation of news habits among college students. They found five patterns in the news consumption of college students: they relied on newspapers from their hometown, watched comedy news (such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*), cable news networks, Internet news, and broadcast news. They also found that one of the reasons for seeking out news from these diverse sources was a desire for “surveillance and escapism, meaning college students looked to these sources to keep up-to-date with the information they want while also seeming to “escape” from the trials of daily life.

Chyi (2012) examined whether the assumption that college students are disinclined to read print newspapers and thus gravitate toward newspaper websites and other online

resources to get news. She decided to look at college newspapers across the country because most campuses publish both an online and a print format free of charge and their target audiences are college students in the 18-22 age demographic. She surveyed 103 college newspaper advisors to see trends in print and online readership among college students. When it came to readership of the print versus the online format, Chyi (2012) found that the print edition reached nearly twice as many readers on a given day, with unique views to the website lagging sorely behind. About 93 percent of the advisors said college students preferred the print edition as opposed to the online product with 7 percent of the vote. These advisors cited the accessibility/portability of the newspaper as the key reason for the print preference, saying that students enjoyed being able to get the paper anywhere on campus and take it with them. Other top reasons cited included tangibility of the print newspaper, the web edition being subpar, and the habit of picking up the paper with its illustrious tradition as other key reasons for print popularity.

Chyi (2012) demonstrated how college students are not dropping print newspapers in favor of more technologically advanced news services as most industry professionals would think they have. In fact, her research suggests that the print edition of a newspaper can be the most popular format among this age demographic when it is readily accessible, free of charge, and contains relevant information to students. This ease of access and high rates of readership are a key reasons why it is important to see what information is contained within the pages of college and university newspapers.

Armstrong and Collins (2009) looked at the relationship between college-aged readers and their perceptions on media credibility. Using the University of Florida-Gainesville as a case study, they examined audience views regarding two similar yet

competing publications: *The Gainesville (Campus) Sun*, a local paper providing a section of content specifically focused on the university and was free of charge to the University of Florida students, and the *Independent Florida Alligator*, a traditional campus newspaper circulated Monday through Friday also available to students free of charge. After studying the readership and how views changed amongst readers for a six-month period, Armstrong and Collins (2009) found that “although exposure and credibility are positively related,” (p. 102), both measurements decreased for the local community newspaper over the six-month period. They found that readers deemed the *Independent Florida Alligator* more credible than the local competitor. But perhaps the major finding of the study was this link between exposure and credibility. Even though both newspapers were available to students in the same frequency and free of charge, they found that both exposure and credibility of the local newspaper decreased in the six-month period of the study, while readership and perceived credibility stayed relatively the same for the college newspaper. Participants in the study demonstrated that, when all other things were equal, college-aged media consumers still chose the campus newspaper over the local paper for receiving information. This echoes research conducted by Chyi and Chang (2009), Chyi and Lasorsa (1999, 2002) and Chyi and Lee (2012) saying that just because young adults are less likely to read a print newspaper compared to older generations, that does not necessarily mean that industry professionals are correct in assuming this demographic has lost interest in reading print newspapers. Instead, when given the same content for the same price, the print edition is still overwhelmingly preferred. It could be the readers in the Armstrong and Collins (2009) study found different reasons and motivations for choosing the campus paper over the local one, but the authors presented another reasoning: Perhaps college newspaper readers are more comfortable with

the campus newspaper and have no desire to seek out a new source for information. Or, as the authors point out, college students may also feel more comfortable reading news produced by those in their demographic—that is, who is better equipped to report on campus news than those who are on campus (Armstrong and Collins, 2009)?

Aside from these aforementioned studies, most research that has been conducted regarding college media focuses on censorship issues and on First Amendment rights of student reporters (Click, 1993; Stern, 1997; Bickham, 2008).

Coupling the importance of swing states with a typically activist demographic of college students provides an interesting context for the present study. By looking at how student journalists completing a practicum of sorts in writing for campus newspapers, we can not only see what kind of information readers are getting from this campus resource, but also insight into how a future generation of journalists are taking the elements of journalism learned in the classroom and applying them in a real-life context. This study aims to add a new piece to the student-media puzzle by examining what sources are cited in student newspapers and the various framing devices used by student journalists.

### **Sourcing**

Despite having different formats and audiences, news media are structured in similar ways internally (Cook, 1998). One of the ways news media outlets are similar is in the ways they interact with sources. Attributing information to a particular source, be it human, document, or otherwise, is a central tenet of contemporary journalism. Sourced material is the backbone of news reporting, providing evidence and lending to the story and the news outlet a sense of legitimacy and credibility (Cozma, Hamilton, & Lawrence, 2012). In finding sources for a story, the source must establish credibility via the expertise on the subject and



the level of trustworthiness given to the communicator (Bennett, 1990). In short, choice of source remains a key component of journalism, and using the same sources time and again can have implications on reader perception and understanding (Cozma, 2014).

In political reporting, the role of sourcing is important to consider because voters' responses are shaped by media content just as much as their personal political beliefs (Dalton et al., 1998). Cook (1998) establishes the media as the "Fourth Estate" of government, demonstrating the responsibility journalists have in reporting politics. The presidential campaign season brings a unique situation for journalists and media consumers. For those voters who get their news from a newspaper, they are exposed to a variety of messages about the candidates running for office and the campaign being run by the candidates and teams. When political news breaks, the first sources usually sought out by reporters are those who are perceived to have an "official" point of view, such as representatives, senators, and other high-ranking officials within politics. They become the dominant voice, seeking to balance and downplay other perspectives being offered by other non-official sources (Cook, 1998; Cozma et. al, 2012). These "official" sources tend to control the types of access journalists receive (Bennett et al., 2007), in that the importance of those voices tends to set the tone for the article and the further information sought out by reporters. Because of this, the news consumers receive tends to reflect this symbiotic relationship between reporters and their "official" sources. According to Bennett (1990), the "other," or non-official, voices and views are considered and used by journalists in stories to bolster the rhetoric already found in "official" circles. These "other" voices tend to be "average" citizens and those whom the politics in question may affect. These non-expert sources can still be considered trustworthy by readers, because these sources are communicating the position they found in their own

lives and/or what they found insightful in the context of a speech or statement (Hovland, Janis, & Kelly, 1953). However, when it comes to ranking these potential sources in terms of importance, Iyengar et al. (2005) found some discrepancies between editors and reporters. They found that editors tended to regard a political candidate as a more important source of information and news than did the reporters. For example, editors cited a local appearance by the candidate as a more important source of news than the reporters did. While reporters can and should have the ability to exercise their levels of news judgment, this discrepancy among reporters and editors between what constitutes a more “newsworthy” subject and/or event could still be seen as a troubling trend in gatekeeping, particularly if reporters and editors do not deem something newsworthy that would actually inform the readers.

The norms of practicing journalism dictate fairness and balance, requiring a style of reporting that is more source-oriented in order for the journalist to establish his or her neutrality and add credibility to the story. In one of the most comprehensive examinations ever done of newsgathering and its responsibilities (“The Elements of Journalism,” 2007), authors Kovach and Rosenstiel conclude that journalism should provide people with the information they need to be free and self-governing (p. 5). In order to fulfill that task, the authors propose ten elements of journalism, one of which is keeping the news comprehensive and proportional, that is, devoting enough space to stories and covering a diversity of topics (pp. 186-190). Another important element of quality news, according to Kovach and Rosenstiel, is monitoring power and giving voice to the voiceless (2007, p. 139).

This study investigates to what extent student newspapers live up to these ideals of a diversity of topics and viewpoints in their election news coverage. If they were to look for examples in professional media, they would be hard pressed. Several decades of research

have consistently found a disproportionate focus on elite sources in hard news coverage (Grabe, Zhou, & Barnett, 1999). Sources alone do not determine the news, but “they do go a long way in focusing the journalists’ attention on the social order...and their values are implicit in the information they provide” to consumers, which is important to remember in a study where the sources journalists turn to most often could play a role in the results (Gans, 1979, p. 145). When it comes to national coverage, research has found that more than 10 percent of stories sampled used pundits as sources, whereas stories covering local issues relied on pundits four percent of the time (Iyengar et al. 2005). In a trend that could manifest itself in college media coverage of campaigns, Iyengar et al. (2005) found in their study that “independent experts” such as academic professors were used in 39 percent of the presidential stories covered, compared to only 15 percent of the time when covering other congressional races. The range of voices used in coverage can also vary widely between one issue or policy area to another (Bennett, 1990). For example, the variety of voices used to speak on matters of budgetary policy and foreign affairs would be more specialized than those voices used to convey civil liberties issues, perhaps because some topics are perceived to be more complex and abstract than others. To put this another way, when the range of debate varies between topics (both simple and complex) and opinions held on said topics, so, too, does the variety of sources used in coverage.

This study aims to gauge the extent to which student media differ from their professional counterparts. With that in mind, the first research question asks,

**RQ1: What were the main sources that college newspapers relied on in their 2012 election coverage?**

**Framing Theory**

Framing involves “selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). When frames are present in the media, they can affect how media consumers learn, interpret, and evaluate information about issues and events (de Vreese, 2005b). Frames can be studied and identified by “the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases...sources of information and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Frames also tend to be associated with sources that vary in terms of credibility, thus affecting how the information gets interpreted (Callaghan & Schnell, 2009). When covered in slightly different ways by different media outlets, the same story can lead to very different understandings. In fact, the subtlest change in how information gets presented can alter the way a story or issue is understood so much that it can sway the reader toward a particular side in a given controversy. As Berinsky and Kinder (2006) put it, “frames not only enhance understanding; they influence opinions” (p. 654).

Framing derives its power from the general communication process. Entman (1993) noted that frames had several locations in this process, including the communicator, the text, receiver, and the culture. Because the communication process is dynamic in nature and not static, these components identified by Entman play an integral role in framing, examining how frames emerge (referred to as “frame-building”), and “frame-setting,” examining the “relationship between media frames and audience predispositions” (deVreese, 2005a, p. 51). Frame building deals with the various factors that influence the frame qualities. These factors can be internal to the practice of journalism or various external factors, such as in interactions

with sources (Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978). Frame setting, “refers to the interaction between media frames and [the] individuals’ prior knowledge and predispositions” (de Vreese, 2005a, p. 52). The effects of frames come from the individual (in the form of attitudinal changes) and the societal levels in altering social processes. Cappella and Jamieson (1997) found four criteria news frames must meet in order to be used: the frame must have conceptual and linguistic characteristics that can be identified; the frame should be observed frequently in journalistic pieces; it must be unique enough in order to differentiate itself from other frames; and it must not only be apparent to the researcher but to others as well that the frame is in place.

Broad categories of frames include issue-specific and generic news frames. Issue-specific frames are relevant only to specific topics or events (de Vreese, 2005a). Labelling frames in this manner allows for a greater degree of specification and can be tailored to the issue(s) in question. Examples of issue-specific framing studies include ones studying various stages in a presidency and studies in the presence of frames used when covering a certain issue, such as poverty or other social issues. Generic news frames can be used to understand differences in news coverage (de Vreese, 2005a). These frames also get used frequently in covering politics, elections, and conflicts as well as identifying conventions specific to the practice of journalism.

### **Relationship between Sourcing and Framing**

The types of sources and how they are used in a story are of interest to framing scholars. Journalists select certain sources in order to engage certain frames, making those particular frames more salient than others. In this manner, sources can purposely try to influence reporting (Entman, 1993). In fact, source diversity can affect many aspects of

journalism, including news frames, the public's perception of the issues reported, and media credibility (Cozma 2006; Christians et al., 2009).

Political journalism is particularly affected by the relationship between sourcing and framing. In her 2014 study on propaganda techniques, framing, and sourcing of World War II stories filed by the Murrow Boys, Cozma found that the use of local media sources could significantly predict bias, thus demonstrating the effects sourcing can have on framing and the perception of bias.

### **Framing of Presidential Elections**

Journalists tend to give higher priority to events that have a significant impact on a vast number of people but whose outcomes are in question. Elections certainly fall into this category (Gulati et al., 2008). In election coverage, existing research overwhelmingly indicates that media favor the horse-race and strategy frames that portray the election as a game in terms of how to win and lose over issue frames that explain policy and/or the platform on which the candidate is running to portray a candidate and/or a campaign. The horse-race and game/strategy frame also greatly outnumbers human interest and image frames.

The citizens' understanding of politics depends upon how the information is presented to them. In fact, it often "is variation in the *presentation* of information and not variation in the information itself that produces...effects" (Berinsky & Kinder, 2006, p. 654). Campaign news coverage is highly focused on the strategies, tactics, polling numbers, and a candidate's prospects for winning, often at the risk of issues or other matters of the campaign (Gulati et al., 2008). Horserace framing can manifest itself in the coverage of poll results, a candidate's fundraising endeavors, predictions of what blocs of people will or will not turn

out to vote, and other types of information about who's ahead or behind that are interesting, but may not actually give readers information they can use to make an informed decision on election day (Iyengar et al., 2005). Horserace-type coverage is favored by media outlets because new polls are released often, particularly in election seasons, and these stories are inexpensive and fairly easy to produce, particularly when on a tight deadline and lacking content on more complicated issues or events to publish. The horse race coverage is also a "safe" story in that coverage of polls rarely leads to criticisms of bias (Iyengar et al., 2005). Also, in some cases, the outlets themselves conduct the polls, allowing them to get their name and news organization brand out to the public.

The strategy or game frame portrays candidates and their campaign efforts in such a way as to emulate a clash between interests, strategies, and/or ideals (Lee et al., 2008). This frame paints the campaign and the candidates as though they are playing a soccer game, requiring strategy and determining a clear winner and loser of the day. Discussing other events or topics (such as campaign platforms) are portrayed as tactics used on the field to score goals and trick opponents. This frame encompasses what Cappella and Jamieson (1997) termed "strategic news." Strategic news is news that predominantly focuses on, among other things, winning and losing, different candidate styles and perceptions, and gives particular weight to polls and standings (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Strategic news, they said, dominates American news coverage, both during election campaigns and in coverage of policy issues by focusing on how to win the battle and not necessarily on what readers may perceive more relevant. This frame presents politics and public life in an indirect way as a contest between candidates requiring strategies. This frame tends to put information voters deem most important to them come Election Day, such as the issues important to them, more

towards the backburner and makes those topics a distraction of sorts. Dimitrova and Strömbäck (2012) have found that U.S. news outlets tend to favor this type of coverage, which correlates with use of media analysts and campaign officials as sources.

In contrast, issue framing involves focusing on information voters can use to make informed decisions, such as more issue-oriented information. These stories that connect policy issues to a candidate's positions and knowledge (Iyengar, 2005) make the polls and horserace-type coverage background noise, bringing to the forefront of the discussion the substance voters need on Election Day. This is where the major differences between generic and issue-specific frames really manifests itself. Issue frames have been shown to affect how readers think about various policy issues. In defining what an issue is about, usually those who have real, vested interests at stake are the ones doing the work (Berinsky & Kinder, 2006). By defining what exactly an issue is and suggesting to readers how to think about it, issue framing allows for those involved to imply what, if anything, needs to be done. The issue frame is particularly susceptible to sourcing bias, because as Callaghan and Schnell (2009) showed, support for a given issue depends not only on how the information is presented, but who (or what) is presenting the information. In this particular frame, sources can be used to advance ideas and lend legitimacy to certain ideas, even going so far as to use frames to distort information. Because of this, issue framing in particular affects the relationship between sourcing and framing in journalism.

Issue framing also proves difficult because covering issues requires more time for research and technical explanations, unlike a story that detailing strategies which reporters find easier (Kanniss, 1995). Comparing the policy positions of candidates also potentially opens a journalist up to criticisms and allegations of partisan bias toward a certain candidate



(Gulati et al., 2008). Put another way, it is easier for reporters to report the facts rather than the causes and effects of policies and the issues at their origin (Lippmann, 1922).

Another common frame during elections, the image frame focuses primarily on a candidate's personal qualities (appearance, character qualities, quirks, etc.) and can include items such as personal anecdotes told by the candidate or their surrogate (such as a spouse or a fellow member of the candidate's political party). The image frame, also sometimes called the attribute frame, becomes prominent when trying to humanize a candidate. For example, a candidate could portray his or her role in an event, such as balancing a national budget, in such a way that is consistent with the self-image of authority he or she wishes to reflect on to voters (Hallahan, 1999). In this way, the candidate is maximizing the perceived benefits of his character because voters tend to attribute causes to personal actions rather than problems endemic to society.

Another commonly used during elections is the human-interest frame. Ordinarily used to provide an anecdote readers can use to relate to the material on a more personal level, the human-interest frame is used to "humanize" an abstract idea and help the reader relate to the subject. The human-interest frame puts a "human face and emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue, or problem," so it allows media consumers to relate what is being discussed to their own lives (Cho & Gower, 2006, p. 420). This frame can include "first-person" accounts of how an issue or policy affected a given person's life or general information paragraphs, such as the number of people attending a campaign rally. This kind of frame that provides general information about an event and demonstrates the different causes and effects should increase reader understanding of what exactly is going on within the political realm (Berinsky & Kinder, 2006).

Given the importance of framing in shaping audiences' interpretations of news events, the second research question asks,

**RQ2: What were the dominant frames used by college newspapers in their 2012 election coverage?**

Given the fact that this study examines newspapers in so-called swing states, which had a high number of undecided voters or a very balanced support for both party tickets, as well as a heightened campaign presence in the state, the third research question asks,

**RQ3: What was the tone of college newspapers' coverage of the two candidates in the 2012 election?**

Finally, the study aims to test the relationship between sourcing and framing, and asks,

**RQ4: Is there a correlation between sourcing and the dominant frames in college newspaper stories covering the 2012 election?**

## CHAPTER 3

## METHOD

For this study, a content analysis of campus newspapers in three swing states was conducted. These articles were collected from campuses spanning the country from west to east: Iowa State University, the University of Iowa, the Ohio State University, the University of Cincinnati, the University of North Carolina, and North Carolina State University. These schools were chosen because of their location in a swing state and because they rank in the top two in their respective states in terms of number of students enrolled. They were also chosen because they regularly publish a print edition of their newspaper, meaning a large number of students would presumably read it often as the studies previously cited state.

Articles published from August 20, 2012, through the day after Election Day (November 7, 2012) pertaining to the presidential campaigns and election between Democratic incumbent, President Barack Obama, and Republican contender Mitt Romney were collected for analysis. A total of 259 articles were collected from the six papers for analysis. These articles related to one or both of the candidates for president and/or the respective campaign(s). Each individual news article was considered to be the unit of analysis. All articles were retrieved via each university's digital repository located on Issuu with the exception of the *Iowa State Daily* articles, from which articles were clipped from each day's newspaper due to the close proximity and availability to the researcher.

The categories of this content analysis capture different characteristics. Article number, newspaper of origin, total number of paragraphs in the story, writer of the story (student journalist, or "staff," versus a wire story) and the primary candidate discussed in the article were classified. Each article counted how many sources total were cited and then

further broken down into how many paragraphs cited each source. If the source was a student at the university but was aligned with a political party club on campus, the paragraph was classified as a “Democrat Student Leader” or “Republican Student Leader.” Paragraphs where other members of the student population were used as sources (For example, “Junior economics major Joe Smith said...” were classified as the student population.

Representatives of the Democratic Party (local and national party officials, Obama campaign surrogates and staffers, Vice President Joe Biden and his wife Dr. Jill Biden, and First Lady Michelle Obama) were classified as paragraphs with Democrats. Representatives of the Republican Party (again, local and national party officials, Romney campaign surrogates and staffers, Romney running mate Paul Ryan, and Romney’s wife Ann) were classified as paragraphs with Republicans. Paragraphs that cited members of the university faculty (for example, “Dr. Mike Johnson, professor of political science, said...” were cited as paragraphs with academics/professors. Paragraphs citing a source with his or her occupation (actors visiting campus, local business owners, etc.) were classified as paragraphs with experts/professionals in general. Paragraphs citing Obama himself or Romney himself were classified accordingly. Paragraphs citing local citizens, (For example, “Susan Bartlet of Ames said...” were classified as paragraphs with citizens. Paragraphs citing documents (flyers, press releases, newspaper articles, etc.) were cited as paragraphs with documents. This is different from paragraphs citing places like the Pew Research Center or other, similar institutes. These paragraphs were classified as paragraphs with polls/research institutions. Sources that were used but did not fall into one of these established categories were classified as paragraphs with other.

Each paragraph was coded to see what frame (issue, horse-race, game/strategy, human interest, or image/personality) was predominantly used. Paragraphs mentioning a specific issue (the economy, education, etc.) were classified as paragraphs with issue frame. A specific issue had to be mentioned in the paragraph to fit into this category. An issue paragraph typically followed this format:

*While Obama's budget proposal would increase the maximum award for federal Pell grants, which are targeted toward low-income students, vice presidential candidate Paul Ryan advocates a markedly different approach: The U.S. House Budget Committee chairman's proposal would repeal recent expansions to Pell grant eligibility and set a maximum award level of \$5,550 for aid recipients. (The Daily Tar Heel, September 7, 2012)*

Paragraphs describing polling numbers and a candidate's prospects for winning the election using hard numbers and statistics to achieve a given outcome were classified as having the horse race frame. A sample horse-race paragraph reads as:

*According to Associated Press polls released Thursday, Obama still leads 50-44 in Ohio polls. The random survey of Ohio residents was taken earlier this month, and Kiriaka said it shows just how close the race for Ohio is. (The Lantern, August 27, 2012)*

Paragraphs detailing strategy tactics, goals for the campaign (including how to get certain demographics to vote for a particular candidate), the process of winning, and aiming to defeat the opponent were classified as the game/strategy frame. To be placed in this category, certain trigger words were assessed, such as "aim/hope/goal/strategy/etc." If these words were present, it was classified accordingly. A sample game/strategy frame paragraph read as follows:

*With Iowa as one of the most divided political states in the country and its six electoral votes up for grabs, there is little doubt in anyone's mind that both the Obama and Romney campaigns will be making a serious play for Iowa, especially with young voters.*

(Iowa State Daily, August 28, 2012)

Anytime an attempt was made to humanize a complex issue or help readers better understand a difficult and/or abstract idea, the paragraph was classified as the human interest frame. A sample human-interest paragraph by a student journalist reads:

*Janet Lewis, 25, a law student at the University of Louisville, said she is already \$93,000 in debt with student loans and came out to support the president Tuesday. Not everyone, she said, can afford to borrow money from their parents, which is one suggestion Romney has made for students who can't afford college of their own.* (The Lantern, August 22, 2012)

If an attempt was made to highlight the candidate's image (discussing his looks and/or personality characteristics) the paragraph was classified as having the image/personality frame. . A sample image/personality paragraph reads as:

*"He's brilliant, and he's an intellectual powerhouse," said Terri Haag, of Raleigh. "What more could you ask for?"* (Daily Tarheel, August 23, 2012)

To see what issues were discussed in each article, a list was made of issues common in an election cycle (such as the economy, education, and social issues) and coders were instructed to denote all that applied to the article. If the topic was not listed but was discussed, coders could note that on the form. A 3-point Likert scale was used to assess the overall tone each article had toward each candidate. The tone toward the candidate could be

classified as negative, neutral, or positive. If the candidate was not mentioned in the article, a “Not Applicable” (N/A) option was used.

Two independent coders coded 10 percent of the sample, and intercoder reliability coefficients ranged from .7 to 1 using Hosti’s formula for nominal variables and Pearson Correlation for interval variables. Framing and sourcing measurement was done at the paragraph level (that is, coders counted the numbers of paragraphs that were attributed to various sources or employed various frames), whereas topic and tone measurement was done at the story level.

## CHAPTER 4

## RESULTS

The goal of this study was to determine how a sampling of college newspapers in potentially significant “swing states” cover an event such as the presidential election. This larger inquiry was then broken down into the four research questions explained previously. Of the 259 articles collected from six different newspapers, 33 were from *The Iowa State Daily* (Iowa State University), 60 were from *The Daily Iowan* (University of Iowa), 46 were from *The Lantern* (Ohio State University), 23 were from *The News Record* (University of Cincinnati), 59 were from *The Daily Tar Heel* (University of North Carolina), and 38 were from *The Technician* (North Carolina State University). Five of the six newspapers publish on a Monday through Friday schedule, with the *News Record* publishing three days a week. A total of 209 stories (or 81 percent) were written by reporters on the newspapers’ staff, and 50 stories (or 19 percent) originated from wire services, such as the Associated Press, McClatchy-Tribune information services, or CNN. Stories varied in length from 4 to 64 paragraphs, with an average of 19 paragraphs. In terms of focus, 33 percent of the stories were exclusively about Obama, 19 percent were dedicated to Romney alone, and slightly less than half of the population (47 percent) covered both candidates. Analyses of variance ( $F=7.75, p<.001$ ) with Bonferroni post-hoc tests found that the stories about Mitt Romney were significantly shorter (Mean=14) than both stories about Barack Obama (M=20) and stories that covered both candidates (M=22).

It was important to examine what the dominant issues were of the college newspaper campaign coverage, because it was vital to see whether audience expectations (that is, writers covering topics particularly relevant to their student audience) or if it was the candidate’s



activities that drove the coverage of student newspapers. Those results are summarized in Table 1. Descriptive statistics showed that 29% of stories did not cover any issue whatsoever. In the stories that did cover issues related to the election, the dominant issue by far was the economy. Half of those stories (50 percent) focused on the economy and related topics (budgets, jobs, labor). Health care was the second most covered issue (22 percent of stories). Social issues (civil rights, women issues, LGBT issues) were covered in 17 percent of stories. Student loans and debt were discussed in 15 percent of stories, with education covered 14 percent of stories. Issues such as foreign affairs, war, energy, defense, and immigration were covered in fewer than 10% of the stories. Independent-sample t-tests found no significant differences in terms of issue coverage between staff and wire stories.

**Table 1. Differences in issue coverage between staff and wire stories (independent samples t-test)**

Issues Covered	Percentage of stories that cover an issue <i>Entire sample</i>	Percentage of stories that cover an issue <i>Staff stories</i>	Percentage of stories that cover an issue <i>Wire stories</i>	t
<b>None</b>	29.3	30.1	26.0	4.10**
<b>Economy/Budget/Jobs</b>	50.2	47.8	58.0	-10.2**
<b>Student loans/Debt</b>	15.1	15.7	12.0	3.70**
<b>Social Issues</b>	16.9	17.2	18.0	0.80*
<b>Foreign Affairs</b>	10.0	8.1	18.0	-9.90*
<b>War/National Security</b>	10.8	11.0	12.0	-1.00**
<b>Education</b>	13.9	16.7	2.0	14.7**
<b>Health care/Medicare</b>	22.0	23.0	18.0	5.00**
<b>Other</b>	15.1	14.8	14.0	0.80**

\*\*p<.01, \*p<.001

To answer RQ1, which asked what were the main sources that college newspapers relied upon in the 2012 election coverage, independent samples t-tests were run to explore differences between the stories filed by student reporters and the stories clipped from news wires. These t-tests were utilized in order to examine how the two populations are different, particularly since the normal distributions were unknown. On average, a student story cited

about five sources per story (M=5.31) whereas a wire story only cited about three sources (M=3.07). The difference is statistically significant ( $t=4.64$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Table 2 shows differences in mean numbers of paragraphs attributed to various sources. Independent samples t-tests found significant differences between student and wire stories across all categories, except citizens and polls/research institutes. The most cited sources by college-originated stories were students (M=1.75 paragraphs per story, significantly more than wire stories, where M=.38) and professors (M=2.15). Obama (M=1.58) and Democrats (M=1.84) followed as most cited sources, outnumbering Romney and Republicans by about 100% respectively. In contrast, wire stories relied most on Republicans (M=1.94), Obama (M=1.22), and Romney (M=1.18).

**Table 2. Differences in use of sources between student and wire election stories (independent samples t-tests)**

Sources	Mean number of paragraphs <i>Entire sample</i>	Mean number of paragraphs <i>Staff stories</i>	Mean number of paragraphs <i>Wire stories</i>	t
<b>Student population</b>	2.13	1.75	.38	4.26**
<b>Democrat student leaders</b>	.77	.73	.04	1.54**
<b>Republican student leaders</b>	.92	.70	.22	1.82**
<b>Democrats</b>	2.64	1.84	.80	5.28*
<b>Republicans</b>	3.05	1.11	1.94	-6.10*
<b>Professors</b>	2.63	2.15	.48	5.26**
<b>Professionals</b>	2.12	1.82	.30	4.24**
<b>Obama</b>	2.80	1.58	1.22	5.60**
<b>Romney</b>	2.03	.85	1.18	4.06*
<b>Polls/research institutes</b>	1.61	.79	.82	-3.22
<b>Citizens</b>	.91	.55	.36	1.82
<b>Documents</b>	.88	.66	.22	1.76**
<b>N</b>	259	209	50	

\*\*p<.01, \*p<.001

RQ2 asked what the dominant frames were in college newspaper coverage of the 2012 presidential campaign and the results are summarized in Table 3. Paragraph-by-paragraph analysis found that the most employed frames were human interest (with an average of  $M=6.75$  paragraphs per story). Issue frame was the next most employed frame used by college newspapers ( $M=6.06$ ), with the game/strategy ( $M=4.96$ ) frame following. Image/personality ( $M=0.93$ ), and horse race ( $M=0.83$ ) were the frames used least by student newspapers

When comparing staff stories to those pulled off of wire services, t-tests found that staff stories employed significantly more issue frames ( $M=6.06$ ) than wire stores ( $M=2.86$ ), as well as significantly more human-interest frames ( $M=6.75$  for staff stories;  $M=2.64$  for wire stories).

**Table 3. Differences in use of frames between student and wire election stories (independent samples t-tests)**

Sources	Mean number of paragraphs <i>Entire sample</i>	Mean number of paragraphs <i>Staff stories</i>	Mean number of paragraphs <i>Wire stories</i>	t
<b>Issue</b>	5.44	6.06	2.86	3.20**
<b>Horse Race</b>	0.81	0.77	0.72	0.05**
<b>Game/Strategy</b>	4.92	4.96	4.76	0.02**
<b>Human Interest</b>	5.96	6.75	2.64	4.11*
<b>Image/Personality</b>	3.05	1.11	1.20	-0.09*

\*\* $p<.001$ , \* $p<.05$

RQ3 asked about the tone conveyed regarding both candidates in college newspaper election coverage. Descriptive analysis found that of the stories that were about Romney, 58 percent were neutral, 13.5 percent were negative, and 9 percent were positive. Cross-tabulations found that wire stories tended to be more negative (16 percent) than staff stories (13 percent) and less neutral (60 percent versus 57 percent), but Pearson Chi-Square tests did not reach significance. On a 3-point Likert scale where 1=negative and 3=positive, the tone

toward Romney was  $M=2.02$ . That level was slightly lower for wire stories ( $M=1.95$ ), but t-tests found no significant differences.

**Table 4. Differences in tone toward each candidate (crosstabs)**

	Tone Obama			Tone Romney		
	<i>Entire Sample</i>	<i>Wire Stories</i>	<i>Staff Stories</i>	<i>Entire Sample</i>	<i>Wire Stories</i>	<i>Staff Stories</i>
<b>Positive</b>	<b>18%</b>	8%	20%	<b>9%</b>	16%	8%
<b>Neutral</b>	<b>61%</b>	54%	63%	<b>58%</b>	60%	57%
<b>Negative</b>	<b>9%</b>	24%*	10%*	<b>13.5%</b>	16%	13%
	$X^2 = 11.62, p<.05$			$X^2 = 7.64, p=.054$		

N=259. Numbers represent percentages of stories.

\*Pairwise comparison with Bonferroni method is statistically significant.

Percentages don't add up to 100 because stories could have been classified as N/A.

Fewer stories were neutral in their tone toward Obama (61 percent). About 18 percent had a positive tone toward the incumbent, and 9 percent had a negative tone. Once again, the wire stories tended to be more negative (24 percent versus 10 percent of staff stories) and less neutral (54 percent neutral versus 63 percent neutral among staff stories). The difference between the negative stories by staff writers and those by wire services about Obama reached statistical significance. On the 3-point Likert scale, the tone toward Obama was  $M=2.09$ . Once again, that value was lower for wire stories ( $M=1.96$ ), but the t-test was again not statistically significant. About 13.5 percent of stories had a negative tone toward Romney, while 9 percent had a positive tone. Overall, a slightly higher percentage of stories had a negative tone toward Obama versus toward Romney, but twice as many stories had a positive tone toward the incumbent versus toward the contender. When comparing the tone toward the two candidates, one-sample t-tests found that the values were virtually identical (and neutral on average, hovering around 2 on the 3-point tone scale).

To answer RQ4, a series of linear regressions were run to investigate whether certain sources predicted a certain coverage tone. Table 5 shows that sources such as Republicans

(campaign operatives and party officials) in general and Mitt Romney himself significantly predicted a negative tone toward Obama, whereas citing Obama or average citizens tended to result in a positive tone toward him.

An identical regression model was run with tone toward Romney as a dependent variable, but no type of source reached statistical significance, with the exception of Republicans and professionals, both of which predicted a slight increase in positive tone toward the contender.

**Table 5. Linear regression analysis with tone toward Obama as dependent variable and types of sources as predictors (R=.57, R Square=.32)**

Sources	B	s.e.	F
(Constant)	1.985	.085	10.823**
Students	.093	.011	1.561
Democrats	.380	.015	6.294
Republicans	-.099	.017	-1.650**
Academics/Professors	-.048	.010	.831
Experts/Professionals	.045	.014	.769
Obama	.286	.016	4.483**
Romney	-.058	.020	-.917*
Citizens	.058	.043	-1.003*

\*\*p<.01, \*p<.001

To test the relationship between sourcing and framing, a series of linear regressions were run with the number of paragraphs with each type of frame (human interest, issue, game, strategy, image) as dependent variables. Citing citizens, student population, and professionals demonstrated an increase in human-interest framing (Table 6). Citing either candidate, as well as professionals, professors, and Republicans, meant an increase in issue framing (Table 7). None of the sources significantly predicted horse-race framing, but polls/research institutes approached significance (B=.257, s.e.=.15, p=.08). Party officials (both Republicans and Democrats), professors, and Obama demonstrated an increase in the game/strategy frame, whereas citing average citizens tended to negatively demonstrate this

type of frame (Table 5). Finally, image/personality framing significantly and positively correlated with use of sources such as Republicans, professors, the two candidates, and citizens (Table 6). No type of source had a negative relationship with image framing.

As demonstrated in Table 6, a typical paragraph with human interest as the dominant frame looked similar to this one pulled from *The Daily Tarheel* on September 7, 2012.

*“No family should have to set aside a college acceptance letter because they don’t have the money,” he [Obama] said.*

The paragraph uses a student speaker who also identifies as a Democrat, as is also demonstrated in Table 6 as having significance.

**Table 6. Linear regression to predict types of sources and the human interest frame**

Sources	B	Std. Error	F
(Constant)	4.052	.721	5.620**
Students	1.058	.116	9.116**
Democrats	-.142	.106	-1.343
Republicans	-.199	.137	-1.454
Professors	-.019	.094	-.200
Professionals	.481	.106	4.530**
Obama	-.090	.113	-.800
Romney	-.498	.177	-2.822
Citizens	.882	.220	4.004*
Polls/research institutes	-.266	.198	-1.347

**R=.62; R-Square=.39; \*\*p<.01, \*p<.001**

When issue was the dominant frame, professors and academics seemed to be the most utilized sources, as this sample paragraph and Table 7 demonstrates.

*[Professor of Political Science Mack] Shelley went on to add: “I don’t think he [Romney] is focused on education; I think he’s focused on jobs. I think the argument is once you get through college, you can get a job once you’ve graduated. (Iowa State Daily, October 26, 2012)*

**Table 7. Linear regression to predict types of sources and the issue frame**

Sources	B	s.e.	F
(Constant)	-2.720	.767	-3.546
Students	.147	.124	1.187
Democrats	.477	.113	4.234
Republicans	.758	.146	5.205*
Professors	.584	.100	5.838**
Professionals	.648	.113	5.738*
Obama	.711	.120	5.942*
Romney	1.367	.188	7.276**
Citizens	.241	.234	1.028
Polls/research institutes	.466	.210	2.216

**R=.63; R-Square=.40; \*\*p<.001, \*p<.05**

By providing some insight into answering the how and why questions of political campaign strategies, academics and professors also proved to be indicating sources of the game/strategy frame, as this sample paragraph discussing the campaigns trying to get college students to utilize early voting in North Carolina demonstrates:

*Steve Greene, a political science professor at N.C. State University, said Republicans traditionally push the mail-in ballot, while early in-person voting has historically helped boost the Democratic vote. Although Obama received less votes on Election Day in 2008, early votes still carried him through (The Daily Tarheel, October 22, 2012).*

Table 8 further demonstrates what sources led to the use of the game/strategy frame.

For the image/personality frame, the candidates themselves seemed to be the dominant source used in those paragraphs. This is not entirely surprising, given how candidates usually try to bolster their qualities in an effort to get votes, as this sample paragraph and Table 9 demonstrates:

*“We’ve been in your shoes. Neither of us came from wealthy families, both of us graduated from law school with a mound of debt. When we got married, we got poor together,” he [Obama] said. “We paid more on our student loans than we did on our mortgage and that went on for years.” (The Lantern, August 22, 2012)*

**Table 8. Linear regression to predict types of sources and the game/strategy frame**

Sources	B	s.e.	F
(Constant)	3.316	.613	5.413*
Student Population	-.169	.099	-1.709
Democrats	.331	.090	3.676**
Republicans	.357	.116	3.067*
Professors	.317	.080	3.969**
Professionals	.055	.090	.613
Obama	.279	.096	2.917*
Romney	-.237	.150	-1.582
Citizens	-.308	.187	-1.646*
Polls/research institutes	.047	.168	.282

R=.52; R-Square=.27 \*\*p<.01, \*p<.001

**Table 9. Linear regression to predict types of sources and the image frame**

Sources	B	s.e.	F
(Constant)	.198	.222	.894
Student Population	-.001	.036	-.021
Democrats	.124	.033	3.793
Republicans	.126	.042	2.987**
Professors	.087	.029	3.010**
Paragraphs with Professionals	-.006	.033	-.185
Obama	.086	.035	2.495**
Romney	.174	.054	3.209**
Citizens	.199	.068	2.940*
Polls/research institutes	-.075	.061	-1.240

R=.65; R-Square=.42 \*\*p<.01, \*p<.001



## CHAPTER 5

## DISCUSSION

Overall, this study found notable differences in the ways college newspapers source and frame their election coverage compared to professional news outlets. Unlike national newspapers, which favor political elites and horserace framing, student newspapers seem to rely on more sources overall and on more sources of interest to their student audiences, such as students and professors. This makes sense, given the accessibility and credibility of these types of sources in the college campus context, but student media also do a good job of balancing these viewpoints with a variety of other types of sources, such as those of campaign officials, professionals, and citizens not affiliated with the college or university. This demonstrates the practice of principled reporting by young reporters. Perhaps because they do not have professional biases yet, they are able to provide more issue-oriented coverage for their readers.

In the same vein of issue-oriented coverage, staff journalists also seem to bring more issue-oriented news coverage to their public, since issue framing tends to dominate, followed by human-interest framing. This is a far cry from national media, which overwhelmingly focus on horse race, strategy and conflict (Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2012). As was stated earlier in the literature review, human interest classified anything from getting an audience member's perception of an event, an anecdote about how a given policy would affect "average" citizens, or just a paragraph giving statistics of where an event was held and how many people attended. Because of the broad nature of the category, it is not entirely surprising that the human interest numbers were so high.

The current study demonstrates a departure from the journalistic norm of treating candidates as though they are players in a football game angling for the best position to win. College newspapers still engage in this framing technique, but emphasize it less than their professional counterparts, allocating more space for more issue-oriented and human-interest stories demonstrating the impact of the candidates.

Diddi and LaRose (2006) found that college-aged consumers of media are driven by “surveillance and escapism” needs. The fact that the college newspapers scrutinized in this study focused on issue and human-interest coverage seems to be gratifying exactly those needs. Because researchers have wondered whether or not journalists are providing their readers with the kind of campaign information that will help them make an informed decision, this study demonstrates that in the college newspaper field, readers may be getting that issue-filled information they want to take with them into the voting booth.

While the tone of the election coverage was predominantly neutral, with no significant differences in bias toward Obama versus toward Romney, this study found that Democrats were used as sources slightly more often than Republicans, and that there were twice as many paragraphs citing Obama. That could be a function of the availability of the sources, and also of the fact that the Obama campaign visited three of the campuses under investigation more often than the Romney team (Dwyer, Friedman, & Ng, 2012). Romney visited Ohio more times than Obama (51 visits versus 22), explaining why the Ohio campus newspaper actually relied most extensively on Republican sources, both in the form of Republican office-holders and campaign officials, and from Republican student leaders.

This study found interesting correlations between sourcing and framing. Citing the student population, citizens, and professionals correlated with increased use of the human-

interest frame. It is notable that these precise three types of sources predicted completely different story tones: When looking at the student population, it was discovered that sourcing that population did not favor one side over another. The citizen population, however, made a difference toward Obama, while the expert/professional population made a difference in Romney's favor.

In terms of tone, using Republicans as sources predicted, not surprisingly, a negative tone toward Obama and a positive tone toward Romney. Using Democrat officials as sources, however, did not make a difference in the tone of the coverage. In an election, candidates usually try to drum up support and excitement in order to entice voters to cast ballots for them. Both Obama and Romney did just that when they were cited in articles, leading to some prevalence of positivity in the candidate in question's direction. Citation of Democrat officials did not correlate with any of the frames either, with the exception of the strategy frame.

Even though they did not make a difference for either candidate in terms of tone, the top source cited was the student population. Staff stories used the student population more often than wire stories, which could be explained by their close proximity to the student population. This top grouping also did not make a difference in framing except predicting the use of human-interest frames. This, again, could be explained by a close proximity to the student population and being driven by a desire to "humanize" political issues, such as jobs, health care, social issues, or student debt, which were the most covered topics.

The fact that Republicans, Democrats, Obama, and Romney were not the most cited sources for stories goes against typical patterns of election news coverage. This study looked at newspapers in swing states, which benefitted from many visits by the two campaigns.

However, just because a campaign made many visits to a particular state, these candidates may not have made many visits to the campuses themselves. To possibly compensate for this, the staffs of campus newspapers turned to their peers in the student population and the academics on faculty at their respective universities, thus challenging the sourcing theory of a “cozy relationship” between journalists and political elites.

This study found major differences between staff and wire stories. The wire stories utilized polls and party officials more frequently than staff stories. Wire stories also used fewer sources than staff stories. Perhaps this difference between the staff and wire stories could be explained by the low frequency in which wire stories were put in print. For instance, at the *Iowa State Daily*, wire stories were only pulled if the newspaper lacked original content and the space needed to be filled. However, an inquiry of this nature was beyond the scope of this study. While wire stories provide stories college newspapers might not normally have access to, it can be said without reservation that staff stories do a better job of serving their audiences along the lines of diversity of topics and sources prescribed by Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007).

### **Implications of Current Study**

This study’s contribution is two-fold: while it sheds light into a type of news coverage generally neglected by scholarship, it also provides hope for the state of journalism training and insight into what we might expect from the next generation of reporters.

It was stated earlier how college students are not eschewing traditional print media in favor of online and electronic news sources. Because of this, it is important for studies like this to show researchers what kinds of information college students get from local university media sources. This study demonstrates that, for the most part, college students get adequate

issue-related information that they can take with them in their voting decisions. By not entirely focusing on the horse-race or game aspects of the campaign season, readers of college media are getting a broader array of information relating to the issues, something voters routinely cite as information they want in deciding who to vote for in elections.

Coverage of the presidential election cycle is widely studied by scholars. Because of this, it was expected that even though college newspapers are generally localized in their coverage, the norms of traditional newspapers would follow suit. Instead, we found that college newspapers greatly deviate from the traditional norms.

With sourcing theory, it has been found that traditional newspapers tend to rely on the “usual suspects,” or those considered in “official” circles to become the dominant voices on the subject. Other, non-official sources, such as citizens, are used to bolster those views voiced by the official sources. This study found that the dominant voices used most often by student newspapers were what traditional newspapers would consider non-official sources, such as the academics, citizens, and the student population. This was not entirely surprising, because student newspapers naturally do not have the same type of access to candidates and campaigns usually granted to traditional newspapers. But instead of seeing this as a disadvantage, perhaps it is important to see it as an advantage for college newspapers. Because they do not have the same levels of access, they are able to write free of professional biases. The writers are better able to bring issue-specific coverage to their readers and are able to humanize abstract concepts in a way that readers can clearly understand how each candidate’s platform will affect them should they be elected. In short, college newspapers are better able to provide the type of issue-specific coverage that clearly demonstrates the link

between the campaign and average citizens many readers, even those who primarily read traditional media, regularly report wanting to see.

In terms of framing theory, traditional newspapers place a heavy emphasis on the horse-race and game/strategy frames in covering presidential elections, with little to no emphasis usually placed on the issue or human interest frames. This study found the opposite trends to be true. In college newspapers, staff writers placed a heavy emphasis on issue and human interest frames, with horse-race and strategy coverage playing more of a supporting role in coverage. As with sourcing theory previously discussed above, the type of sources available and subsequently cited in articles play a huge role in what frames were used in coverage. Again, perhaps it is important to see this trend as an advantage for student newspapers.

### **Limitations of Current Study**

The current study focused on six campus newspapers, two each from three political swing states. One limitation, then, of the current study is that it looks at only a select few swing states. Perhaps if we expanded the study to include newspapers from all swing states, the results would be comparatively different. The results would also be affected if we included non-swing states in the analysis as well.

Another limitation is that we looked at one election cycle. The coverage levels of the 2012 presidential election may be different from elections past, or those elections yet to happen. This is an area for future study.

The coding of the paragraphs classified as having the human nature frame could be considered another limitation of the study. Because of the broad nature of the category previously discussed, the results for human interest could have been uncharacteristically

high. Perhaps in another, similar study, research could break that category up into two categories classified as “human interest” and “general information” or “scene setting information.”

A final limitation of the study lies in the sample size. When comparing tone for the two candidates, for instance, wire stories about Romney only totaled eight stories out of the entire 259 article sample. Perhaps having either a higher number of wire stories or a higher total sample size would have affected certain calculations of numbers, allowing for more statistically significant numbers.

### **Areas for Future Study**

Future studies could test college newspaper coverage for the remaining elements of quality journalism as defined by Kovach and Rosenstiel as well as provide further insight into student media’s newsgathering standards through surveys of college newspaper staff. Another avenue for future study would be to follow a group of student journalists through their time at the campus newspaper to their first jobs in the working world to see how the patterns of sources and frames used change over time. As was stated in the previous section, expanding the study to include all traditional swing states would likely lead to different results, as would a study comparing swing state coverage to non-swing state coverage.

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APPENDIX

**Coding Survey Design**

**Student media 2012 sourcing**

1. Coder

Aimee  
Coder 2

2. Story Number

3. Newspaper

Iowa State  
U of Colorado  
Ohio State  
U of North Carolina  
North Carolina State  
U. of Iowa  
U. of Cincinnati

4. Paragraphs

5. Writer

Staff  
Wire

6. Candidate

Romney & team  
Obama & team  
Both

7. Sources total
8. Paragraphs with Student Population
9. Paragraphs with Democrat Student Leaders
10. Paragraphs with Republican Student Leaders
11. Paragraphs with Democrats
12. Paragraphs with Republicans
13. Paragraphs with Academics/Professors
14. Paragraphs with Experts/Professionals in general
15. Paragraphs with Obama
16. Paragraphs with Romney
17. Paragraphs with citizens
18. Paragraphs with Documents
19. Paragraphs with polls/research institutes
20. Paragraphs with Other sources

21. Paragraphs with Issue frame
22. Paragraphs with Horse Race
23. Paragraphs with Game/Strategy
24. Paragraphs with Human Interest
25. Paragraphs with Image/Personality
26. Issues Presented (Check all that apply)  
NONE  
Economy/Budget/Jobs/Labor  
Student loans/debt  
Social issues  
Foreign affairs  
War/National Security  
Education  
Health care/Medicare  
Other: \_\_\_\_\_



27. Tone Obama  
Unfavorable/Negative/Critical  
Negative

Neutral

Favorable/Positive/Praising  
Positive

N/A

28. Tone Romney  
Unfavorable/Negative/Critical  
Negative

Neutral

Favorable/Positive/Praising  
Positive

N/A