

SELECTIVE POLITICS: THE FRAGMENTATION AND POLARIZATION OF NEWS ON
CABLE TV

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SELECTIVE POLITICS: THE FRAGMENTATION AND POLARIZATION OF NEWS ON CABLE TV

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ABSTRACT

As the number of available outlets for political news grows, so does the tendency of citizens to self-select which news to consume and which to ignore. This news filtering has resulted in media fragmentation-- a situation where different individuals are consuming unique news packages. This paper looks at selectivity by news consumers as well as selectivity by news organizations that must make choices about which news stories to present to the public and which to exclude. This study argues that both types of political media selectivity are largely driven by political belief systems. Using a quantitative content analysis to analyze cable news broadcasts on MSNBC and Fox News, I find that these news outlets have a significant partisan slant, with MSNBC leaning liberal and Fox News leaning conservative. I then performed an audience analysis using the Pew Research Center's 2010 Media Consumption Survey. I show how fragmented cable news audiences are based on party identification and political ideology, with Democrats/liberals gravitating towards MSNBC and Republicans/conservatives relying heavily on Fox News, and both groups largely ignoring the opposing point of view. This study then discusses the polarizing effects of this "echo chamber" news environment, where citizens lack a common frame of reference on political issues and move towards more fiercely partisan, and often radical political opinions.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Mediated Politics	7
Lasswell's Communication Process	8
History of Communications Research	8
Media Effects	11
Mediated & Mediatized Politics	14
Chapter 3: Selectivity in a High Choice Media Environment	19
High Choice News Environment	19
News Consumer Selectivity	22
Political Belief Systems	25
Media Outlet Selectivity	30
Chapter 4: Watching Politics--A History and Evaluation of TV News	33
The Power of Television News	34
Cable News	39
Fox News & MSNBC	43
Chapter 5: Content Analysis--The News on MSNBC and Fox News	55
Methodology	56

Cynicism on Cable News	61
Subjective vs. Objective Reporting	63
Cable News Frames	65
Partisan Bias on Cable News	69
Chapter 6: Audience Analysis: Who's Watching & Why	73
Cable News Demographics	75
Political Attributes of Cable News Viewers	77
Audience Fragmentation by Political Preference	82
Uses and Gratifications: Why Are People Tuning In?	90
Chapter 7: Audience Effects: Political Polarization	97
Lack of Mutual Understanding	101
Radicalization	103
Civility in Political Discourse	107
Chapter 8: Conclusion	110
Methodological Appendix	119
Chapter 5 Appendix	119
Chapter 6 Appendix	123
Works Cited	127

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In October 2010, hundreds of thousands of people descended onto the National Mall for a rally. This was not a rally in the traditional sense. Even with an important congressional election less than a month away, the crowd was not there to support a particular party, cause, or candidate. They were there for “The Rally to Restore Sanity”, hosted by political satirists Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert. At the tail end of a vicious midterm campaign season peppered with such outrageous incidents as a senatorial candidate opening her first TV ad explaining, “I am not a witch,” it seemed likely that this was the “insanity” Stewart was protesting (Farber, 2010). However, It quickly became clear that Stewart was protesting not the insanity of the political establishment, but the insanity of the political media. He railed against what he saw as polarizing and often vitriolic rhetoric continuously on cable news. “If we amplify everything, we hear nothing,” Stewart said, exasperated (Rayfield, 2010). Why was his anger directed at the media and not the government? Likely because he understood just how influential political media are in dictating opinions and ideas to the public. As Rod Hart explains, “A truly rich understanding of modern governance must ask what politics feels like when people watch it” (Hart, 1999).

This study will expound on this idea by investigating both *what* people see on television news as well as *who* sees it. This specific investigation will examine cable news programs on MSNBC and Fox News to illustrate some of the characteristics of, “what politics feels like when people watch it” today. The study will employ both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to gain a more in-depth, and measurable picture of MSNBC and Fox News’ news packages and audience compositions. This analysis will focus on two distinct junctures of media selectivity.

First, selectivity by news organizations that make choices about what kind of content to present to the public, as well as how they will advertise their particular type of news to this audience.

Second, the study investigates selectivity by news consumers who must make choices about what type of news content they want, and ultimately which news outlets they will rely on for political information.

This study hypothesizes that both news organization and news consumer selectivity will be largely influenced by political preferences. News organizations are increasingly moving to a “niche media” model where they no longer strive to broadcast to the largest possible audience with objective coverage, but instead narrowcast their programs to a smaller audience with a particular ideological point of view. Political belief systems also play an important role in determining which media outlets news consumers go to for information, with the majority of people limiting themselves to news that agrees with their preexisting political beliefs. By examining both the content and audiences of MSNBC and Fox News in light of existing research on media effects we will gain a better understanding of the state of political media, and the many ways it can affect not only people’s perceptions of politics, but ultimately participatory democracy in general.

Chapter two will examine the concept of “mediated politics.” Considering that by age 18, the average American is already consuming about 11 hours of media a day (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010), it seems prudent to reexamine the way that the media portray political events to the public. Media effects, or the way media messages influence the audience’s opinions and attitudes; have long been considered an important area of scholarship. Dating back to early propaganda studies following World War One, scholars speculated about how persuasive certain types of media messages could be (Curnalia, 2005). While there was continuing debate within

the academic community about the exact extent of media effects, researchers began to study specific techniques such as message framing and agenda setting as effective measures of shaping public opinion about politics.

Unlike in earlier eras of American governance, citizens seldom have the opportunity to interact directly with their elected leaders. Recently, we have also witnessed a move away from group based social behavior (Putnam, 1995), which stimulates interpersonal communication, towards a more individual and isolated lifestyle, made possible in large part by access to media and the Internet. These two changes have resulted in a monumentally important shift regarding the acquisition of political knowledge-- the vast majority of Americans now get all of their news and information about politics through the media.

This chapter will illustrate that we live in a state of mediated politics, where the political media determine not only which issues are important but also how they fit into the larger political dialogue. Going one step further, I will argue that in many ways, our political establishment has adapted to the structure of the political media, making media effects all the more important to our perception of politics.

Chapter three will discuss the current state of political media. It will first focus on the exponential growth of news outlets from traditional sources like newspapers, radio, and television, to more recent innovations on the Internet like political blogs, online news sites, and social networks. In such a high choice media environment, people will never have time to consume it all, and thus must make choices about which news they consume and which they ignore. This chapter will explore how this inundation of political information undeniably leads to media selectivity, and what different types of selectivity may mean for political compromise and the collective American intelligence. With a focus on political preferences as a driver of media

choice, this chapter will provide support for the notion that news organizations tailor their content to fit with the ideologies of their target audience, and further, that news consumers will choose those media outlets that confirm their preexisting political beliefs. What we find is a cycle between news outlets reflecting the partisan opinions of their audiences, and audiences continually searching for news that is most in line with their beliefs.

Chapter four will examine political news on television, and cable news specifically. Revisiting seminal research about the persuasive powers of television news, and specifically political news on TV, it will provide a context for the importance of understanding media messages on television today. There is much agreement in the academic community about the power of television. Statistics show that despite the emergence of Internet news outlets, TV remains people's number one source of news with 66% of Americans naming TV as their main source of news in 2011 (Pew Research Center, 2011). Further, countless studies have demonstrated the intense persuasive power of TV messages (Hart, 1999).

This chapter will then turn its focus to cable news; illustrating the specific persuasive elements found within these broadcasts and highlighting why cable news is particularly important to the study of political media and media effects. Unlike the network newscasts on NBC, ABC, and CBS, which have all witnessed a decline in their audiences over the past several decades (Davis & Owen, 1998), cable news networks have enjoyed rising viewership, especially during times of crisis or major political events (Bae, 2000). Further, research shows that cable news audiences are, for the most part, more politically knowledgeable, engaged and active than the general population (Baum, 2003). These people are likely to work to shape actual political happenings, and perhaps more importantly, to influence the political views of others. Finally,

chapter 4 will trace the history of MSNBC and Fox News, with a particular focus on their levels of partisanship and the way they advertise their news packages to the public.

Chapter five will build on the discussion of cable news with a content analysis of the two networks. While both MSNBC and Fox News have garnered a lot of attention in recent years, mostly due to their perceived partisan bias, this study will use a novel content analysis to objectively illustrate how vastly different the two news packages are. The analysis will reveal stark differences between the two networks, and will quantify levels of ideological bias. Next, it will look at the overall tone of the networks. Here, I will show that cable news presents a very negative view of politics and illustrate just how much subjective commentary is present on these networks.

Chapter six will explore the current audience composition of MSNBC and Fox News through several statistical models. These models will support the hypothesis that audiences are fragmented according to their political preferences. The data will also support the claim that cable news audiences are overall more politically interested and knowledgeable than the general population. Further, this chapter will explore people's motivations for choosing specific media outlets. This uses and gratifications model will illuminate some of the confusion about what type of news products come out of MSNBC and Fox News. Here, the analysis will work to answer questions including, why do people chose certain media outlets over others? And is their perception of the news they consume in line with what is actually being presented? Data will show that many news consumers chose these outlets in search of objective reporting while others turned to cable news for opinionated commentary. These findings raise important questions about audience perception of cable news. If news consumers are unknowingly turning to politically biased news outlets in search of objective reporting, we can begin to see how different

groups will come away from divergent news outlets with vastly different versions of political reality.

Chapter seven will discuss the ramifications of a partisan and fragmented news environment. It will examine how the fragmented political news environment, where consumers are unaware of just what type of news package they are getting, can lead to difficulty in mutual understanding and opinion radicalization among the American electorate and ultimately the American government. With both MSNBC and Fox News seamlessly vacillating between objective reporting and opinionated commentary, viewers can easily become confused about just what kind of news they are getting, and thus accept either networks' "spin" as fact. These divergent depictions of reality will undoubtedly impact the audiences' perception of the real world.

This chapter will examine not only these differing perceptions of political reality based on news outlets choice, but also what happens to people's political opinions when they are confined to news spaces where they hear only louder echoes of their own voice (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). Studies have already shown that people who are part of groups comprised only of like-minded individuals tend to move towards greater attitude extremity (Mutz, 2006). A fragmented news environment will lead to a decay of a common frame of reference for citizens; who will lack information on broad issue topics, and ignore the opposing point of view on issues they consider important (Tewksbury, 2006). What effects will this have on our participatory democracy? The answer remains to be seen-- but with a steadfastly partisan Congress in Washington, and an angry, doggedly stubborn electorate, there are indications that political discussion, compromise and progress are already becoming much more difficult.

CHAPTER 2: MEDIATED POLITICS

Scholars have long understood the important role the media play in influencing public opinion and shaping people's perceptions of the world. However, the debate over how influential the media actually are is apparent even from the earliest studies of political communication in the 1920s. One body of research, born from work in the mid-1930s on World War One propaganda, held that media messages had strong and direct effects on the audience who directly received and wholly accepted the media messages they were exposed to. On the other hand, another cohort of communications scholars found that the media's effect on the audience was much more limited, as early U.S. election studies showed people resisting media messages and relying more heavily on personal communications to inform their political decisions.

When one considers the massive amount of time Americans spend with the media (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010), it becomes clear that this debate must be revisited in light of our current media environment. If the media are in fact an important predictor of public opinion and mass attitudes, then this enormous amount of time spent interacting with the media will likely have serious implications for our society and our political system. It is not only the time spent with media that is a game changer, but also the intense interconnectivity between media and politics-- as mediated communications become the primary way citizens interact with politics, the political establishment has adjusted how they do business to better align with the media system. This chapter will argue that today, the media's influence over public opinion and politics is unprecedented in both size and scope.

Lasswell's Communication Process

In 1948, Harold Lasswell put forth one of the most seminal, and most often cited, characterizations of the communication process. His model looked at several junctures of message transmission to determine the persuasive strength of that message. The summary below illustrates his model for evaluating media messages:

Who says What to Whom in What Channel with What Effect

This model is quite sophisticated as it considers not only the sender and receiver as important components of the message's ultimate effect, but also the outlet through which it is transmitted. This early theory will be very informative to the novel research in this study as "the channel" of message transmission will be a primary consideration as I focus on cable news networks. Further, this study will address each of Lasswell's junctures in an effort to draw conclusions about the overall effects of political media messages on cable TV.

History of Communications Research

It is useful to examine how theories of media influence developed in the 20th century as a means of understanding where the body of research stands today. Most of these models focus only on one or two of Lasswell's communications junctures, which may explain some of the contradictory findings and debates over media effects. Beginning in the 1920s, communications scholars believed that the media had a strong and direct influence on people's opinions. This was called the "full effects model", or the

“hypodermic model”. Elihu Katz conducted one of the seminal studies in this area in 1953. He summarized the theory well in this excerpt:

In short the model of the mass persuasion process looked like this: There were the powerful mass media, on one hand, sending forth their message, and the atomized mass of individuals, on the other, rather directly and immediately responding—and nothing in between (Katz, 1953).

In this case, scholars thought they observed a simple stimulus- response reaction where information was “injected” directly from the media into people’s beliefs. The sender, or the media, was dominant, while the receiver, or audience, was completely passive (Katz, 1953). An illustrative example of this model is found in the “War of the Worlds” study from 1938, where radio messages, based on the science fiction novel by H.G. Wells about an alien attack in New Jersey, almost immediately caused mass panic (Cantril et al., 1940).

In the 1950s, Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet published a groundbreaking study titled, *The People's Choice*. This study was originally intended to support the “full effects model” by focusing on the process of decision-making during a presidential election campaign (Lazarsfeld et al., 1952). They expected to find empirical support for the direct influence of media messages on voting intentions. Instead, they found that informal, personal contacts were mentioned far more frequently than exposure to radio or newspaper as sources of influence on voting behavior. These new findings led Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues at Columbia University to develop the “two step flow model,” which was a corollary to what was known as the “limited effects model.” The limited effects model said that mass

communications has only small direct effects on the audience. As a follow up to *The People's Choice*, Lazarsfeld coauthored another important piece of scholarship that illustrates the move away from the “hypodermic model”, called *Voting* (1954). Introducing a chapter on political processes the authors explain:

Typical debates about the role of the media too often imply a simple, direct ‘influence’—like a hypodermic stimulus on an inert subject—and that is a naïve formulation of the political effects of mass communications (Berelson et al., 1954: 234).

By 1957, Joseph Klapper had announced that mass communication research was shifting away from the “direct effects model,” and by about 1960, almost all scholars included quotation marks when referencing the term “hypodermic” (Klapper, 1960; Park & Pooley, 2008).

As mentioned above, the new limited effects framework yielded a new conceptualization of media effects, summarized in Lazarsfeld et al’s “two-step flow model”. He contended that media messages are disseminated through personal interaction with opinion leaders, rather than direct contact with the media. The first step was the opinion leader receiving messages directly from the media, and then the second step was where the opinion leaders disseminated these messages to the public. This was a very important turn in the scholarship for several reasons. First, it shifted the focus from the media outlet itself to the outlet’s audience. The two-step flow theory highlights the importance of understanding *who* is exposed to what media, a concept that will become very important to this study as a whole. This theory also breaks with the conventional wisdom that would determine the level of influence a news outlet garners based

solely on the size of the audience. Scholars were now looking at audience composition in a more nuanced manner. They began analyzing not only the size of the audience but also the specific characteristics of that audience, and the differing levels of political activation or passivity among distinct audience segments.

Media Effects

Turning our attention from the history of media effects to the current state of the media environment, it becomes clear further research is necessary. The mainstream media and mass public alike seem to have a sense of the power the media exert over politics. When the Democrats lost control of the House of Representatives in the 2010 election, pundits and politicians immediately blamed the media. It was a “communications problem” exacerbated by the way the media framed the election for the public. When Democratic Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords was brutally shot at a public appearance in January 2011, political commentators rushed to blame the media for legitimizing violent rhetoric in political speech, while downplaying the fact that the shooting was the work of a single disturbed person. In attributing so much blame to the media, these politicians, pundits, and scholars have tacitly, if not overtly, acknowledged that media messages are as important, if not more important, than the actual political operation.

Today, people operate in a media environment that could not have been imagined by these scholars working in the first half of the 20th century. The sheer number of media outlets people can choose from and the ubiquitous nature of media messages, forces us to reconsider their importance. Further, we must consider how much more reliant people are on the media for

any type of information, namely political information in today's world. People are living much more isolated lives, in part due to the emergence of the Internet and other digital platforms, which allow us to do almost anything from the comfort of our homes. This isolation is likely leading to decreased levels of face-to-face interpersonal communication—a conduit of political information that was considered paramount to previous scholars, namely those who subscribed to the “two-step flow model”. With less time spent discussing politics face-to-face with others, and much more restricted levels of access to political leaders, it is not a stretch to assume that the vast majority of people's political information comes from the media.

How exactly do the media influence people's perception of the political world? While there are countless persuasive elements found in media messaging, the two primary techniques relevant to this study are agenda setting and framing. Agenda setting refers to the idea that there is a strong correlation between the emphasis that the media place on a certain issue and the importance attributed to that issue by mass audiences (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). Agenda setting allows the media to tacitly tell their audience how much importance to attribute to a given issue based on the amount and style of media coverage it is given. Often, through agenda setting, the media can determine which elements of a campaign or issue are the most important.

If agenda setting tells people which issues to think about, then framing tells people how they should think about them. Framing effects are based on the assumption that how an issue is characterized in the media can have an influence on how it is understood by audiences (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007). Support for the effectiveness of framing effects can be found in psychological studies showing how presentation effects perception (Plous, 1993), and in sociological studies explaining that people struggle to understand a complex world and therefore rely on schemas or shortcuts to make sense of it (McGuire, 1974). When analyzing media

frames, the informative, factual content of the story becomes secondary to the commentary that surrounds it, which places the story in a distinct space within the greater political discourse. Shanto Iyengar finds that the framing of issues by television news shapes the way the public understands the causes of and the solutions to central political problems. He also differentiates between thematic frames, which apply a single theme to a series of disparate stories, and episodic frames which use a specific person or event as an example of a larger issue (Iyengar, 1991). One of the most common frames in political media is the thematic “horserace” frame used in campaign coverage. Here, almost all campaign coverage is bent to fit into a winner/loser, frontrunner/underdog context. The frame serves to simplify elections by bypassing much of the legislative content, like voting records and speeches, and replaces it with an easy to follow contest between two people.

Political frames often position political discourse in terms of fundamental value systems (Lakoff, 2004). This notion of value systems will be further explored in this study, as I focus my analysis on political orientations. We can begin to see how political orientation is a value system easily used by the media in creating frames. For example, during the 2010 debate over extending the Bush tax cuts; the media relied on two distinct frames that were almost directly in line with the fundamental ideologies of the two main political parties. First, was the idea that continued tax cuts during an economic recession were a necessary and moral decision, that would prevent the country from slipping into another depression. The second frame presented the tax cut extension as irresponsible government spending. This frame presented tax cuts for the top earning Americans as immoral since they would only add to a growing national deficit. The frame particular media outlets chose to rely on depended largely on the ideological composition of their audiences. If they wanted to advocate for the tax cuts they looked to frame one, if they

wanted to oppose the cuts they used frame two. Here we see how the same factual information can be presented in two distinct ways leaving news consumers with two distinctly different perceptions of the issue.

Mediated & Mediatized Politics

Today, most political communication scholars have accepted that we live in a state of mediated politics. Bennett and Entman (2001) explain that this term refers to, “a situation in which the media have become the most important source of information and vehicle of communication between the governors and the governed.” Taking this concept one step further, it seems that people not only get their political information from the media, but that the political establishment itself has begun to adapt its structure to better accommodate political media. For example, speeches are written with 3-5 second memorable quotes built in as ready-made sound bytes for the media, or when a major political figure needs to make a speech it is always positioned during prime time TV viewing hours, and sometimes is even scheduled as to not conflict with popular entertainment content.

This state of affairs moves beyond mediated politics to what Jesper Strombäck (2008) calls, “mediatized politics.” Mediatization of politics refers to a process where core elements of the political process begin to assume media form. Carter termed this phenomenon “government by publicity” (Carter et al., 1988). Timothy Cook (1998) aptly titled his book on the subject, “*Governing with the News: The News Media as a Political Institution.*” Scholars have coined the term “media logic” to refer to this media driven format. According to Altheide and Snow, media logic has become the dominant way people perceive social and political affairs. They explain,

Media logic consists of a form of communication; the process through which media present and transmit information. Elements of this form include the various media and the formats used by these media. Format consists, in part, of how material is organized, the style in which it is presented, the focus or emphasis on a particular characteristic of behavior, and the grammar of media communication. Format becomes a framework or a perspective that is used to present as well as interpret phenomena. (Altheide & Snow, 1979)

In a state of mediatized politics, the media enjoy much more independence in controlling their content. The government adapts media logic into its processes, as media considerations are increasingly part of policy decisions. In a sense, media reality becomes more important than actual reality in determining public opinion, and in many cases legislative outcomes. Political players begin to internalize media logic, and media standards and implications are built in to the governing process. A poignant example of this shift can be found in the period directly preceding the Iraq War. The media reality told the American people that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, and thus was a direct threat to the United States. The actual reality was much less certain, yet citizens and members of Congress rallied behind the media reality and overwhelmingly supported the 2003 invasion of Iraq (United States Senate, 2002).

Going back to media format, there is evidence of the political establishment adapting itself to the media's chosen frames for coverage. As discussed above, media coverage of elections is almost always presented through a "horserace" frame, where constant assessments of winning and losing are the emphasis. There is no doubt that as the media began constantly using

instant polls that the campaigns too began to rely on this, often meaningless, information as the driver of their campaigns. While this frame may fit well in the campaign context, it seems less appropriate in a governing context. However, as the political process adapts to the media logic, we see increased examples of “horserace” governing. Every legislative vote is treated as an election by the media, and by the politicians themselves. Political leaders will often be found standing before constituents quoting approval ratings of whatever legislation they are currently working on as opposed to making a real case for or against the new law. Even when the “horserace” frame can’t be aptly applied to a story in the governing context, the media just slightly alter this frame to a “conflict” frame, where the story still pits one side against the other.

Further, as it is clear the media prefer to cover politics that can easily mold to their pre-set framework, we have begun to see what has been termed, the “endless campaign” or the “permanent campaign” (Blumenthal, 1980; Trillin, 1996). Constant campaigning is a clear indicator of the supremacy of media logic. Acting as a candidate while trying to govern is clearly not beneficial to the politicians or their constituents, but it is beneficial to the media who can start polling about elections over two years before they occur, creating buzz, false rumors, and interest. If a candidate chooses not to participate in this early campaigning it is highly likely they will be ignored by the media and thus invisible to the American people, putting them at a great disadvantage for re-election, and thus decreasing their ability to continue governing.

Another media frame that has been adopted by politicians is the focus on the personal and physical attributes of the candidates. This frame has become especially prominent in coverage of female candidates and politicians. Whether or not candidate A *looks* presidential has become more important than if candidate A *is* presidential. One reason the media rely so heavily on this frame is that it is much easier to cover than political issues. Writing or broadcasting this type of

report requires no specific expertise on the part of the journalist. Politicians too have accepted this frame by creating countless public appearances that serve no other purpose than to highlight a personal attribute polls tell them is appealing to voters. For example, against a backdrop of growing public skepticism about President Obama's religion, the President began making frequent trips to church with his family, always making sure the media were in tow to document the event. Personal scandal and attacks have become the fodder of modern political campaigns, as they understand these issues will be much more widely covered by the media than for example, a criticism of someone's voting record. Many scholars have asserted that the success of this "tabloid-style" journalism has sparked candidates to employ similar techniques in their campaigns, and that "this lurid style of political media has often been copied in presidential campaign commercials" (Davis & Owen, 1998). Further, the political establishment seems to understand that the media have already told people that these personal and sensational issues are the ones that matter, by highlighting them continuously in their coverage.

As noted by Schulz, "mediatization as a concept both transcends and includes media effects" (2004). Examples support the idea that we are in fact living in a state of mediatized politics. With this in mind, it becomes clearer how hugely influential political media messages are on public opinion and modern governance. Therefore, while we build on the scholarship of the seminal works in communications research, we must also recognize that their models do not take into consideration the intense symbiosis between media and politics today. Further, techniques such as agenda setting and framing become even more powerful with the exponential growth of media messages. Theoretically, each outlet could develop their own schema for politics and thus report on similar stories while presenting completely different versions of that story. The next chapter will delve more deeply into the nature of this high choice media

environment and return to these concepts to illustrate the potential effects of this changing news market.

CHAPTER 3: SELECTIVITY IN A HIGH CHOICE MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

High Choice News Environment

Just a few decades ago, news consumers had very limited choices about where to get their news. Most people accessed local newspapers and local network affiliate TV stations as their source for news about their communities. Looking to national and political news, most news consumers had access to one or two newspapers, and the vast majority of Americans tuned in to the nightly network newscast on one of the three network TV channels—NBC, ABC and CBS. This relatively limited news environment resulted in most Americans consuming the same news products and thus coming away from the news with relatively consistent impressions of the day's events. It was reasonable for citizens to read their daily newspaper and watch a 30-minute evening news report-- creating an environment where most citizens were exposed to very similar news.

The old media environment of limited choice encouraged moderation and conformity (Jones, 2002). This was not only a journalistic choice but a legal prerogative for the three broadcast stations. In 1949, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) introduced a policy known as the Fairness Doctrine. The Fairness Doctrine consisted of two main tenets. First, the broadcast stations had to devote adequate time to covering issues of public importance. Second, the doctrine required that when presenting public issues or issues of some controversy, the networks had to fairly reflect opposing viewpoints (Jung, 1996). This policy prevented any network from moving too far to either side of the ideological spectrum, and preserved a sense of journalistic objectivity. 1987 marked the end of the Fairness Doctrine when the FCC abolished the doctrine by an Executive Order from President Ronald Reagan. Situated within a general

move towards government deregulation, Reagan felt the doctrine violated free speech rights guaranteed by the First Amendment. The abolition of the Fairness Doctrine opened the door for a new type of news landscape, where specialization and sensationalism would reign supreme.

Today, we live in a much different news environment made clear by the exponential growth of news outlets, many of which are overtly partisan. This changing news environment owes a great deal to the technological innovations developed over the past several decades, such as cable TV, satellite radio, mobile technologies, and ultimately, the Internet. To illustrate this massive proliferation of news sources, it is useful to compare some statistics about the number of news outlets available in the past to those available to the public today. For example, in 1970, television provided a mere seven channels to the average household. In comparison, by 2005, 85% of households had access to cable or satellite television, providing the average viewer with about 100 channels to choose from (Prior, 2005). Today, we see TV channels numbering in the thousands and new recording devices, which make watching any content at any time an easy option. Further, people can now access countless newspapers online. They can read any of the national papers, or even local papers from around the world instantly and at any time.

Lastly, as the Internet developed as a tool for political communication, the number of online news sources grew dramatically. These sources range from online news sites of established media organizations (CNN.com), to political blogs written by well-known commentators (The Drudge Report) or even unknown bloggers, to social networking sites (Facebook), which have increasingly become a relevant place for political discussion. A 2010 Pew study showed that 34% of the public goes online for news, and 44% of Americans say they got news through one or more Internet or mobile digital source on the day prior to receiving the survey. Looking to the emergence of blogs in general, we can begin to conceptualize just how

drastic this increase in online news sources actually is. In the year 2000, blogs numbered in the thousands, in 2004, there were 4.3 million blogs, and by 2008, there were 133 million blogs on the Internet with about 120,000 new blogs being created daily (Technorati, 2008). Interestingly, A 2009 report from Technorati points out that 50% of these bloggers discuss the political aspects of their preferred topics on their blogs (Sussman, 2009). Further, a 2010 Pew report indicates that 9% of Americans regularly read blogs about politics or current events, and another 19% sometimes turn to blogs for their news (Pew Research Center, 2010).

What effects does this high choice media environment have on media consumption as well as political understanding and discussion? One result that seems undeniable is that news consumers will increasingly have to make choices about what news to consume and what to ignore. As it has become impossible for any one citizen to consume it all, certain motivations will determine how people select their news repertoire. As news consumers begin basing their news choices on personal preferences and dispersing amongst an ever-growing choice of outlets, the media environment is growing increasingly fragmented. To illustrate this decentralization of the American news audience, consider that in 1970, the three broadcast networks (NBC, ABC, & CBS) captured 80% of all audiences, while by 2004 that number was more than halved to 34% (Morris, 2005). What happened to the 46% of news consumers who moved away from network news? Markus Prior (2007) explains that, “more choice leads to better sorting of the television audience by taste.” These people likely found other outlets that more closely matched their tastes and preferences for content.

News Consumer Selectivity

Media selectivity can be well understood by considering what Cass Sunstein calls, “The Daily Me” (2007). His book describes the phenomenon that has resulted from extremely high media choice, coupled with the extreme ease of accessing information. Instead of relying on a mediating institution, such as a newspaper or a television channel, people now serve as their own news aggregators (Lee, 2009). Individualized filtering has the ability to compromise one of the most basic American constitutional ideals—deliberative democracy. This system of government places a high priority on discussion between free, equal and informed citizens. Adopting elements of representative democracy and direct democracy, it puts a heavy emphasis on deliberation between citizens as a legitimizing force in the lawmaking process (Elster, 1998; Barber, 1985). If the media cease to serve as a “public forum” where citizens gain a common frame of reference about the happenings in the country, how will they ever be able to discuss, debate, or compromise on important political decisions?

Political vs. Non-Political Selectivity

Many scholars have looked at this fragmented environment and the inevitable media selectivity that comes with it, as a major problem for our political establishment. They lament that with increased media choice, people may simply move away from political content towards more preferable entertainment content. A citizen who is very interested in the news now has the opportunity to access huge amounts of information. These people can gain a much more holistic understanding of a news story by following its coverage across a range of media outlets with different perspectives and contributions to the story. A political “junkie” can follow any story, from the most hyper-local to the most international. They can see many journalistic perspectives

on the issue at hand, as well as view the opinions of other regular citizens blogging or commenting on news stories. While this scenario seems like an idyllic model for what Michael Schudson (1998) calls the “informed citizen,” one must also consider the possibility of the other extreme. A person with no interest in politics or the news has so many other media options that they can avoid almost all political messages.

In comparison, forty years ago, a politically uninterested person would still experience a good deal of political messages through incidental exposure, as there were often few, if any, alternatives in the media (Prior, 2005). While partisans on both sides of the aisle garner most of the media attention, there is still a large center of citizens who are indifferent or ambivalent towards politics (Bernhardt et al, 2008). The idea that this group can completely detach from the political world is unsettling at best, and detrimental to the functioning of our democracy at worst. Prior explains, “Since political knowledge is an important predictor of turnout and since exposure to political information motivates turnout, the shift from a low-choice to a high-choice media environment implies changes in electoral participation as well.”

Selectivity Based on Political Preferences

While selectivity between political and entertainment content is clearly an important avenue of research, this study will focus in on selectivity within political content. Thinking back to the concepts of mediated politics and deliberative democracy, the type of political information citizens receive becomes especially significant. This study will argue that one of the most important determinants of media outlet choice is the political preference of the news consumers. There is strong evidence for the claim that people tend to seek out information consistent with their own beliefs (Klapper, 1960). This body of evidence can be traced back to some of the first

studies on selective exposure from the 1940s. Paul Lazarsfeld linked his work with a psychological study by Leon Festinger on the theory of cognitive dissonance. Festinger suggested, “that people want to avoid information that conflicts with their preexisting beliefs, and that they seek out information—through activities such as selective exposure—that confirms their current beliefs” (Mutz, 2004).

Previous research has found that individuals’ political predispositions can predict their exposure to specific media (Lee, 2009). A study of self-reported media exposure during the 2000 and 2004 campaigns showed significant fragmentation of media use among Republicans and Democrats. Republicans gravitated towards talk radio, a medium known to have a conservative slant; while Democrats avoided talk radio and watched television newsmagazines and late night entertainment, two predominantly liberal media outlets (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). Interestingly, studies have also shown that news consumers’ affinity for agreeing political news does not only apply when considering controversial political topics but also when searching for news on “soft” subjects such as crime and travel. Further, the study showed that the stronger a person’s partisan affiliations the more likely they were to select media outlets that confirmed their beliefs (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). Looking to cable news, there is already clear evidence of audience selectivity based on party ID. In 2010, 40% of Republicans said they regularly watched Fox News, a network with a known conservative bias, while only 6% of Republicans regularly watched MSNBC, a much more liberal network (Pew Research Center, 2011).

These statistics lead to yet another important component of selectivity—audience perception of news outlets. If news consumers are increasingly choosing news outlets based on how closely they *think* the outlet mirrors their political ideas, the simple reputation of a news source can become as important as the source’s actual content. Iyengar and Hahn’s 2009 study

supports the idea that demand for a news outlet varies according to the *perceived* affinity of that news organization to the consumer's political preferences. This study included an experiment where people were given a choice of news stories on a given subject from which to choose. The content of the stories remained constant, while the researchers only changed the label accompanying the story, which indicated news outlet. They found that the mere presence of a news organization label increased the stories' appeal across all subject matters. For example, identical stories about politics attracted vastly different audiences when labeled as Fox, CNN, or NPR. This idea of perception of news outlets will become important to this study, as later chapters will begin to analyze both the content on, and perceptions of, the cable networks under investigation.

“Echo chamber” is the term most often used to describe this media environment where people not only gravitate towards agreeing news, but almost entirely ignore news that contradicts their beliefs. Jamieson and Cappella (2008) define an echo chamber as, “a bounded, enclosed media space that has the potential to both magnify the messages delivered within it and insulate them from rebuttal.” The term is apt as it describes a situation where news consumers are likely to only hear echoes of beliefs they already hold. Like an echo, beliefs are amplified or reinforced by transmission inside an "enclosed" space; the beliefs are never challenged and thus have a tendency to move towards extreme positions over more moderate stances.

Political Belief Systems

It is interesting to note that the majority of studies analyzing political media selectivity rely on party identification as the primary, if not only, indicator of a person's political

orientation. Political belief systems are in fact much more complex. Other factors such as a person's political ideology (conservative, moderate, liberal, etc), trust in a political personality (perhaps a news anchor or politician), or commitment to specific issue positions, can be just as influential as party ID, if not more so, in forming overarching political beliefs.

The notion of party ID is itself quite tenuous. Considering that a great deal of the research on media selectivity and political preferences relies on survey data, we must consider how the survey respondents understand questions about party ID. For example, the Pew Research Center asks respondents, "In politics today, do you consider yourself a Republican, Democrat or Independent"(Pew Research Center, 2010). Does this mean which party did you vote for in the last election? Or which party have you voted for the most in your lifetime? Or which party do you feel is most inline with your political beliefs? The space for confusion here is quite clear. However, some scholars consider party ID as an important and inheritable characteristic. This school of thought says that party ID is the major influence on voters' perceptions of political choice as well as their final vote choice, because their party ID was established when they were children and thus informed their future partisanship (Campbell et al, 1960). An early study on children in the political system revealed that party identification was a predictor of children's evaluations of the President as early as grade four, and that by eighth grade, the children seemed to have internalized party preferences with huge discrepancies between evaluations of the President along party lines (Easton & Dennis, 1969).

But what if a person does not identify with one of the two major party choices? Perhaps because they are disinterested in politics or because they associate with a lesser-known third party. An analysis of Pew survey data from 2010 revealed that 40% of Americans do not identify themselves as either Democrats or Republicans. Ideology on the other hand is slightly more

instructive, asking people, “In general, would you describe your political views as...”

Respondents are then offered a five-point scale ranging from very conservative to very liberal.

The same survey showed only 6.5% of respondents not selecting into this spectrum by choosing “don’t know”. Not only can they more specifically decide where they fit on a spectrum, but this measure does not require an association with an established political organization, which may deter respondents from selecting a party and thus over report those who select “independent” or “no preference.” Still, there is debate about the value of ideology as a determinant of one’s political belief system. Converse argues that most people do not interpret politics through an ideological lens because most people do not have a clear understanding of what the two major political ideologies (conservative and liberal) represent. He does concede that people with higher levels of education, political involvement, and political information are more likely to adhere to these pre-set ideologies (Converse, 1964).

Another problem within the existing scholarship on political belief systems is that the concepts of party ID and ideology are too often conflated, assuming that if someone identifies as a Republican or Democrat they also identify themselves as conservative or liberal, respectively. The chart below uses the Pew Research Center’s 2010 media consumption survey data to illustrate how divergent these two concepts actually are.

Table 3.1
Party Id vs. Ideology

	Republican	Independent	Democrat
Conservative	70%	33%	23%
Moderate	26%	49%	43%
Liberal	4%	18%	34%

Significance of chi square= .000

While most Republicans say they are conservative (70%), another 30% identify as moderates or liberals. The differences are even more striking when looking at Democrats. Only 34% say they are liberal, with 43% identifying as moderate, and another 23% as conservative. The analysis in this study will move beyond these constraints by looking at party ID and ideology separately, as well as combining them into a more comprehensive political orientation variable.

In addition to party ID and ideology, there are other factors that heavily influence a person's political belief system. One of these factors that is paramount to this study, is the reliance on "opinion leaders" for political information and cues. The concept of opinion leaders can be traced back to the early communication research discussed in chapter two, such as Paul Lazarsfeld et al's two step flow model. Opinion leaders possess certain traits (political interest, intelligence, notoriety, charisma, etc) that allow them to disseminate their political views and opinions to a much larger audience. Further, these people have the trust of their followers and thus have great power in influencing their views. Opinion leaders are especially important in today's high choice media environment. As discussed above, people cannot possibly consume all the political information available to them, so opinion leaders act as yet another cognitive

shortcut for mapping and understanding political issues. In today's landscape, opinion leaders can be friends or family members who are highly interested and educated about politics, and thus spread their views within their social networks. Perhaps more importantly, are the opinion leaders who have the ability to influence massive audiences--such as television personalities and news anchors. For example, a person who watches the same news anchor for an extended period of time will come to trust that person, and ultimately internalize that anchor's take on politics as political reality. Over time this habitual reliance on a particular opinion leader will lead to increased comfort and trust, eventually reaching a point where almost anything they present will be accepted as fact. In his work on mass opinions, Zaller (1992) argues this point, explaining that public opinion is largely shaped by exposure, via the media, to elite discourse on issues.

Considering the partisan bias found on many news outlets, we begin to see how these anchors can heavily shape the political orientations of their audience. Further, two people who rely on different opinion leaders for political information will likely walk away with two distinct versions of political reality.

Lastly, as mentioned above, specific issue positions often play an important role in determining not only how a person will vote, but also how they situate themselves in the broader political landscape. For example, a person who is heavily invested in environmental protection is likely to support whichever candidate puts more emphasis on this particular issue. Further, they are more likely to select media outlets that highlight environmental issues regardless of their perceived ideological stance. While this is undoubtedly an important factor in people's political preferences, it is not an area I will investigate deeply here. This study focuses primarily on political orientations based on party ID and ideology, as the goal is to illustrate how large cohorts of American citizens are likely to encounter news packages that vary greatly in partisan tone and

information, and how this might ultimately lead to more extreme political positions and difficulty in mutual understanding. However, because this study focuses on cable TV news stations and the anchors that personify them, the concept of opinion leaders will be discussed more thoroughly in later chapters.

Media Outlet Selectivity

In such a high choice news environment, it must be assumed that news outlets themselves also rely on selectivity to determine what news content they present to the audience and what they give only a passing glance, or ignore completely. The portion of this study that looks at content differentiation across news outlets has its roots in one of the most famous journalism studies- The Mr. Gates study. This study established that news organizations must make editorial decisions about what content to include and what to disregard based on certain criteria. David Manning White (1950) concluded that editors' decisions were "highly subjective ... [and] based on the gatekeeper's own set of experiences, attitudes and expectations." Successful product differentiation of this type occurs when, "one firm's products are clearly preferred by at least some buyers over rival products at a given price" (Bae, 2000). Looking to newspapers, Mullainathan and Schleifer (2005) explain, "competition forces newspapers to cater to the prejudices of their readers, and greater competition typically results in a more aggressive catering to such prejudices as competitors strive to divide the market." In the new multichannel atmosphere, media outlets must differentiate themselves from their competitors, and the clearest way to do so is through content selection. Content does not simply consist of stories chosen, but encompasses all areas of production from style, to format, to the personalities invited to contribute.

In light of the research on product differentiation and audience selectivity based on political orientation, it seems clear that the outlets too, will differentiate themselves by varying their content to cater to different political belief systems. Instead of broadcasting to the largest possible audience, trying to offend no one with purely objective reporting, many news outlets have moved from a “broadcast” to a “narrowcast” model, where their target is a smaller cohort of the population with distinct and homogenous political views. For example, in 2010, 80% of the people who regularly listened to Rush Limbaugh or watched Sean Hannity (openly conservative personalities) were conservative – roughly twice the national average at 36% (Pew Research Center, 2011). News organizations no longer worry about mass appeal but instead focus on producing content that is in line with the preexisting beliefs of their target audience. Davis and Owen (1998) point out that not only are these new media outlets unencumbered by the same market constraints as traditional media, but also because they are not broadcast on network TV, they are also free of many of the legal constraints. Absent these obstacles, new media outlets are free to transmit messages that are, “in terms of tone and content—distinctly partisan.” This niche media model is apparent across all media outlets but is especially interesting on television. Unlike some of the hyper partisan blogs on the Internet, which may receive just a small number of daily viewers, television, which relies heavily on the niche media model, remains the most popular source of news for Americans (Pew Research Center, 2011). Cable news broadcasts seem to be particularly aggressive in adapting a niche media model. The extreme tailoring of content according to their audiences’ political preferences is both summarized and mocked in the title of a recent *New York Magazine* article-- “Chasing Fox, The loud, cartoonish blood sport that’s engorged MSNBC, exhausted CNN—and is making our body politic delirious” (Sharman,

2010). Chapter four will delve more deeply into the dynamics of television news, and illustrate how partisan selectivity has come to dominate the cable news world.

CHAPTER 4: WATCHING POLITICS—A HISTORY AND EVALUATION OF TV NEWS

Despite the massive proliferation of political news outlets, television remains people's number one source of national and political news (Pew Research Center, 2011). TV clearly still holds an important place in the political communications landscape. It plays an integral role in informing citizens about political happenings, but further, in framing how these issues should be viewed by the public. People not only watch political news on TV, but it is also their conduit for experiencing actual political events such as inaugurations, political debates, or State of the Union addresses. Television has historically been, and still is today, one of the most pervasive and persuasive media outlets. Its reach and influence seem only to intensify when looking specifically at political information on TV.

In 1960, a presidential debate was broadcast live on television for the first time. This debate, between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, seems to have marked the beginning of the inextricable link between politics and TV. According to data from the Roper Organization, the early 1960s marked a shift in the way people consumed political news. At this time people's response to the question, "Where would you say you get most of your news?" shifted from newspaper to television (Roper, 1983). Interestingly, those who listened to the 1960 debate on the radio labeled Nixon the winner, but those who watched on TV saw Kennedy as the winner. Kennedy was a handsome young candidate whose mere appearance inspired confidence and support (Kraus, 1977). This speaks not only to the persuasive powers of TV but also to the new standards for presidential candidates imposed by television. Kennedy recognized how important the TV debate was, when after his victory he said, "It was the TV more than anything else that

turned the tide” (Pasternack, 2010). In 1984, Walter Mondale reiterated this emphasis on televised politics explaining, “Modern politics requires mastery of television” (Hart, 1999).

The Power of Television News

As the previous chapter expounded on the exponential growth of political news outlets, namely on the Internet, one might wonder why this study focuses on television instead of a more novel, online media outlet. The first justification for this choice comes from simple statistics. Today, people still rely on TV more than the Internet as a source of political information. A national survey conducted in January 2011 showed that 66% of Americans consider TV as their main source of news, compared with 41% who say they get most their news from the Internet (Pew Research Center, 2011). In a survey conducted by Pew Research Center on the week preceding President Obama’s 2011 State of the Union Address, 61% of Americans said they planned to watch the speech. Of that 61%, a staggering 54% said they would be watching the President on television compared with just 7% who planned to watch the speech via the Internet (Pew Research Center, 2011). Looking back to the last Presidential campaign of 2008, 68% of people named television as their main source of election information compared with 36% who relied on the Internet (Owen, 2010). The second, and perhaps more important reason I chose to focus on television is that researchers must not look only to audience size in determining the influence of a particular media outlet. As Rod Hart puts it, “television’s power lies not in the *number* of people it reaches but in the *depth* with which it reaches them” (Hart, 1999). This chapter will argue that TV reaches people on a very deep and personal level, and thus has enormous persuasive power over how they view politics.

Another challenge comes from scholars who have tried to downplay or deny the power of TV news by arguing that exposure to political news on TV does not translate into higher levels of political knowledge (Becker & Whitney, 1980). This chapter counters that assertion by highlighting more recent work that supports a correlation between watching TV news and gaining political knowledge. Surveys conducted during the 1992 election campaign found that television news was at least as strong a predictor of political knowledge as newspapers (Chaffee & Kanihan, 1997). Another analysis found that television news was, “the most important correlate of knowledge of issue differences between the candidates” (Chaffee et al., 1994). A 1995 study by Weaver and Drew, found that not only was TV the most important correlate to political knowledge, but that exposure to TV news was the only significant predictor of knowledge of the differences between the two presidential candidates (Bush and Clinton) taking into consideration twelve media use measures and seven demographic variables (Weaver & Drew, 1995).

While these and countless other studies support the notion that exposure to TV does increase political knowledge overall, many of them also point out that TV does highlight and disseminate a certain type of political knowledge—namely biographical and personal information about the candidates (Chaffee et al., 1994). This heightened attention to candidate personality above party platforms or issue positions can partly be explained by the media’s attachment to the personality frame discussed in chapter two. Further explanation for this trend will come from understanding the way TV presents political information, as will be discussed later in this chapter. Accepting that TV does in fact impart political knowledge to its audience, I argue that this is only a piece of the puzzle in determining the effects of television news on audiences. We must look beyond the simple acquisition of political facts, to a more holistic

understanding of how TV news effects people's broader perceptions of politics and American government.

When children are asked about the meaning of government, they most often respond with references to TV (Connell, 1971). Thinking back to the concept of mediated politics discussed in chapter two, this should come as no surprise. In many ways, TV acts as a universal socializer, showing us from a young age what our government looks like, and how it operates. It is not only children who perceive politics through the lens of television. Consider the assassination of President Kennedy. Would our collective memory of this tragedy be the same without the now infamous Zapruder tape, which allowed networks to replay the moment Kennedy was shot endlessly on television (Lehrer, 1998)? Or more recently, the attacks of September 11th; when Americans think about that tragic day, what is it that they are remembering? It's the television imagery of the towers collapsing into a sea of smoke, or the video of New Yorkers running through lower Manhattan covered in ash and debris.

Television news shapes not only how we remember national and political events, but also how we view the political establishment in general. Television's power over public opinion comes in part from its format—TV is dynamic, colorful, ubiquitous, and emotional. It is able, like no other form of media, to capture the collective imagination of Americans. One cable news study clearly concludes that, "In general, television's visual realism and affective appeal appear to be its decisive advantage" (Ibelema & Powell, 2001). The drama and imagery of TV stirs people's emotions, and these emotions stay with people for extended periods of time, unlike the fleeting knowledge of political facts (Morris, 2005).

Hart explains, "television tells us what to feel, when to feel it, and how and why as well. Television is our emotional tutor, teaching us which of our feelings are proper and which are

passé” (Hart, 1999). An illustrative example of this is found in the growing cynicism among Americans towards politics. Many scholars have supported the claim that the media are inherently biased against government. Thomas Patterson’s 1993 book, *Out of Order*, emphasizes this growing “anti-politics bias” in the news by pointing to comparative statistics. He shows that in 1960, 75% of media evaluations of Kennedy and Nixon were positive compared to 1992, when only 40% of evaluations of Clinton and Bush were positive. Michael Schudson (1999) attributes cynicism in the media to several new journalistic standards such as “declining deference to authority,” “growing emphasis on thematic coherence” and “an insistence on providing more comprehensive news.” As Hart notes, “cynicism is TV’s most natural language.” He argues that TV news allows the citizenry to hold onto this negative perception of their government, without guilt, by reinforcing their beliefs--creating an endless cycle between personal cynicism and cynicism in national broadcasts-- “television makes us feel good about feeling bad about politics” (Hart, 1999).

A close examination of the content of political news on TV reveals several of the persuasive techniques discussed in chapter two. Techniques such as agenda setting and framing add yet another layer to the persuasive power of TV in influencing public opinion about politics. Previous research supports the notion that agenda setting effects are particularly powerful on TV. Iyengar and Kinder (1987) conducted an experiment where identical groups of people were exposed to different media packages, with each group’s package highlighting a different area of concern for the country (national defense, energy, civil rights, etc). They found that across every group, people rated the issue they were exposed to as more important than the others, and as more important than they had prior to the experiment. Further, when participants were then asked to evaluate the current President, they all treated the issue they were exposed to on TV as a much

more important factor in their overall evaluation. This “priming” effect shows how TV exposure can effect what information is most cognitively accessible, and thus what information people will use in evaluating political issues. They clearly illustrated how, “television news powerfully influences which problems viewers regard as the nation’s most serious.”

Another avenue of television’s persuasive capabilities in shaping public opinion comes from its ability to “frame” the news. Thomas Nelson et al. (1997) define framing in their study, “Towards a Psychology of Framing Effects,” as, “the process by which a communication source constructs and defines a social or political issue for its audience.” Framing effects are particularly strong on TV because the outlet does not have to rely solely on text to create the frame, but can also utilize every element of their multimedia production (images, guests, tone, headlines, etc) to reinforce that particular frame. Further, TV news is not limited to factual presentations, but often provides a lot of space for news anchors to comment on stories. This becomes important to framing effects, as the informational content of news reports is less important than the interpretive commentary that surrounds it in creating these types of frames (London, 1993). One study looked at the way television frames affected the audiences’ interpretation of a certain issue—enlargement of the European Union. Randomly selected groups were exposed to experimental television news broadcasts that either highlighted the “conflict frame” or the “economic consequences frame” in reporting on the actions of the EU. Researchers found clear evidence that the TV news a person watched directed the way they thought about the issue at hand (de Vreese, 2004). Another study took framing effects to the next level of audience influence. Here, the experiment tested not only if frames changed the way people thought about a political issue, but if they also changed the way these people *evaluated* political issues. They

found that, “individuals explanations of political issues are significantly influenced by the manner in which television news presentations ‘frame’ these issues” (Iyengar, 1987).

Cable News

Despite the predominance of television as America’s main source of political information, its relevance has recently been called into question as people begin to move online in search of the news. At first glance, this is a valid interpretation of American news consumption patterns. National survey data show that between 2004 and 2008 the percentage of people who ranked TV as their main source of election news dropped from 76% to 68%, while those who ranked the Internet first rose from 21% to 36% (Owen, 2010). However, a closer examination of these television statistics reveals a stark discrepancy between network news and cable news. The number of people who ranked network news as their primary source of campaign information dropped precipitously from 29% in 2004 to 18% in 2008. On the other hand, cable news audiences continued to expand, with 40% ranking it first in 2004, compared with 44% in 2008 (Owen, 2010). This 44% becomes especially poignant considering that only 33% ranked print newspapers and only 16% chose radio as their main source of election information. Since the birth of CNN in 1980, followed by MSNBC and Fox News in 1996 (Bae, 2000), cable news broadcasts have clearly staked out a unique and important place in the political media landscape.

Again, this study does not rely solely on audience size in determining the persuasive power of a media outlet. Cable news is also unique from other political media outlets in its

choice of format and content. From the beginning, cable news networks wanted to differentiate themselves from the traditional network newscast. MSNBC's past promotional slogans elucidate this goal. They included, "It's not the same old news" and "It's not your father's newscast," a play on the Oldsmobile advertising campaign of the day (Bae, 2000). The editorial and multimedia decisions of cable news executives serve to increase their sway over public opinion and attitudes towards politics by tapping into the psyche of the American political news consumer. There are three main components of cable news that make it distinct from other forms of political news: It is 24 hours, it is sensational, and it is ideological. A 2008 study on cable news opens by laying out the two main trends in the development of cable news over the past several decades. They point out that these programs; "have increasingly defined themselves in relation to particular political perspective" and note, "the increasing prominence of "soft news" programs" on cable TV (Coe et al., 2008). While some other outlets incorporate one or two of these elements, very few, if any, utilize all three with the same effectiveness as cable news.

Scholars have begun to recognize the uniqueness and importance of cable news within the political media landscape. This interest is illustrated by the numerous studies done in the past analyzing the sensational and ideological aspects of cable news. Interestingly, it is the 24-hour nature of cable news that allows for the presence of both sensationalism and ideological slants. Unlike a 30-minute network newscast which scrambles to fit in all the news of the day, cable news has time to provide the facts of the day with ample space left to fill with commentary. Looking first to work on the sensational aspect of cable news, early studies support the claim that new media outlets (a category that definitely included cable news in the 1990s) presented a much more entertainment based news package than traditional media by highlighting "soft news" stories (Davis & Owen, 1998). Tom Patterson (2000) defines soft news as "typically more

sensational, more personality-centered, less time-bound, more practical, and more incident-based than other news.” One study points out that cable news is not the only news platform where sensational news thrives but qualifies the statement by pointing out that it is on cable news that this format has, “multiplied and found their greatest success” (Coe et al., 2008). Another term for news that highlights the entertainment component of stories by assuming a tabloid-like presentation and news quality is “infotainment.” A 2003 book on political reporting attributes the popularity of infotainment to the rise of 24-hour cable news networks. The study points out that even the most serious stories such as war coverage are presented in a sensational style. They do this primarily by relying on novel technologies such as interactive graphics and satellite imagery thus creating a “video game format” for combat coverage (Thussu, 2003). Another element to the sensationalism of cable news is their reliance on stories centered on personality politics and personal scandal. Larry Sabato (1993) has noted the shift in political reporting by contrasting the “lapdog” press of the pre-Watergate era to the “junkyard dog” press we find today. The “junkyard dog” press refers to the condition where the media consider politicians and political leaders as fair game in aggressive and personal investigations often without a solid factual basis or using source material that would once have been considered merely gossip. Other studies have taken a different approach to soft news by examining the way it affects the news consumer. Some scholars such as Matthew Baum (2003) argue that soft news might actually have positive effects on the audience by incidentally exposing non-political audiences to political messages. On the other hand are scholars like Markus Prior (2003), who don’t think soft news is beneficial to the audience because while they may be more likely to watch it, they do not learn important political information from soft news reports.

Turning our attention to the ideological element of cable news, there are many studies that strive to illustrate the ideological product differentiation across cable news networks, as well as the effects these differing news packages have on the audiences. An early content analysis from 1998, showed that there was already a significant difference in the types of stories and levels of analysis found, both among cable news shows, and between cable news and network news (Bae, 2000). A more recent study compared coverage of national issues on Fox News to other new media outlets as well as several traditional outlets such as news wires. They found that Fox's coverage showed a "consistently pro-Republican slant" (Groeling & Baum, 2007). The study by Coe et al. (2008) discussed above makes clear that, "cable news programs have begun to take more explicitly partisan positions." One of the ways cable news has made this shift to ideological news has been by incorporating far more opinion into their newscasts. Looking back to 2006, the Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ) reported that 83% of stories on cable news included opinion from the host (Project for Excellence in Journalism , 2006). In 2010, their "State of the News Media" report said, "The medium became noticeably more partisan in tone in 2009, adding ideological talk show hosts to prime time and shedding dissenting voices." They point out that these programs saw their audience increase much more than those that adhered to a more neutral perspective (Project For Excellence In Journalism , 2010). Another report by PEJ analyzed the cable news coverage of President Obama's first 100 days in office and found that on Fox News the majority of Obama stories were clearly negative in tone—Fox News was the only outlet studied where this was the case. On the other hand, MSNBC contained a majority of stories that were clearly positive in tone; MSNBC was only one of two outlets to have such tilted coverage (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2009).

Interestingly, despite the clear evidence of ideological bias, several studies have found that audiences view cable news on TV as the most credible news outlet (Ibelema & Powell, 2001). Further support for this conclusion is found in a study by Jonathan S. Morris (2007). He finds that Fox News viewers had a distinct set of political attitudes regarding President Bush and his opposition, and that the Fox News audience had distinct voting behavior patterns, even when controlling for party identification. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, he found that Fox News viewers had perceptions of political reality that differed from the rest of the television news audience (Morris, 2007). These findings begin to shed light on the dangers of large groups of Americans watching, and trusting ideological cable news and internalizing their messages as facts.

Fox News & MSNBC

The era of 24-hour, all-news, cable networks truly began on June 1, 1980 with the birth of CNN (Morris, 2005). CNN's original goal was to replicate the concept of all-news radio on television by creating a space people could turn to at any time for a summary of the day's most important news (Auletta, 2003). Throughout the 1980s CNN garnered limited attention from mainstream America. However, this changed dramatically in the early 1990s, primarily because of CNN's intense and unrivaled coverage of the first Gulf War. People began to take notice of this novel TV news format, and they began to recognize both the appeal and profitability of such a model, especially during times of heightened political attention or national crisis. It didn't take long for MSNBC and Fox News to appear on the scene as rival 24-hour news networks in the

mid 90s. In 1996, CNN had access to 70 million homes, followed by MSNBC with 22 million and Fox News reaching 17 million homes (Auletta, 2003). Since then however, there has been a massive shift in the audience dispersion among these three cable networks. Today, Fox News ranks first in the cable news ratings, followed by MSNBC with CNN consistently placing last (Nielson, 2011). What caused this move away from CNN and towards Fox News and MSNBC? Many argue that Fox News and MSNBC simply fit better into the new, niche news media market by staking out clear ideological perspectives. This section will provide some historical background on these two networks to better understand how and why they evolved into the highly popular, and highly controversial, news networks they are today.

Fox News Channel

The Fox News Channel was launched on October 7, 1996 by Rupert Murdoch, and is owned by the Fox Entertainment Group, a subsidiary of News Corporation. Murdoch, a well-known conservative media mogul, hired former NBC executive and Republican political consultant Roger Ailes as the founding CEO of Fox News. Despite this clearly conservative leadership, Fox's initial goal was to present news from a purely objective standpoint. In 1996, the chairman and CEO explained, "We're going to be basically a hard-news network" providing "straight, factual information to the American people so that they can make up their own minds, with less 'spin' and less 'face time' for anchors" (Morris, 2005). A *New York Times* article from October 1996 was aptly titled, "At the new Fox News Channel, the buzzword is fairness, separating news from bias." Murdoch did not expect his staff to be without opinions or bias, but he expected them to keep such biases out of their reports. He wanted his new network to clearly

label analysis and opinion in order to distinguish them from objective news. It was from this original mindset that they came up with Fox's most enduring slogan, "fair and balanced."

The 2000 presidential election marked a shift in tone and content for Fox News. As the country watched a controversial and highly partisan election unfold, Fox began to provide news with a conservative angle. They presented overwhelmingly positive coverage of presidential candidate George W. Bush, and focused coverage on attacks against Democrats—most notably in the emphasis put on the Swift Boat campaign against Senator John Kerry (Knight, 2008). This partisan tone continued through the lead up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, when Fox News clearly staked out their position-- to support the Republican President and the war. While most news networks rallied around the flag in the aftermath of September 11th, Fox's coverage was particularly positive towards President Bush and his Republican administration.

While there was a growing sense among news consumers, traditional media, and politicians that Fox News had moved to a right of center platform, it was in 2004 that the network was outrightly accused of not only presenting a conservative bias but of manipulating stories to fit a political agenda. Filmmaker Robert Greewald's documentary, "Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism" included interviews with former Fox employees describing how they had been fired for not tailoring stories to the ideological perspective of the network, as well as many studies that empirically supported the conservative bias on Fox News (Outfoxed.org). In the wake of the film, many Fox employees spoke out in defense of the network explaining they had never been guided as to how to present a news story. The film was further criticized for not attempting to interview anyone who currently works at Fox News or NewsCorp. Regardless, the barrage of criticism against Fox News continued. In 2010, an internal Fox News memo to staffers was circulated by the liberal news site *Media Matters*. The memo, written by a top Fox

News editor, contained instructions about how to report on global warming, instructions that to many, revealed a network that was intentionally framing stories to advocate for conservative policies.

We should refrain from asserting that the planet has warmed (or cooled) in any given period without IMMEDIATELY pointing out that such theories are based upon data that critics have called into question (Mirkinson, 2010).

In 2011, a former Fox News employee spoke to *Media Matters* under conditions of anonymity, calling Fox News a “propaganda outfit” (Boehlert, 2011). In her opinion, Fox News had become a political operation that was operating under the guise of a news organization. She explains,

The content that wasn't news, they didn't care what we did with as long as it was amusing or quirky or entertaining; as long as it brought in eyeballs. But anything- anything- that was a news story you had to understand what the spin should be on it. If it was a big enough story it was explained to you in the morning [editorial] meeting (Boehlert, 2011).

Bill O'Reilly, one of Fox's most popular prime time hosts since 1996, has adamantly defended his network's journalistic integrity. In his opinion, Fox News is a traditional channel not a conservative channel, and that it only appears that way because of a pervasive liberal bias across most other news outlets.

In February 2011, Fox News attracted an average of 1.3 million daily viewers (Nielson, 2011). As Fox continues to brand itself as an objective news organization, still using the slogan “fair and balanced, ” we must question if their audience is aware of exactly what kind of news they are really consuming. This becomes especially important to this study as it deals with media selectivity based on political preference. The reputation of the news source becomes almost as important as the actual content of the source in informing people’s choice of news outlet. The next chapter will employ an in depth content analysis to determine whether or not these claims of a conservative bias on Fox News are well founded today.

However, looking first to the reputation of the news outlet, we see clear evidence that many people view Fox News as a conservative news outlet. A 2009 Pew survey revealed that 47% of Americans identified Fox News’ ideology as “mostly conservative” (Pew Research Center, 2009). Another illustrative example of this point is the way politicians have exposed themselves to different news outlets. During the 2010 midterm campaign, it became commonplace for Republican candidates to only appear nationally on Fox News. The most notable example is ex-Alaska Governor, and former vice presidential candidate, Sarah Palin. Palin, who, at the time of this study was employed by Fox News, made a point to advise Republican candidates to only appear on Fox News or risk being manipulated by the “lame stream media.” In an on air conversation with Fox host Bill O’Reilly, Palin discusses the media strategy of the highly controversial Republican senatorial candidate, Christine O’Donnell. She suggests that O’Donnell, “Go with her gut, get out there speak to the American people, speak through Fox News” (Gibson, 2010). While many Republican candidates pledged their allegiance to Fox News, the network reciprocated, by hiring several high profile Republican politicians (and potential 2012 GOP presidential candidates) as pundits on their network (The Huffington Post,

2011). President Obama has even had a rocky relationship with Fox News, going so far as to bar them from certain White House events. He even spoke out publically against the network in a September 17th, 2010 interview with *Rolling Stone Magazine*. Obama said that Fox is part of a worldview that is “destructive for the long-term growth” of the country (Wenner, 2010).

MSNBC

MSNBC, which launched just three months prior to Fox News, followed a different, although surprisingly similar trajectory with regards to ideological perspective and branding. Unlike Fox News, which is owned by the conservative NewsCorp, MSNBC was born as a collaboration between Microsoft and NBC with General Electric as their parent company. NBC, which also broadcasts the Nightly News with Brian Williams, held objectivity in high regard. From the beginning they feared that a liberal slant on MSNBC would consequently tarnish the reputation of NBC as a traditional, objective, news source. Thus, like Fox News, MSNBC began with the intention of creating an objective 24-hour news channel to rival CNN. Already recognizing the need for product differentiation, MSNBC hoped to be unique by attracting a younger, more tech-savvy audience by putting a great deal of emphasis on technological issues and by directing traffic to their website. This ideal was well illustrated in their first promotional slogan “*It's Time to Get Connected*” (Beato, 1997). This strategy did not attract the audiences executives had anticipated, and in 1997 MSNBC laid off 20% of its employees and eliminated much of the technological focus (Flash, 1997). For the next several years, MSNBC trailed behind CNN and Fox News in the ratings. Executives realized they had to change their model in order to stake out a place in the 24-hour cable news landscape.

In 2003, two events converged cementing MSNBC's reputation as a liberal network. The first was the United States invasion of Iraq, and the second was the hiring of Keith Olbermann. Prior to the war, MSNBC anchors were already using their airtime to express grievances about the Bush Administration, namely their handling of the investigation into the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The 2003 invasion provided the impetus for MSNBC to focus almost primarily on criticism of the Bush Administration. With questions about transparency and motivations of the administration, MSNBC painted a bleak picture of the country's intentions and future success in Iraq. The acquisition of Keith Olbermann, a respected, but often irreverent, liberal television personality, seemed, at the time, to have marked the moment where MSNBC acknowledged they were a liberal network. Olbermann's show "Countdown with Keith Olbermann" would close each night with a running tally of days since the Iraq invasion, with Olbermann echoing, "Mr. President, where are the weapons of mass destruction," a clear attempt to embarrass the Republican President. Olbermann recognized an opportunity as President Bush's approval ratings plummeted due to criticism over his handling of Hurricane Katrina and the Iraq War. He explained his intentions saying, "I want to take over this little corner of the world." In retrospect, it is clear that "this little corner of the world" referred to a liberal space within cable news. To support the notion that TV executives were well aware of Olbermann's partisan style, we can look to statements from CNN executives as they debated trying to lure Olbermann to CNN. When the newly hired President of CNN/U.S. wanted to hire Olbermann as a means of improving ratings, his boss, Jim Walton, responded, "I'm not gonna be the guy who's gonna turn CNN into an opinion network" (Sherman, 2010).

In 2008, MSNBC hired Phil Griffin as their new president. From the beginning, Griffin believed that product differentiation, namely partisan differentiation, was the key to MSNBC's

viability. He had observed the cable news world for over a decade as a CNN producer, and watched CNN plummet in the ratings as they tried desperately to cling to objective and balanced reporting. He understood that to succeed in a niche market like this one, they had to attract different viewers than those who were regularly tuning in to Fox News. Griffin seemed to take plays right out of the Fox News playbook, although he was, not surprisingly, reluctant to admit it. In 2007, as senior vice president of NBC News and the executive in charge of MSNBC, Griffin addressed the channel's prime time point of view explaining, "It happened naturally...there isn't a dogma we're putting through. There is a 'Go for it'" (Steinberg, 2007). As President however, he did concede, "Fox figured it out that you have to stand for something in cable." Describing his strategy for MSNBC, Griffin said, "What we're doing is targeting an audience...in television, and in particular cable television, brand is everything" (Sherman, 2010). This vision was clearly embodied in his programming changes as President of MSNBC. Tucker Carlson's show, one of the few remaining conservative programs, was canceled in 2008, and Carlson was replaced by the much more liberal David Gregory. Griffin also hired several openly liberal or progressive news anchors over the next several years. Rachel Maddow joined the team in 2008, followed by Ed Schultz in 2009 and Lawrence O'Donnell in 2010.

Like Fox News, MSNBC quickly became the target of mass criticism for allegedly presenting a politically slanted version of the news. The controversy came to a head during their coverage of the 2008 presidential election. MSNBC was accused of presenting coverage that was not only biased towards Democrats but specifically towards Barack Obama during his primary race against Hillary Clinton. In the fall of 2008, MSNBC revealed their new slogan to immediate and widespread criticism. "The Power of Change" was a clear reference to the campaign slogan of candidate Obama, and seemed a clear indicator of not only partisan bias but of a news network

directly advocating for a political candidate (Huffington Post, 2008). Chris Matthews became the target of much of this criticism due to on air statements that seemed overly laudatory towards Obama, such as saying “I felt this thrill going up my leg” when listening to Obama speak. He also made a point to denigrate Senator Clinton almost nightly, accusing her of “playing it safe” and taking the “poll tested path” (Huffington Post, 2008). During live coverage of the 2008 Democratic National Convention, Olbermann took a jab at Matthew’s anti-Hillary routine, sparking an on air fight which led the network to pull both anchors from covering live political events (Kurtz, 2008).

After this embarrassing event, MSNBC executives seemed to become more cautious of blatant biases towards political candidates. In November 2010, Keith Olbermann, the MSNBC anchor with the highest nightly ratings, was suspended without pay after executives discovered that he had not disclosed campaign donations to Democratic candidates. Olbermann had donated the maximum legal donation of \$2,400 to three Arizona Democrats. Griffin responded to the “scandal” saying, “I became aware of Keith's political contributions late last night. Mindful of NBC News policy and standards, I have suspended him indefinitely without pay” (Aujla , 2010). Olbermann returned to the air after just three days of suspension. Interestingly, in January 2011, he abruptly announced he would no longer host *The Countdown with Keith Olbermann* on MSNBC. It was widely speculated that he was fired due to corporate pressures from NBC and Comcast executives, not Phil Griffin and the MSNBC team, who seemed to have embraced their position as the liberal cable news network. While the network may have become hyper cautious about biases towards specific candidates, they did not seem as concerned with their reputation of having a liberal bias in general.

On the night of the 2010 midterm elections, MSNBC was widely criticized for not including a single conservative on their panel of pundits. In October 2010, MSNBC launched yet another slogan that would be used to brand the network. This time they chose “Lean Forward,” a slogan that clearly lays out the networks progressive political stance. A closer examination of some of these ads reveals that the new campaign not only hinted at the political persuasion of MSNBC but also the type of content a viewer could expect to find there. One billboard featured a picture of Chris Matthews with large text reading, “Opinions Should be Earned” (Huffington Post, 2010). This headline clearly implies that there is a significant amount of opinion presented on MSNBC. The new reliance on subjective commentary makes sense in light of the cable news move towards reporting with a point of view, as well the trend towards more entertainment-based content.

This campaign should not be taken to mean that MSNBC wanted their audiences to view them as a liberal network per se. Instead, anchors and executives continue to defend their reporting as objective, mainly by drawing comparisons to Fox News, which they view as far more partisan than MSNBC. Keith Olbermann said, “The standard false equivalency in the coverage of cable news is that this is a left-wing version of Fox...I get no talking points. It illustrates the core difference between us and the guys down the street” (Sherman, 2010). In response to Olbermann’s firing, Rachel Maddow expressed her opinion that Fox News is "a McCarthyite chamber of horrors" (The Huffington Post , 2011), and discussed the differences between Fox and MSNBC saying,

Let this incident lay to rest forever the facile, never-true-anyway, bullpucky, lazy conflation of Fox News and what the rest of us do for a living. I know everybody

likes to say, “Oh, that’s cable news. It’s all the same.” Fox News and MSNBC, mirror images of each other...Let this lay that to rest forever. Hosts on Fox raise money on the air for Republican candidates. They endorse them explicitly; they use their Fox News profile to headline fund-raisers. They can do that because there’s no rule against that at Fox. They run as a political operation. We’re not. Yes, Keith’s a liberal, and so am I, and there are other people on this network whose political views are shared openly with you, our beloved viewers. But we are not a political operation. Fox is. We are a news operation. And the rules around here are part of how you know that (Chung, 2010).

As much as they may protest, the public still seems to be aware that MSNBC’s coverage contains a liberal slant, with 36% of respondents saying the network is “mostly liberal” (Pew Research Center, 2009). Interestingly, this is significantly less than the 47% that identified Fox News as conservative. The next chapter will reveal if this discrepancy is based on actual differences in coverage or merely differing public perceptions of the two networks.

As of February 2011, MSNBC was averaging about 530,000 viewers daily. This viewership is enormous compared to the meager audience share MSNBC attracted at its inception. Notably however, it is less than half the daily audience of Fox News. Many explanations have been put forth to explain this discrepancy. The most prominent is the notion that conservatives see a liberal bias in almost all media, so Fox News becomes their only option for news with a conservative edge. Another explanation, that is illustrated in the history of MSNBC above, is that while Fox embraced their ideological position early on (at least behind the scenes), MSNBC continued to waver between their liberal point of view and a public

appearance of objectivity. If cable news really is this highly specialized niche market, dominated by branding and opinion, perhaps Fox News just better fits the model.

CHAPTER 5: CONTENT ANALYSIS: THE NEWS PACKAGES FOUND ON FOX NEWS AND MSNBC

This chapter will summarize the major findings from the content analysis portion of this study. By systematically examining a representative sample of MSNBC and Fox News, I will illustrate several major trends in cable news coverage. First, I will detail the exact methods used to generate the percentages discussed throughout the chapter, drawing special attention to the way partisan tone was handled objectively. I will then discuss the overall tone of the broadcasts, highlighting the overwhelmingly negative coverage and the prevalence of opinionated content. Drawing on examples from my sample, I will use both quantitative and qualitative arguments to highlight how two of the major frames used in political reporting are especially prevalent on cable news. Lastly, I will examine the partisan bias on MSNBC and Fox News, and make a quantitative case that the reputations of MSNBC as liberal and Fox News as conservative are grounded in fact.

Hypotheses

These central hypotheses summarize the three broad areas of interest discussed in this chapter: the overall tone of the broadcasts, the use of frames on cable news, and the presence of a partisan slant on MSNBC and Fox News.

H₁: Cable news coverage is primarily negative in tone.

H₂: Cable news coverage is primarily subjective in tone.

H₃: MSNBC and Fox News will spend more time discussing Republicans and Democrats, respectively.

H₄: MSNBC will report more positively on Democrats and more negatively on Republicans than Fox News.

H₅: Fox News will report more positively on Republicans and more negatively on Democrats than MSNBC.

Methodology

In choosing the sample of content for this analysis many factors were taken into consideration. First, the physical limitations of one person watching and hand coding the content required that a limited sample size be selected. For this reason, I decided to analyze two of the top rated prime time shows from each network over two days. For Fox News, I selected The O'Reilly Factor (8pm) with Bill O'Reilly, and The Sean Hannity Show (9pm). On MSNBC, I analyzed Hardball with Chris Matthews (5pm & 7pm) and The Rachel Maddow Show (9pm). All four programs were analyzed on Tuesday March 8th, 2011 and again on Thursday March 10th, 2011. The dates chosen for analysis were not selected randomly. The date selection was dictated by national and world events, so that the sample would not be skewed by overwhelming

coverage of one issue, or dominated by non-political stories that would not be particularly useful in illustrating my hypotheses about political news. In this case, the TV coverage on the week preceding my analysis was hugely dominated by a populist uprising in Egypt (the first of a series of Middle East uprisings discussed below). At the same time, a great deal of coverage was being given to Charlie Sheen, an actor who had recently been fired from his CBS sitcom due to drug abuse and violence, and who subsequently went on a media blitz telling the story from his point of view. I waited for the hype around these stories to subside so that my analysis wasn't clouded by an unusually high number of stories on international affairs and celebrity entertainment. Further, I selected samples from Tuesday and Thursday as a review of the year's cable news ratings showed consistently high numbers for these days of the week compared with Mondays or Fridays, where viewership was usually lower.

While cable news broadcasts contain a great deal of multimedia content, the quantitative portion of this content analysis focused in on the spoken content of the shows, either by the host or a live guest (in studio or via satellite/skype). First, each show was broken down into "segments." A segment is defined here as a portion of the show dealing with a certain subject area or story. Next, each segment was further divided into "speaking turns," where each time a new person began speaking, it was coded as a new turn. However, while most of these "turns" were between ten seconds and one minute, there were instances where the host spoke uninterrupted for several minutes. In these cases, the turn was divided into smaller segments based on logical subject breaks. For example, if Rachel Maddow spoke for six minutes about the labor protests in Wisconsin, the breaks were marked by her subtle change in topic, for example from a discussion of the union protestors themselves to talk about the Governor of Wisconsin. Once the speaking turns were established, each was coded according to several categories

dealing with the speaker, general tone, partisan tone, objectivity, and the presence of poll data (full coding sheet in appendix). The speaking turns were then combined to determine how each segment, as a whole would be identified.

Some of these coding categories were simply looking for the presence or absence of a certain element within the speaking turn, (eg. polls, Democratic reference, Republican reference) and thus were simply coded yes or no. If any of the speaking turns within a segment contained a reference to poll data, the entire segment was coded “yes” for polls. However, many other categories dealt with tone, a much more subjective area that required a more rigorous test to assure that the researcher’s personal bias did not influence the results. Looking first to objectivity, each speaking turn was coded as either objective or subjective. In many cases this distinction was quite clear such as statement beginning with “I think...” while others were a bit more difficult to determine. If it was unclear whether a turn was objective or subjective, the default was to code it as objective as to not artificially inflate the percentage of subjective speaking turns. Next, in order to determine the overall level of subjectivity of a segment, the speaking turns were tested against a 2:1 ratio of subjective to objective. A segment was only coded as subjective if it contained twice as many subjective speaking turns as objective turns.

Turning next to partisan tone, which was perhaps the most challenging category to deal with objectively, each turn that contained a partisan reference was coded as negative, neutral or positive towards both Republicans and Democrats. As was the case with objectivity, if there was uncertainty about whether or not a turn was negative or positive it was coded as neutral. Next, each segment was assigned a value (negative, neutral or positive) based on a 3:1 ratio of negative to positive speaking turns. Because of the difficulty with objectively identifying partisan bias, this measure was held to an even higher standard than objectivity with the 3:1 ratio. If a segment

had three times as many negative turns as positive turns it was coded as negative, and vice versa. If a turn contained a partisan reference but all speaking turns were coded as neutral or the negative to positive ratio did not meet the threshold the segment was coded as neutral. The same 3:1 ratio was applied when determining the overall tone of the segments.

In order to assure objectivity and consistency throughout the content analysis, I recruited a second, independent coder to perform an intercoder reliability analysis. I provided the second coder with my coding book as well as examples of some of the more complicated categories such as partisan tone. The examples came from a distinct sample of cable news not included in this analysis. The second coder coded 12% of the content, or 46 out of 370 speaking turns. The intercoder reliability coefficient was 1.0 for all but three speaking turns, all within the partisan tone category. Where we disagreed on tone, I default coded those turns as neutral as it seemed the tone was a bit ambiguous to an outside viewer.

Before outlining the findings of this content analysis it is useful to generally explain the major news stories covered in these four broadcasts, especially in regards to partisan bias, as some stories are inherently positive or negative towards a political party. The first major story discussed was the labor disputes in Wisconsin. The Wisconsin protests began on February 14, 2011, in opposition to the Wisconsin Budget Repair Bill proposed by Republican Governor Scott Walker. The bill included measures to raise the premium on entitlement programs for many public sector workers, as well as to limit the collective bargaining power of public unions, as a means of balancing the state budget. The group that would have been most heavily affected by the bill was public school teachers, who immediately organized and began protesting at the state capitol building in Madison, WI. Large protests continued throughout Wisconsin for weeks while the legislative majority refused to compromise on the provisions in the bill. Further, in order to

prevent the Wisconsin state legislature from voting on this bill, the 14 Democratic Senators from Wisconsin fled the state to avoid being legally compelled to vote (Kelleher, 2011). The protests sparked national attention to issues such as labor laws, the rights of public school teachers, and state's rights.

The next major story was about the ongoing anti-government uprisings across the Middle East, namely in Libya. Large numbers of Libyan citizens formed a coalition to fight the oppressive regime of Muammar Gaddafi. In response, the Gaddafi government ordered its military to suppress the rebels, resulting in violence against Libyan rebel fighters and civilians. In light of what was perceived as egregious human rights violations in Libya, the United States, in conjunction with the United Nations, began discussion about initiating a no fly zone over Libya in order to limit Gaddafi's military power (Bumiller, 2011).

The last major news story covered during my analysis was the beginning of a federal investigation into the radicalization of Muslims living in the United States. The Homeland Security Committee, led by Peter King, a Republican Congressman from NY, initiated these investigations. They were met with fierce opposition, mostly by Democrats, claiming that King was unfairly singling out a religious group of Americans. On the other hand, supporters argued that these hearings were a response to a real and pervasive threat within our borders, and that Representative King was just doing his due diligence to protect American national security (Young, 2011).

As noted above, this analysis is based on a limited sampling of Fox News and MSNBC. The content under consideration looks only at two shows on two days, and thus is not as comprehensive as an analysis of the full prime time lineup over an extended period of time.

However, by carefully choosing this sample, it is quite representative of the networks as a whole, and further analysis of different time periods or programs would likely illustrate the same trends.

Cynicism on Cable News

The first major area of this content analysis was to examine the overall tone of the broadcasts. Considering the literature in chapter four about the prevalence of cynicism on TV, I decided to test this notion by evaluating cable news segments and identifying them as negative, neutral, or positive. The results clearly supported the claim in the literature that political news on TV is largely negative. On both MSNBC and Fox News the vast majority of segments were negative, with a limited number of neutral segments and almost a complete absence of positive news segments. As table 5.1 illustrates, the MSNBC and Fox News samples were 90% and 92% negative, respectively. While the Fox News percentages seem slightly more negative than the MSNBC percentages, a t-test mean comparison reveals that there is no statistically significant difference in tone between these two samples.

Table 5.1
Overall Tone of Broadcasts

	Negative	Neutral	Positive
MSNBC	90%	5%	5%
Fox News	92%	8%	0%

There are many possible explanations for this predominance of negativity on cable news.

First, many would argue that the nature of the stories they are covering is inherently negative.

While this certainly accounts for some of the negative tone, it cannot possibly explain such striking percentages of negativity (90% and 92%) . For example, the Wisconsin protests story, which garnered much media attention from both outlets, definitely has an innate level of negativity, as union workers were protesting against what they perceived as oppressive regulations threatening their way of life. However, there were of course positive elements to this story-- displays of Democracy as tens of thousands of Americans protested peacefully in accordance with their Constitutional rights, or renewed attention to the role school teachers play in American society. However, the broadcasts focus on the negative and enhance the drama of the story with continual video loops of the few protesters who did engage in altercations with state officials or opposition protesters, as well as looming warnings that these protests and civil unrest would soon reach a town near you.

Interestingly, there is another possible explanation for why cable news leans so heavily on negative stories. An analysis of MoveOn.org, a grassroots liberal organization, revealed that in order to construct a sense of community and activism among their “constructed community” MoveOn included a great deal of negative content in their email correspondence (Eaton, 2010). This same concept can be applied to cable news networks who have made clear that establishing a community of viewers is essential to their success. Perhaps focusing on the negative will prompt viewers to take action, or at the very least, tune in the next night to find out about the status of whatever looming disaster is being reported that week. Later in this chapter, I will discuss partisan bias specifically, and it will become clearer how these networks may be overly vilifying the opposition in order to rally and organize their politically homogenous base.

Subjective vs. Objective Reporting

The next area of inquiry looks at the presence of opinionated commentary on cable news. The presence of opinion versus straight objective reporting is one of the things that makes cable news unique, but how much of their coverage is actually comprised of opinion? In the sample analyzed here, I found that of the 26 segments on Fox News, 18 of them were subjective, meaning they contained at least twice as many subjective speaking turns as objective speaking turns. On MSNBC, 16 out of 20 segments were subjective. Table 5.2 shows the breakdown by percentage of objective versus subjective news segments. While we assumed there would be a significant presence of opinion, the actual percentages are much higher than anticipated. 69% of Fox's coverage was subjective and 80% of the coverage on MSNBC was subjective. Here, it appears that MSNBC is more subjective than Fox News, but again a t-test revealed that there is not in fact a statistically significant difference in the overall ratio of objective to subjective stories between the two networks.

Table 5.2
Objective vs. Subjective News Content

	Objective %	Subjective %
MSNBC	20%	80%
Fox News	31%	69%

Again, there are many reasons that cable news includes so much opinion in their political coverage. The first is, in a sense, a logistical explanation. These networks have hours of airtime to fill with political coverage, and there simply isn't enough news to fill all the time with novel objective reports. This explanation is clearly subject to criticism, as many would argue there are countless important news stories that go unreported, or underreported, because they aren't

exciting or sensational enough for cable news. This content analysis clearly revealed that cable news tends to rely on a format of limited, but extended, news segments. This means that they will choose to focus in on fewer stories and attempt to cover each of them more extensively. In this sample the cable shows contained between three and eight segments. In reality, when a cable news host devotes 20 minutes to one story, they do present quite comprehensive coverage of the issue but are still left with ample time to insert their opinionated commentary.

Further, looking to the guests that are invited onto cable news shows, they are most often partisan pundits brought on to share their opinions as opposed to neutral experts brought on to testify about the facts. On MSNBC, 18 out of 20 guests had a distinct partisan point of view versus just 2 who were neutral. On Fox News, there were 23 partisan guests compared with just 7 neutral guests. The notion that cable news is highly sensational also provides reason for the presence of opinion. A host or irreverent guest spouting their opinions, which are often heavily partisan in nature, is much more exciting to watch than a straight factual presentation of the story. Thus, the presence of opinion is one way that cable news channels brand themselves and further, attract and keep viewers.

MSNBC and Fox News are undoubtedly sending mixed messages to their audiences about what type of news organization they really are. Some promotional material, such as the “opinions should be earned” MSNBC billboard discussed in chapter four, acknowledge the opinion factor and promote it as a positive attribute of their network. On the other hand, both networks have often said that while some of their content is opinionated it is clearly distinguished from their objective reporting. At least from the sample analyzed above, I found no such distinction, and struggled to identify which programs were the ones that the networks consider “real news.” Looking further into the discrepancy between branding and reality, The

O'Reilly Factor brands itself as the, “no spin zone” yet contained speaking turns that were 59% subjective. We will further investigate this discrepancy between branding and reality later in the chapter as we discuss the presence of partisan bias.

Cable News Frames

The conflict frame and the horserace frame are two of the most central frames used in political reporting. Since framing effects, and these two frames specifically, have already been discussed extensively in chapters two and four, respectively, I will focus here on illustrating how these frames are employed in my cable news sample. Looking first to the conflict frame, we see evidence of both cable news networks over-emphasizing their political opponents as a means of creating an “us vs. them” worldview, clearly based in conflict not compromise. This concept was operationalized by counting how many segments included a reference to either a Democratic or Republican personality or policy. The results supported the idea that both MSNBC and Fox News spend more time discussing the opposition than reporting on politics that is in line with their ideological perspective. Of the 20 segments coded on MSNBC, all 20 contained references to Republican politicians or policy, while only 13 so referenced Democrats. On Fox News we observe the same trend, with 21 out of 26 segments referencing Democrats and only 16 segments discussing Republican politicians and policy.

While the number of Republican to Democratic references is in fact significantly different between the two networks, we can anticipate that a broader cable news sampling would show even more drastic differences, especially for Fox News. The reason for this is the nature of

the stories covered during my sample period. For example, two of the main stories covered on both networks (Governor Walker (R) in Wisconsin and Rep. Peter King (R) in New York) are inherently based in a discussion of Republican politicians. Thus, we can expect that a more diverse sample would include less Republican references, and make the discrepancy even more pronounced. The next logical question clearly asks about the tone of these partisan references, a topic that will be discussed extensively below, and one, which will further serve to illustrate the conflict frame.

Looking next to the horserace frame in political reporting, we find some interesting examples within this cable news sample. This infamous political frame refers to media coverage that presents politics, especially campaigns in a simple winner/loser, frontrunner/underdog context. As discussed in chapter two, the reliance on this frame often leads the media to cover campaigns even before anyone declares their candidacy, as it makes reporting both easier, and more dynamic for the audience.

One of the most fundamental ways cable news exemplifies their reliance on the horserace frame is through their use of poll data. Polls often provide just a snapshot of the opinions of a certain cohort of Americans, and are often not statistically sound. For example, both MSNBC and Fox News will construct polls where viewers can text message their vote to the network or vote online on the network's website. We must immediately recognize that these types of polls are not at all instructive about national trends as they utilize a convenience sample of people who tune in to these networks, and thus are largely ideologically homogenous (as will be illustrated in chapter 6). Further, polls are no longer just used to gauge the electoral prospects of political candidates. Today, polls are fielded on almost every aspect of political life. People are polled about their feelings towards legislation, their evaluations of different branches of government,

and perhaps most prevalently, they are polled about the electoral prospects of people who have not even expressed an interest in running for office. On Fox News, 8 out of 26 segments included a reference to polling data, and on MSNBC a striking 13 out of 20 segments used polls.

Another way to analyze the reliance on the horserace frame is by looking not only at the segment topics but further at the way these stories were presented to the audience. First, we must recognize that at the time of this analysis not a single person had formally announced their candidacy for President in 2012-- not surprising, as the next presidential election was almost a year and a half away. Regardless, MSNBC and Fox News featured segments dedicated entirely to discussing the GOP *potential* candidates, and further both networks infused election type coverage into their reports on other national and international events. Of the eight shows analyzed, four of them included segments dedicated almost entirely to discussion of possible Republican presidential candidates (two on MSNBC and two on Fox News). Here, we begin to see the conflation of horserace coverage and opinionated reporting. Since none of these people have actually announced a presidential run or expounded on what they would do as President, the segments are comprised almost entirely of opinion and speculation.

Chris Matthews seemed to rely most heavily on this framework, as both his Tuesday and Thursday programs included a segment about the 2012 race. The Thursday show even got quite in depth about how each of these hypothetical candidates would fare in the early voting state of Iowa. In addition to generally discussing the candidates, Matthews devoted an entire additional segment to Newt Gingrich, a Republican politician who had not announced a presidential run or even the beginning of a presidential exploratory committee. While Rachel Maddow focused the vast majority of her stories on the labor protests in Wisconsin, even here I observed many references tying the Wisconsin story to a campaign discussion. On Tuesday, she made the

connection by extensively discussing the electoral chances of the 14 Democratic Senators who fled the state, as well as Governor Scott Walker's chances of reelection—again relying heavily on poll data. On Thursday she took a different approach, fitting the Wisconsin story into the horserace frame by discussing how these events would affect the relationship between Democrats and the labor movement in the 2012 election. On Tuesday night, Bill O'Reilly featured a full segment on the 2012 GOP primary, again heavily featuring speculation about Newt Gingrich. On Thursday, he devoted an entire segment to discussing the electoral pros and cons of former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, appearing with President Obama at a Florida public school. This story is particularly illustrative as the actual event was bipartisan, and fully focused on education reform. The news coverage of the meeting however, painted a partisan picture of Jeb Bush hurting his chances of being elected to office by appearing with the Democratic President. There was almost zero mention in the news report of education reform or the speeches given by either politician. Lastly, Sean Hannity spent a good deal of time on his Tuesday broadcast discussing the national budget. At first glance this seems an important and legitimate story. However, the manner in which it was presented emphasized not the fiscal trouble of the country, but the effects that voting on a budget would have on members of Congress and the President going into 2012. On Thursday night, Hannity featured an extensive interview with Sarah Palin, where most of the conversation was centered on her thoughts about potential GOP candidates and her own ambitions of running for president. They debated the merits and pitfalls of a long list of Republican politicians, again, none of who had announced their candidacy and many of who had spoken out, clearly saying they would not be running in 2012.

While all of these examples clearly show how reliant cable news is on reporting politics through a horserace, campaign-centric frame, we must also consider the behavior of the

politicians who are being reported on. Thinking back to chapter two's discussion of mediatized politics, we begin to see a cycle emerge where the media are prematurely reporting on elections and horserace frames while the politicians are staging appearances in early voting states, or prematurely hinting at a presidential run simply in order to attract the attention of the media. While Sean Hannity may seem to be politicizing the national budget issue in his report, we must recognize that the politicians in Congress are also thinking heavily about how their vote will affect them in the next election. This is a useful example of the political establishment adapting to media logic, as every legislative vote becomes an election in and of itself.

Partisan Bias on Cable News

Perhaps the most telling aspect of cable news coverage, and certainly the most important to this study, is the analysis of tone used towards the two main political parties. Considering the existing literature explicated in chapter four, as well as the popular perception of these news networks, I expected to find a significant pro-Democratic and pro-Republican slant on MSNBC and Fox News, respectively. The results did support this conclusion but also yielded some other surprising and informative findings about how the networks treat the opposition party in their coverage. Each of the percentages presented below and in tables 5.3 and 5.4 consider only the speaking turns that included a partisan reference. On MSNBC, 69% of their Democratic references were positive, while 31% were neutral, and not a single segment reached the 3:1 ratio to be classified as negative. This 69% becomes especially significant when one considers that MSNBC contained only 5% positive reports of Republicans. Turning to Fox News, 38% of their reports on Republicans were positive, another 38% were neutral, and 25% were coded as

negative. Again, we must compare the 38% positive towards Republicans to their 5% positive reports on Democrats. There is clear support for the hypothesis that MSNBC reports more positively on Democrats and Fox News reports more positively on Republicans.

What was more surprising was how much more time each network spent denigrating the opposition compared to praising the party with which they are ideologically aligned. While MSNBC reported 69% positive towards Democrats, they also reported 85% negative towards Republicans. On the other hand, Fox News contained 38% positive reports towards Republicans and 81% negative reports about Democrats. Again, these huge percentages of negativity towards the opposition are not inflated by the mere presence of more opposition references, as the valid percentages reported consider only the segments that included a reference to the party under consideration. By overemphasizing the negative aspects of their opposition instead of highlighting the positive elements within their own cohort, these broadcasts are leaving audiences with a clear take away message—the other side is bad, they should be feared and defeated. Statistical tests again show, that for both MSNBC and Fox News the difference in tone towards both parties is significant above the 99% level. The results below provide clear support for the assertion that MSNBC has a liberal bias while Fox News contains a conservative bias. Again, we can observe clear differences in how these news organizations are presenting themselves to the public versus what kind of news they are actually providing. Take for example, Fox News' slogan, "fair and balanced." An unknowing news consumer would likely take this to mean they are watching a relatively non-partisan network. The data reveal the reality however, with Fox News clearly not balancing the tone of their coverage or even providing an equal amount of information about both partisan perspectives.

Table 5.3
Tone Towards Democrats

	Negative	Neutral	Positive
MSNBC	0%	31%	69%
Fox News	81%	14%	5%

Table 5.4
Tone Towards Republicans

	Negative	Neutral	Positive
MSNBC	85%	10%	5%
Fox News	25%	37.5%	37.5%

In addition to the tone of the news reports there are other areas of content, such as featured guests, that can also be analyzed to illuminate the partisan bias on MSNBC and Fox News. This analysis coded each speaking turn to identify the speaker. If the speaker was someone other than the host, they were coded as liberal, neutral, or conservative. As with the previous models, if there was uncertainty about the political persuasion of a guest they were coded as neutral. On MSNBC, 26% of turns were spoken by a liberal guest versus just 4% by a conservative guest. On Fox News, 35% were spoken by a conservative guest compared with 7% liberal guests. These numbers already illustrate the preference of these networks to converse with people who will agree with the political ideology presented on their networks as opposed to those who would challenge or question that ideology. Further, if we consider that the MSNBC and Fox News hosts are clearly liberal and conservative, respectively, we can include their speaking turns, and really see the stark discrepancy between agreeing and disagreeing voices on

cable news. Looking first to MSNBC, someone with a liberal point of view spoke in 91% of the turns, 5% were neutral, and just 4% were conservative. Turning to Fox News, 87% of the turns were occupied by conservative voices, 5% were neutral and liberals spoke in just 7% of the turns.

This analysis does not mean to suggest that the mere presence of a partisan bias on cable news is necessarily negative. Instead, establishing that the bias does in fact exist is just a piece of the puzzle in determining audience effects. These results must be considered in light of two other important factors: the reputation of the news source (chapter four) and the audience composition of the news outlet (chapter six). Hypothetically, if a heterogeneous audience was watching either of these cable networks with a firm understanding that they were consuming highly partisan and highly opinionated news, there would likely be few negative consequences. However, as we will learn by the end of this study, this is definitely not the case in today's media environment. Instead, it seems ideologically homogenous cohorts of Americans are tuning into these networks; with many of these viewers completely unaware of the political slant they are absorbing. It is under these circumstances that we must consider the possible detriment to the news consumer of being misled by biased news and by shielding themselves from any information from the opposing point of view. Further, this scenario may pose a threat to our Democracy, which is so deeply rooted in deliberation and compromise. If people can no longer reach mutual understanding or find a middle ground on issues of utmost importance to the country, how will their elected officials ever be able to vote and pass laws that require bipartisan support?

CHAPTER 6: AUDIENCE ANALYSIS: WHO'S WATCHING & WHY

Now that we've established what type of news is coming out of MSNBC and Fox News, the next important questions ask, who is watching these channels and why? This chapter will examine and quantify the audience composition of cable news, and Fox News and MSNBC specifically. The data will reveal several important trends among cable news viewers, such as their general demographics and levels of political interest and knowledge. Further, this chapter will illustrate the high levels of partisan selectivity and fragmentation across cable news audiences, lending credence to the possibility of detrimental audience effects, as discussed in chapter five. Lastly, I will look at people's perceptions of these news outlets, as well as why they choose to tune in to them for political news.

Survey Data

The data used in this study originated from the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. The specific data set under examination is their *Biennial Media Consumption Survey from 2010* (Pew Research Center, 2010). The telephone survey asked 3,000 adults, comprising a nationally representative sample, a wide range of questions about their demographics, political opinions, and most importantly, media consumption habits.

Hypotheses

These hypotheses highlight the central trends of cable news viewers that are examined throughout this chapter. We first look to the political attributes of cable news viewers (H₁, H₂), and then illustrate their high levels of partisan selectivity and fragmentation (H₃, H₄, H₅, H₆). Lastly, H₇ focuses on people's primary motivations for choosing specific news outlets.

H₁: Regular cable news viewers have higher levels of political interest and knowledge than those who watch sporadically, or not at all.

H₂: People with higher levels of partisanship watch cable news more frequently than those who are more moderate.

H₃: Republicans and conservatives watch Fox News more frequently than Democrats and liberals.

H₄: Democrats and liberals watch MSNBC more frequently than Republicans and conservatives.

H₅: Republicans and Democrats will largely ignore MSNBC and Fox News, respectively.

H₆: Exposure to Fox News is more strongly affected by political preferences than exposure to MSNBC.

H₇: The majority of viewers do not rate "opinionated commentary" as their primary motivation for choosing MSNBC and Fox News

Cable News Demographics

The first portion of this audience analysis will look at who, among the American population, is tuning in to cable news. We will begin with basic demographics. Using the data from the 2010 Pew media survey, I performed difference of means tests (ANOVA), to examine the level of exposure to cable news. Respondents' average exposure is examined in relation to their age, sex, socioeconomic status, level of education and race. For all of these analyses, exposure to cable news was measured on a four-point scale ranging from "never" to "regularly." Thus, in the proceeding tables, higher mean values will represent higher frequencies of cable news exposure.

Looking first to age (table 6.1), the data show a statistically significant linear trend of higher exposure to cable news among older cohorts of Americans. To capture socioeconomic status, I clustered respondents into five categories based on their average yearly income. Table 6.2 shows that people from higher socioeconomic status groups are watching cable news more frequently than those who fall into lower economic brackets at a statistically significant level. Turning to sex, table 6.3 illustrates that men watch cable news more frequently than women. However, with a difference of means only equaling .143 we can see that while statistically significant, the difference between genders is quite small.

Table 6.1
Exposure to Cable News vs. Age

Young (18-30)	2.83
Adult (31-50)	2.99
Old (51-70)	3.00
Very Old (71-96)	3.15

Significance=.012

Table 6.2
Exposure to Cable News vs. Average Income

Very Low (under 10k)	2.41
Low (10k-29k)	2.90
Average (30k-74k)	3.03
High (75k-149k)	3.12
Very High (150k or more)	3.13

Significance=.000

Table 6.3
Exposure to Cable News vs. Sex

Men	3.075
Women	2.932

Significance =.016

The next demographic variable under consideration is level of education. Low education is defined here as someone who at most graduated high school, medium education includes those who have graduated high school up to those who have completed college. Finally, the high education cohort is comprised of people with some level of post-graduate education. Table 6.4 reveals that people with higher levels of education are watching cable news more frequently than those with less education at a statistically significant level.

Table 6.4
Exposure to Cable News vs. Education

Low (up to high school graduate)	2.88
Medium (up to college graduate)	3.03
High (post graduate education)	3.04

Significance =.037

The final demographic variable considered here was the race of the respondent. By breaking race down into four general categories of White, Black, Asian, and Latino I was able to compare each group's average exposure to cable news and discovered that there is no statistically significant difference in exposure among races (see appendix).

Political Attributes of Cable News Viewers

Moving on from basic population demographics, this analysis will now look into some of the political attributes of cable news viewers. First, we will examine levels of interest in news and politics and how they correlate to cable news consumption. Next, the analysis will determine whether people with higher levels of political knowledge are watching more cable news than their counterparts with low levels of political knowledge. Finally, we will look into the partisan preferences of cable news viewers by comparing cable news exposure to both party ID and political ideology.

In order to tap into people's levels of political interest, this study will utilize two distinct survey variables. The first is more general in nature asking, "How much do you enjoy keeping up with the news?" The second more specifically captures attention to electoral politics by asking, "How closely did you follow news about this year's congressional elections (2010)?" It is worth noting that many previous studies use the "registered to vote" variable as a determinant of political interest. While the survey under consideration here does ask respondents whether or not they are registered to vote, this study will not include that variable in the analysis. The "vote" variable was omitted due to what statistical researchers call the acquiescent response bias, or the tendency of respondents to provide the answer they believe is the more socially acceptable choice. Clearly here, the more socially acceptable response is to report that you are in fact

registered to vote. For this reason, the results are often skewed on this variable and do not yield very informative results about actual voting patterns or political activity.

Several statistical models were conducted to support the notion that political interest is an important correlate of cable news exposure. First, I examined whether those who enjoy keeping up with the news in general have higher levels of exposure to cable news. Using an ANOVA model, the means for those who say they enjoy keeping up with the news “a lot” were compared to those who said they don’t enjoy keeping up with the news (see appendix). The results showed that for those who enjoy keeping up with the news, we see an average cable news exposure score of 3.33. According to the scale, this means that the cohort falls in between watching cable news ‘regularly’ and ‘sometimes’. On the other hand, the 1.89 score for those who don’t enjoy keeping up with the news at all means this group falls just below the ‘hardly ever’ threshold. Next, as table 6.5 illustrates, I created charts depicting the correlations, which support the above conclusion as the “enjoy keeping up with the news” variable was positively correlated to cable news exposure with a statistically significant Pearson’s R value of .379.

Next, I looked at attention to electoral politics, namely the 2010 midterm elections. Again, we see that the more closely a person followed the elections the more frequently they watched cable news. Table 6.5 shows a positive correlation to cable news exposure with a statistically significant Pearson’s R value of .326. A contingency table (see appendix) showed that 68% of those who were regular cable news viewers followed the elections very closely compared with just 21% of regular viewers who didn’t follow the elections closely at all. Only 8% of those who followed the elections very closely reported never watching cable news. Considering the content characteristics illuminated in chapter five this is not at all surprising. Cable news outlets are perfectly suited for covering elections, and for a person interested in

electoral politics there seems no better place to turn for constant updates, often presented in an easy to digest horserace frame of winners and losers.

Table 6.5
Correlations (Pearson's R) to Exposure to Cable News

	Pearson's R	Significance
Enjoy Keeping up with News	.379	.000
Followed 2010 Elections	.326	.000

Lastly, in order to determine the predictive strength of these two variables on exposure to cable news I conducted an ordinary least square regression (OLS). The results illustrate that both variables are important and significant (.000) predictors of exposure to cable news (see appendix). The resultant solution reads as follows:

$$\text{Exposure to Cable News} = 4.123 + \text{Enjoy}(-.361) + \text{Follow}(-.204).$$

Further, the R^2 value for this regression model was .174, which means that about 17% of the variance in exposure to cable news can be explained by these two variables alone. This makes a solid case for the hypothesis that people with higher levels of political interest are the ones most likely to watch cable news.

The next set of analyses further support hypothesis one by showing that people with higher levels of political knowledge watch cable news more frequently than those with lower levels. I included this measure because of the body of research mentioned in chapter four discussing the relationship between political knowledge and political news on TV. While these results cannot tell us about the direction of the relationship and thus can't support the notion that cable news exposure *leads* to higher levels of political knowledge, it does show a definite correlation between the two. It is interesting to consider the inverse relationship where increased

political knowledge leads to exposure to cable news. This relationship would fit well into the framework of this study, as I argue that the regular viewers of cable news are highly politically aware and knowledgeable, and thus will likely act as disseminators of political information. In order to operationalize political knowledge I selected two survey questions that directly test respondents' knowledge of current political facts. The first asks people to identify which political party has a majority in the House of Representatives (Democrats) and the second asks them to identify the role of Eric Holder in Obama's administration (Attorney General). In both cases the group that answered the knowledge questions correctly reported higher exposure to cable news (see appendix).

The final set of political attributes under investigation here are party ID and political ideology. The survey question that asks about party identification reads, "In politics TODAY, do you consider yourself a Republican, Democrat or Independent? Respondents then chose from the following response choices: Republican, Democrat, Independent, No Preference, Other, and Don't Know. For the purposes of this analysis, I included only those who answered, Republican, Democrat, or Independent (93% of total sample). The variable that taps into ideology asks, "In general, would you describe your political views as..." Respondents may then answer on a five-point scale ranging from very conservative to very liberal. ANOVA tests were conducted to support the idea that people who are more Republican and more conservative will watch more cable news than their Democratic or liberal counterparts. Both tables 6.6 and 6.7 show statistically significant differences between political orientations, with Republicans scoring highest among party ID and very conservatives scoring highest among ideologies. Notably, the range of exposure to cable news is higher for ideology than for party identification. This begins to imply that ideology may be a stronger predictor of cable news exposure than party ID. To

support this hypothesis, I generated a chart depicting the correlations between party id and ideology to cable news exposure. Table 6.8 shows that ideology is more than twice as strong a correlate to cable news exposure as party ID.

Table 6.6
Party Id vs. Exposure to Cable News

Republican	3.16
Independent	2.99
Democrat	2.86

Significance =.043

Table 6.7
Ideology vs. Exposure to Cable News

Very Conservative	3.22
Conservative	3.09
Moderate	2.97
Liberal	2.93
Very Liberal	2.56

Significance =.028

Table 6.8
Correlations between Party ID/Ideology and Cable News Exposure

	Pearson's R	Significance
Party ID	-.054	.000
Ideology	-.109	.000

Another important concept to consider within the area of party ID and ideology is partisan strength. Considering the highly partisan content found on cable news and the discussion of news outlets catering their content to the audience, it seem logical that people with more extreme partisan beliefs would watch the most cable news. To test this hypothesis I created a “folded variable” from the original ideology variable. By combining ‘very conservative’ with ‘very liberal’, ‘conservative’ with ‘liberal’ and leaving ‘moderate’ alone, I created three

categories of partisanship: “very partisan”, “partisan” and “moderate.” The data support the contention that extreme partisans watch cable news significantly more than moderates. Of the “very partisan” group, 50% reported regularly watching cable news compared with 40% of moderates who regularly watched (see appendix).

Audience Fragmentation by Political Preference

As we can see from the data above, political ideology and party identification are important predictors of exposure to cable news. The next important question asks if people with different political orientations are exposing themselves to disparate news outlets. Existing research suggests that people are likely to select news that agrees with their preexisting political belief systems (Klapper, 1960). Are liberals and conservatives flocking to MSNBC and Fox News respectively? And further, are they shielding themselves from the opposing network’s media messages? Chapter five demonstrated how vastly different the news package is across these two networks and illuminated the issues that can arise when distinct cohorts of American citizens are consuming different news and opinions, and thus walking away from the television with wildly different perceptions of political reality. This quantitative analysis will illustrate just how strong the echo chamber has become in the cable news sphere, as people increasingly confine themselves to agreeing news outlets.

Party Identification

The first step in this analysis is to examine audience fragmentation according to party identification. As discussed in chapter three, party ID has many weaknesses when it comes to tapping into underlying political belief systems. For this reason, it comprises only the initial step in this comprehensive look at fragmentation according to political preference. However, given the extensive past research done utilizing the party ID variable, it is prudent to examine its effects in today's media environment, and to look at how it specifically affects exposure to cable news outlets. I used a bivariate crosstabulation to generate a contingency table comparing people's self-reported party identification with their frequency of exposure to MSNBC and Fox News. Again, the media consumption question allowed respondents to rate the frequency with which they watch MSNBC and Fox News on a four-point scale ranging from "never" to "regularly." The results below show strong audience fragmentation according to party identification for both networks.

Table 6.9
Exposure to Fox News by Party ID

	Republican	Independent	Democrat
Never	19.5%	36.6%	46.3%
Hardly Ever	9.1%	15.1%	16.9%
Sometimes	26.3%	27.9%	21.7%
Regularly	45.1%	20.5%	15.0%

Significance of $\chi^2 = .000$

Table 6.10
Exposure to MSNBC by Party ID

	Republican	Independent	Democrat
Never	48.9%	40.6%	32.1%
Hardly Ever	21.5%	20.2%	18.0%
Sometimes	23.2%	29.5%	31.7%
Regularly	6.3%	9.7%	18.2%

Significance of $\chi^2 = .000$

There are many interesting conclusions that can be drawn from these tables. Perhaps the most striking finding is the huge difference in exposure to the two channels between Republicans and Democrats (selectivity by party ID). The second major finding is that a very large percentage of respondents report regularly watching the network that agrees with the platform of their chosen political party while overwhelmingly ignoring the opposition outlet (fragmentation by party ID). Looking first to Fox News (table 6.9), we see that while 45% of Republicans regularly tune in, only 15% of Democrats report this level of exposure. On the other hand, 46% of Democrats say they never watch Fox News compared to only 19.5% of Republicans who completely ignore the network. The MSNBC figures reveal similar trends (table 6.10), with 18% of Democrats regularly watching MSNBC compared with just 6% of Republicans. A striking 49% of Republicans say they never watch MSNBC as opposed to 32% of Democrats.

These numbers are quite telling regarding the second fragmentation finding. Almost half of Republicans regularly watch Fox News, while an even higher percentage admit to never watching MSNBC. The reverse is also true with less than 1 in 4 Democrats reporting regular exposure to Fox News. Importantly, while the trends are similar across the two networks the actual percentages reveal some important differences. While almost half of Republicans watch

Fox News regularly, only about 1 in 5 Democrats regularly watch MSNBC. Part of this discrepancy may simply be because Fox News is much more popular than MSNBC in general (as discussed in chapter four). Another explanation may be that Fox News is more unique in its conservative point of view. Republicans have few other choices of news outlets if they want news with this conservative point of view, whereas Democrats can find ample news outlets with a perceived liberal bias, such as CNN, The New York Times, NPR, or Politico. This explanation may seem flawed considering the massive number of both conservative and liberal political news outlets on the Internet. However, we must remember two previous points from this study to counter that criticism. First, cable news audiences are predominately made up of older Americans, a group that is less likely than their younger counterparts to use the Internet for news (Owen, 2010). Second, as chapter four explains, people are inherently drawn to TV as a source of news. If the news consumers considered above were looking only within the television sphere, they would be hard pressed to find an alternative to Fox News with a similar conservative perspective. Further, many Americans, namely conservative Americans, view the traditional network newscasts on NBC, ABC, and CBS as slanted towards liberals. Thus, Fox News becomes their only television option without a perceived liberal bias.

Political Ideology

Next, I performed a similar analysis replacing party ID with political ideology. As previously discussed, ideology too has its limitations, but it does provide a broader scale of

political preference and does not require an institutional affiliation. For these reasons, I expect the fragmentation by ideology to be even more blatant than the party ID results.

Table 6.11
Exposure to Fox News by Ideology

	Very Conservative	Conservative	Moderate	Liberal	Very Liberal
Never	14.2%	21.9%	39.7%	53.6%	62.9%
Hardly Ever	3.8%	12.1%	17.4%	15.9%	10.0%
Sometimes	22.6%	27.4%	26.3%	19.3%	15.7%
Regularly	59.4%	38.6%	16.5%	11.1%	11.4%

Significance of $\chi^2 = .000$

Table 6.12
Exposure to MSNBC by Ideology

	Very Conservative	Conservative	Moderate	Liberal	Very Liberal
Never	57.5%	45.7%	33.7%	33.8%	49.3%
Hardly Ever	14.2%	20.5%	20.9%	20.8%	13.0%
Sometimes	19.8%	26.7%	32.8%	28.5%	14.5%
Regularly	8.5%	7.1%	12.7%	16.9%	23.2%

Significance of $\chi^2 = .000$

Tables 6.11 and 6.12 support the notion that ideological fragmentation is even stronger than fragmentation by party ID. For Fox News, 59% of people who are very conservative and 39% conservative report regular exposure to Fox News. These huge numbers are only intensified

when compared with people who are very liberal or liberal, both reporting regular exposure at only 11%. Again, we see the same type of fragmentation when it comes to ignoring cable news outlets. Only 14% of very conservatives and 22% of conservatives say they never watch Fox News versus 54% of liberals and 63% of very liberals. Looking to MSNBC in table 6.12, we see similar trends in the “regularly” category, with 23% of very liberal people and 17% of liberals regularly watching MSNBC compared to only 7% of conservatives and 9% of very conservatives. The never category is a bit more confusing here, although the general trend remains intact. Not surprisingly, people who are very conservative report never watching MSNBC the most (58%). However, it is liberals (34%), not those who are very liberal (49%) who report the lowest percentage for ignoring MSNBC. Some of this discrepancy may be a result of insufficient sample size. Because the number of overall respondents that watch MSNBC was already relatively low, breaking this group down into five ideological categories does present challenges to certain parts of the contingency table, with some categories having an n value less than 50.

Another interesting conclusion that is supported by the data is that people on the ideological extremes (very conservative and very liberal) are the most fragmented in their news consumption---they are much more likely to only watch TV that echoes their existing ideological position. It is worth mentioning again here, that the percentage of very conservatives who regularly watch Fox News (59%) is still much higher than the percentage of very liberals who regularly watch MSNBC (23%). Additionally, the number of very liberals who never watch Fox News (63%) is also greater than the number of very conservatives who never watch MSNBC (58%). In general, these findings show that Fox News has a more ideologically fragmented audience than MSNBC.

Party ID & Ideology

We can begin to see that ideology, as a survey variable, casts a wider net in encompassing people's political belief systems. For example, while only 45% of Republicans say they regularly watch Fox News, 66% of conservatives (very conservative + conservative) so identify. With respect to MSNBC, liberals (very liberal + liberal) reported regularly watching MSNBC (31%) at almost twice the rate of Democrats (18%). This clearly reflects that fact that American political parties are umbrella organizations that encompass a range of ideologies (Epstein, 1989). However, it is still difficult to determine from these disparate models whether the differing effects of party ID and ideology on outlet choice are significantly different, as well as whether or not their strengths vary between Fox News and MSNBC.

To answer these questions I employed a series of regression analyses. Each dependent variable (Fox News and MSNBC exposure) was analyzed as it relates to party ID and ideology. Each regression equation is statistically significant at $p=.00$. Across the board, the results show that as predicted, ideology is a much stronger predictor of outlet choice than party ID. Tables 6.13 and 6.14 allow us to directly compare the effects of the two variables by examining the beta values. For Fox News, party ID (-.136) was about half as strong a predictor as ideology (-.324). MSNBC showed a similar trend with ideology (.114) scoring much higher than party ID (.046). Looking to the Pearson's R correlation values, we can support this conclusion in another way. Looking first to Fox News, party ID has a correlation value of -.207 versus ideology, which equals -.352. MSNBC showed a similar trend with party ID correlating at .074 and ideology at .125. These correlations can also be used to compare the strength of the independent variables across the two cable news outlets as the two outlets were measured on identical scales. The data show that both party ID and ideology are stronger correlates to Fox News exposure than

MSNBC exposure. Next, we will examine and compare the B values between table 6.13 and table 6.14. Party ID has a B value of -.203 for Fox News and .061 for MSNBC. Clearly here, party ID is a stronger predictor of exposure to Fox News than to MSNBC. Ideology has a B value of -.409 for Fox News and .128 for MSNBC. Again, ideology is a much stronger predictor for Fox News than for MSNBC.

Table 6.13

OLS Regression Analysis of Fox News Exposure on Party ID and Ideology

	B	Beta	Significance	Pearson's R
Constant	3.967		.000	
Party ID	-.203	-.136	.000	-.207
Ideology	-.409	-.324	.000	-.352

$R^2 = .145$

Table 6.14

OLS Regression Analysis of MSNBC Exposure on Party ID and Ideology

	B	Beta	Significance	Pearson's R
Constant	1.650		.000	
Party ID	.061	.046	.097	.074
Ideology	.128	.114	.000	.125

$R^2 = .018$

As discussed throughout this study, both party ID and ideology are limited in their ability to tap into political belief systems. The results above show that the two variables do in fact work differently as they relate to cable news exposure and thus are likely tapping into two different, albeit overlapping, areas of political orientation. To move beyond some of these constraints and to form a more comprehensive political belief system variable, my final step is to combine the two variables into a new “political orientation” variable. This new variable improves on the original two in one very important way—it allows respondents to identify as both Republican

and liberal or Democrat and conservative, something table 3.1 illustrates is not at all uncommon among Americans. Further, we can now work with a 10-point scale ranging from very conservative Republican, through moderate Independent, to very liberal Democrat. I ran two new OLS regressions (for Fox News and MSNBC) with the combined “PartyIdeo” as the single independent variable. In both cases, the resulting R^2 values were higher than any of the previous models. For Fox News, R^2 equaled .193, or put another way, 19.3% of the variance in exposure to Fox News can be explained by this single, comprehensive political orientation variable. R^2 equaled .048 for MSNBC, so 4.8% of the variance in exposure to MSNBC can be explained by ‘PartyIdeo’. Again, we see that political belief systems are a much stronger predictor of exposure to Fox News than to MSNBC.

Uses and Gratifications: Why Are People Tuning In?

Now that we’ve established who is watching cable news in general and Fox News and MSNBC specifically, the next important question asks about the audience’s motivations for choosing these specific political news outlets. Uses and Gratifications theory places the focus on the audience, instead of the actual media message, by asking, “what people do with media” rather than “what media does to people” (Katz, 1959). The theory suggests that people use media that fulfills their personal gratifications or needs. According to this theory, if someone is exposed to a certain media outlet but does not feel satisfied with the news package they receive there,

they are not likely to return. On the other hand, when they find an outlet that does fulfill these needs, they will almost certainly return—thus forming the basis for media consumption habits.

In light of the focus of this study, the first question to ask news consumers about what they want from political news is whether or not they prefer news that agrees with their political point of view. The Pew 2010 Media Consumption Survey words the question as follows, “Thinking about the different kinds of political news available to you, what do you prefer... Getting news from sources that share YOUR political point of view or Getting news from sources that DON’T have a particular political point of view [sic].” The results in table 6.15 reveal a very interesting trend, yet they must be taken with a grain of salt. The data must be considered in light of the acquiescent response bias discussed above. Most Americans believe that objective news is the gold standard, and thus are more likely to report that they prefer news without a point of view. We see this in table 6.15 with a staggering 72% of people answering the socially acceptable response. This is quite interesting however, that even with a strong social pull on respondents to answer “no point of view,” 28% still admit to preferring news that confirms their preexisting political beliefs. It is also worth noting that when these responses were broken down by age group, the older cohorts of Americans were more likely than their younger counterparts to say they preferred news that shared their point of view (see appendix). This is contrary to the popular assumption that it is older Americans who are still most attached to the idea of objective journalism. These findings begin to explain the general popularity of cable news, with its highly opinionated content, and further, serves to explain why Fox News is consistently number one in the cable ratings, as their point of view is quite explicit.

Table 6.15
 What Type of Political News Source Do You Prefer?

Getting news from sources that share YOUR political point of view	28%
Getting news from sources that DON'T have a particular political point of view	72%

Perceptions of MSNBC & Fox News

Before we can truly begin to understand why people choose to watch MSNBC or Fox News, we must first examine how the general public perceives these news outlets. For example, in order to choose MSNBC because it is a liberal leaning network, a news consumer must first have some sense of this partisan tone. The Pew Research Center's News Interest Index from October 2009, asks respondents about their perception of the ideology of several different news outlets. These data are both illuminating and shocking, in that they illustrate the widespread confusion about exactly what kinds of networks Fox News and MSNBC actually are. Chapter five's content analysis showed us that both networks present a clear ideological slant across their news programs. However, while 47% of Americans identify a conservative slant on Fox News another 53% are unaware of the partisan tilt. The MSNBC statistics are even more striking; 36% of respondents identified MSNBC as having a liberal slant, but 64% were not aware of the liberal tone presented on the network. Thinking back to chapter two's discussion of mediated politics we can see the danger of large numbers of Americans tuning into highly ideological and opinionated cable outlets without a proper understanding of what type of news they are getting.

Table 6.16
Perceptions of Fox News's Ideology

Mostly Liberal	14%
Neither	24%
Mostly Conservative	47%
Don't Know	15%

From Pew Research Center (2009)

Table 6.17
Perceptions of MSNBC's Ideology

Mostly Liberal	36%
Neither	27%
Mostly Conservative	11%
Don't Know	26%

From Pew Research Center (2009)

The next important thing to recognize is that whether or not respondents correctly identified the partisan slant of Fox News and MSNBC, in both cases large percentages of respondents recognized that a political bias does exist. For Fox News, 61% identify a partisan lean versus 24% who say "neither". Looking to MSNBC, 47% recognize a partisan lean versus 27% who do not. All of the data from tables 6.16 and 6.17 are incredibly important to the next set of analyses looking at people's primary motivations for choosing particular news outlets. It can be argued that there is no harm in exposing oneself to highly partisan political news if the viewer is aware of the biases they are consuming. However, the next set of tables will illustrate that while many people are aware of the partisan bias on cable news they still tune in to these channels in search of information other than opinionated commentary.

What Are People Looking For on MSNBC & Fox News?

Thinking back to the striking percentage from chapter five showing that cable news is comprised primarily of subjective opinion (Fox News- 69%, MSNBC- 80%), it is quite interesting that seeking out opinions is not most people's main motivation for choosing MSNBC or Fox News (table 6.18). Only 15% of Fox News viewers and 22% of MSNBC viewers said they chose this channel primarily for views and opinion. There is slight difficulty in interpreting the rest of the data in these tables, as the survey questions available did not align perfectly with the conceptual ideas of objectivity versus subjectivity discussed in this study. For example, "in-depth reporting" does not necessarily distinguish between the two, as comprehensive research can be done with the intention of supporting a particular point of view. As chapter five illustrates, cable news coverage does provide in-depth reporting, but these reports almost always comes in the form of subjective discussion with a partisan slant.

Looking to the category that garnered the majority of responses on both networks, "latest news and headlines," we see another interesting conflation. Cable news does provide constant updates on the latest political news, but again looking back to the content analysis, the news they chose to feature as "latest" or "headline" is almost entirely decided by editorial decisions within the network. This is a perfect example of media agenda setting, where the media are telling people which issues to think about, resulting in differing impressions of what is most important each day. As "latest news and headlines" is the main reason people are tuning in to MSNBC and Fox News, it becomes even more clear how they might walk away from the television set with different perceptions of which news stories, and which elements within those stories, were the most important of the day. The final category in these uses and gratifications tables is "entertainment." While this notion of "infotainment" is quite important to the study of cable

news, it is not the focus of this analysis. However, we can begin to draw inferences from this category. While the “entertainment” option was likely the least socially acceptable reason to report watching cable news, we still see 6% so reporting for Fox News and 12% for MSNBC. This speaks to the sensational nature of cable news coverage. For some people it is likely acting as an entertaining supplement to more traditional political news sources, while others may watch news on cable TV as their primary source of political information-- purely to be entertained by the highly opinionated, confrontational, partisan content.

Table 6.18
Main Reasons People Watch Fox News & MSNBC

Reason for Choosing Outlet	Fox News	MSNBC
For the latest news and headlines	59%	52%
For in-depth reporting	19%	14%
For entertainment	6%	12%
For interesting views and opinions	15%	22%

These analyses tell us many important things about the audiences of MSNBC and Fox News. First, we observe highly partisan cable news audiences that also have high levels of political interest and knowledge. Considering that people who care about politics and know about politics are those who are most likely to participate in politics, or at the very least discuss politics with others, their extreme partisanship becomes quite important. If it is primarily the extreme political voices that are heard and disseminated, what will that mean for the large block of moderates in the middle? One likely result is that they will become fed up with the partisan

bickering and begin to move away from political content completely. We begin to see support for this conclusion as moderates reported the lowest exposure to cable news. Next, we found that the cable news sphere is overwhelmingly made up of two separate echo chambers. MSNBC provides a space for liberals and Fox News provides a space for conservatives, with little evidence of people regularly exposing themselves to both outlets. Finally, the uses and gratifications analysis supports the idea that there is widespread confusion about exactly what type of content these networks are providing. The next chapter will explore the ramifications of such a news environment in light of the actual content found on cable news.

CHAPTER 7: AUDIENCE EFFECTS: POLITICAL POLARIZATION

The final portion of this study will build on all the previous chapters as well as existing scholarship, to extrapolate on how the current political media system affects the American news consumer. As discussed in chapter two, this study design is based on Harold Lasswell's communication paradigm (1948), which is summarized as follows:

Who says What to Whom in What Channel with What Effect

This chapter will reflect on Lasswell's final stage of the communication process, "with what effect," by drawing on evidence from each of the preceding four stages. First, I will briefly review the first four stages as they directly apply to this study. Chapter four discusses "who" is imparting the media message through a discussion of cable news hosts and pundits. The "what" is extensively analyzed in chapter five's content analysis, finding that it is partisan, opinionated political news that is being communicated. Next, chapter six's audience analysis is entirely focused on the "to whom" stage. Here we found that media messages on cable news were being received by people who generally had heightened levels of political knowledge and interest. Further, I illustrated how the specific audiences for MSNBC and Fox News were highly fragmented according to their political preferences, with conservatives watching Fox News and liberals gravitating towards MSNBC. Finally looking to the discussion of "channel" in chapter four, I provided a history of MSNBC and Fox News, as well as an in depth discussion of the

unique qualities of cable news. The description below details how each of these factors fits into Lasswell's original construct of the communication process.

Cable Hosts/Pundits provide Partisan, Opinionated Political News to an Ideologically Fragmented Group of Politically Aware Americans on Cable News (with what Effects)

I chose to include this summary as a means of emphasizing that audience effects are not a result of any one component of the communications model, but instead they are largely affected by each of the individual stages as well as the interplay between them. For this reason, we must be cautious not to place too much blame on any one component without considering what would happen if the others were altered. The media environment detailed in this study provides an illustrative example of the previous point. Consider the content found on MSNBC and Fox News; instinctually many people will see the highly partisan content as vitriolic and harmful to our society. However, now consider that the "to whom" stage was altered, holding constant the content on the networks. If instead of a highly fragmented audience who only exposed themselves to agreeing information, we found a heterogeneous audience watching both networks and comparing the differing perspective, the harmful audience effects would be ameliorated if not eliminated completely. The point of this discussion is to avoid generalizations when considering the possible effects of the media environment detailed here. The goal is not to place blame on the TV hosts for expressing their opinions, or cable news networks for adopting a partisan slant, or news consumers for confining themselves to echo chambers of agreeing political information. Instead, we must stay cognizant of the fact that the audience effects discussed below are a result of the totality of one specific media environment we find today.

Political Polarization

Watching partisan, opinionated cable news that confirms one's preexisting political beliefs likely affects audiences in many ways. Here however, I will focus on the most important effects-- those that have the potential to harm our democracy. Political polarization, or the process by which public opinion is divided, and pushed towards the extremes, is a trend that dates back to the founding fathers who formed distinct cohorts and fiercely debated the role of the federal government and state's rights. Ideological media also has a long history in America, dating back to the partisan press of the 19th century, when different newspapers openly advocated for certain political parties and candidates (Cook, 1998). For decades, the media have been blamed for a perceived rise in polarization. This is not surprising, as the media have often been used as scapegoats for a wide array of societal ills from violence to childhood obesity to xenophobia. However, when it comes to political polarization, the media do seem to play an integral and unique role in attitude formation and even attitude change.

Before expounding on the ways that this media environment may be causing political polarization, it is useful to briefly examine the state of polarization in the United States today. *The Economist* writes that, "the 50-50 nation appears to be made up of two big separate voting blocks with only a small number of swing voters in the middle" and that, "America is more bitterly divided than it has been for a generation" (The Economist, 2002). Even those scholars who argue that there is still a large block of centrist voters, concede that partisans have become more partisan in recent years (Fiorina et al., 2004). Another study explains that, "patterns of aggregate opinion suggest that partisanship is a driving force in how people perceive, interpret,

and respond to the political world” (Mutz, 2006). Data from the American National Election Studies (ANES) illustrate this increase in political partisanship. The data show that between 1976 and 2008 there was a steady drop in the number of Americans identifying themselves as “independents” and a parallel rise in the number of self identified “strong partisans”(American National Election Studies, 2010). Observations about political debate in Washington today seem to only further elucidate this assertion. The health care reform debate of 2009, or the debate over public sector union rights in Wisconsin in 2011, are just two examples of the extreme partisanship in Washington. In both cases one party proposed a bill, while the other party, en masse, immediately attacked it, vilified the opposition, and refused to compromise on what they saw as core ideals. Today, most congressional votes are split according to party lines, with few congressmen willing to break ranks, resulting in very little bipartisan legislation.

While much work has been done to show a correlation between polarization and exposure to partisan media, very few have taken the next step in establishing a causal relationship between exposure to the media and higher levels of polarization. This distinction is important as the correlation alone can be interpreted in two equally valid ways. The first says that the media are causing people to become more polarized, while the second argues that it is the partisan news consumers who are frequenting these news outlets because they confirm their preexisting beliefs and enjoy partisan news content. However, a 2002 study by David Jones takes this next step in supporting the former justification that exposure to partisan media results in more polarized viewpoints. Jones compared aggregate data from Rush Limbaugh listeners in 1992 and 1996 in order to test attitudinal change over time. He found that regular Limbaugh listeners were on average much more likely to call themselves conservative in 1996 than in 1992. This change is especially significant when you consider his control group of non-listeners and casual listeners,

who reported no change in their ideology. On the other hand, when asked to rate the Democratic Party, regular listeners reported an 11-point drop between 1992 and 1996. These findings do begin to support a causal relationship between partisan media exposure and partisan attitudes. The findings are also quite telling with regards to media effects in general. As was discussed in chapter 3, political belief systems are complex and deeply rooted preferences that do not change easily—thus the media were exerting enormous influence over the way these people viewed politics.

While studies support the idea that polarization is, at least in part, caused by exposure to partisan media outlets, the term polarization is quite broad and it does not pinpoint the exact effects the media are having on audiences that are resulting in these stronger partisan opinions. This study will break polarization effects down into two categories of specific media effects that result from a fragmented, partisan news environment—a lack of mutual understanding and opinion radicalization.

Lack of Mutual Understanding

As media selectivity increases with the growth of available news outlets, audiences become more fragmented. As political news consumers move into distinct echo chambers of political information, one of the most obvious results is a decaying of their common frame of reference. As has been discussed throughout this study, our government relies heavily on deliberative democracy-- a system where mutual understanding and compromise are paramount for success. Cass Sunstein notes that, “A possible consequence [of media fragmentation] is considerable difficulty in mutual understanding” (Sunstein, 2007). David Tewksbury echoes this concern saying, “Fragmented audiences are unlikely to consume a common diet of news,

potentially leaving them under informed about central issues facing the country” (Tewksbury, 2005). This is definitely a cause for concern today, as chapter six showed that not only are people exposing themselves to political information with which they agree, but that for the most part, they are ignoring news outlets that counter their political preferences, which would be where they find these countervailing opinions to help them understand where the other side is coming from. Joseph Turow (1997) laments the effects of such segmentation describing, “a major shift in balance between society-making media and segment-making media.” Instead of one common frame of reference, we are left with several distinct versions of political reality.

The American politician, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, once said, “Everyone is entitled to his own opinion but not his own facts” (Moynihan & Weisman, 2010). This quote encapsulates the problems that can arise from distinct cohorts of Americans consuming completely different news, with both groups accepting their chosen news package as fact. As was illustrated in chapter five, it is easy to see how MSNBC and Fox News viewers could walk away with not only differing opinions about political events but also different facts, or different perceptions of political reality. This assumption is supported in a 2010 study by the World Public Opinion Organization. They found that regular Fox News viewers agreed much more strongly than those who rely on other media outlets with definitive, albeit false, statements such as, “most scientists do not agree that climate change is occurring,” or “the auto bailout only occurred under Obama.” On the other hand, those who regularly watched MSNBC agreed with the following false statement much more strongly than those who relied on most other media outlets--“It was proven that the US Chamber of Commerce was spending money raised from foreign sources to support Republican candidates.” When asked if they thought the following, more ambiguous, statement was true, “Presently, the US economy is getting worse,” the discrepancy between regular

MSNBC and Fox News viewers was clear. Of people who watched MSNBC almost every day, 50% thought the statement was true. Among daily Fox News viewers, 72% believed it to be true (Ramsay et al, 2010). This statement is politically charged, as disagreement with the statement implies support for the Democratic administration. With a Democratic President and Democratic Secretary of the Treasury, it is not surprising that Fox News viewers were more likely to agree with this statement than the more liberal MSNBC viewers. These findings show that media exposure does have an important influence over which political facts people think are true.

Radicalization

Another effect of the media landscape explicated above is the radicalization of political viewpoints. Radicalization refers to the tendency of news consumers' to move away from centrist, moderate political positions, towards more extreme political beliefs. This process of radicalization occurs in several ways, all of which are a result of partisan echo chambers in political news. First, as was illustrated in chapter five, MSNBC and Fox News place a great deal more emphasis on negative reports of the opposition than on positive reports about their own political position. This conflict frame creates an environment where the opposition is painted as the enemy. They are not a group with whom compromise can be reached, but instead, a group to be convinced of their errors or else defeated. There is little discussion of the merits of the opposing point of view, and instead we find demonization and mockery. For example, in Rachel Maddow's discussion of Republican Governor Scott Walker's bill to balance the budget she demonizes him, saying he is, "taxing the old and the poor in order to give that money to corporations." Or James T. Harris, a conservative guest on The O'Reilly Factor, who mocked the 14 Democratic Senators in Wisconsin who left that state to protest voting on the bill, saying they,

“ran and fled and hid out” to avoid doing their jobs. The mere presence of an “enemy” works to radicalize the “in group” by fostering homogeneity of opinion and opinion extremity (Edelman, 1988).

Another explanation for how echo chamber news leads to radicalization is found in studies on how people behave when confined to like-minded group settings. Sunstein explains that, “People who are part of groups comprised only of like-minded individuals tend to move towards greater attitude extremity” (Sunstein, 2007). In his view, this type of media fragmentation will likely result in the polarization of diverse groups of news consumers. This type of group radicalization is easily and aptly applied to political belief systems. Politics are complicated and confusing, leaving people with many questions about what is really going on and how it will personally affect them. For this reason, politics are an area where people rely heavily on cognitive shortcuts and cues to form their opinions. Once placed inside an echo chamber of news with which one agrees, people are very likely to take these shortcuts and cues from other members of this echo chamber or the opinion leaders (TV hosts) themselves. In the absence of opposing viewpoints, news consumers will hear only louder echoes of their own voices, making it extremely likely that any attitude change will be in the direction of the extremes.

While radical political views are rarely in the best interest of the country, in this case, the ramifications of radicalization are particularly ominous. Considering that news outlets are increasingly catering to the viewpoints of their audience, and that these audiences are likely to continue moving towards extreme ideological positions, it is likely that the news content will continue to adapt to these more radical viewpoints—again creating a vicious cycle between public opinion and media messages. Several studies have shown that the mass media play an

integral role in, “bracketing the range of acceptable opinion for the public” (Hallin, 1986).

Clearly, as the voices get more and more extreme, the range of acceptable opinions will expand to include what were once considered “fringe” political voices. These fringe voices are often intolerant and hateful, yet through this process they gain mainstream acceptance.

Looking to cable news, we find ample evidence of a widening of the range of acceptable opinions. For example, on Fox News several anchors have devoted airtime to discussing the “birther movement,” a movement within the Republican Party claiming that President Obama was not born in the United States and thus does not have the legal authority to be President. Questioning the constitutional authority of a sitting President, despite ample evidence countering your assertion, would have historically been an unacceptable position to take. However, as cable news has incorporated the argument into mainstream discussion, the topic has become fair game for political opponents and the conservative public in general. Another example from Fox News comes from their former host, Glenn Beck’s assertion that President Obama is a racist. Considering that Barack Obama was the first African American elected to the American presidency this claim seems flawed at best, yet once it was expressed by a popular cable news host, it ignited a wildfire of criticism from conservatives, claiming the President was in fact consciously pushing for policies that would negatively affect the white population.

Looking to MSNBC, we find similar trends. For example, during the 2010 midterm campaign, MSNBC devoted a great deal of time to discussions about the political organizations that were raising money for Republican candidates, most notably American Crossroads and Crossroads GPS. Their issue was with the fact that these organizations were not required to disclose their donors. However, cable news hosts moved the argument farther to left by claiming that these GOP groups were taking money from foreign countries with the intention of allowing

foreign entities to “buy” American elections in order to accommodate their own interests. Again, this train of thought quickly entered the mainstream liberal consciousness, and painted the 2010 Republican victory as one that occurred because of shady campaign finance maneuvers, and not policy differences.

These examples support the assertion that cable news broadcasts are bringing more radical political voices into the fold of mainstream political opinion. This is partly explained by the cycle discussed earlier, where the media mirror more extreme public opinions while simultaneously enforcing and intensifying these beliefs. However, regarding cable news, there seems to be another important reason for the inclusion of radical political voices. As discussed throughout the study, sensationalism is an important component of cable news coverage. It is quite clear that extreme opinions make for far more sensational and exciting news than more moderate opinions. Striving for ratings in this niche media model makes the appeal of presenting radical opinions all the more enticing to these news organizations. It is interesting to observe how this media radicalization of news consumers has translated into actual radicalization in politics. For example, we often hear primary candidates exclaim that they are the *most* liberal or conservative candidates in the race as a way of attracting voters. This is not to say that only radical candidates are being elected to office, but we do see a trend where very partisan opponents hugely disadvantage more moderate politicians. An example of this trend is found in Senator John McCain, who prior to his 2008 presidential race was considered a very moderate Republican. After he was forced to defend himself against a much more conservative challenger in 2010, he seemed to shift his views, and in 2011 was named the most conservative U.S. Senator (Wilson, 2011).

Civility in Political Discourse

Another effect of this media landscape is a decline in civility in political discourse. This effect is of course largely related, and even caused by, the two preceding audience effects. As people are losing a common frame of reference about political events while simultaneously moving towards ideologically extreme positions, it is quite apparent that they would have more difficulty communicating with one another in a polite and civil manner. As political communication becomes more difficult so does political action. When citizens and politicians lose the ability to communicate with those with whom they disagree, compromise based governing becomes much more difficult.

Again, as the audience moves away from civil discourse so too does the political media, and vice versa. This incivility in political discourse has been quite apparent on cable news for many years. A rather infamous example is found in the CNN program, *Crossfire* (1982-2005). *Crossfire* pitted a liberal host against a conservative host where they would fiercely and aggressively debate politics every night, with almost no consensus ever reached—as this was not the intention of the program. In October 2004, Jon Stewart appeared on the show and began berating the hosts for “hurting America” with “partisan hackery,” by feeding into this incivility in political discourse on TV (Media Matters for America, 2004). While this incident did result in the cancelling of *Crossfire*, it by no means marked the end, or even a cooling, of harsh political rhetoric. In 2011, recognizing how harmful political rhetoric was becoming to actual politics and the American psyche, President Obama pleaded, “At a time when our discourse has become so sharply polarized — at a time when we are far too eager to lay the blame for all that ails the world at the feet of those who happen to think differently than we do — it’s important for us to

pause for a moment and make sure that we're talking with each other in a way that heals, not in a way that wounds" (Obama, 2011).

His concern came from an understanding that incivility in the media would translate into incivility in actual politics. The 2010 midterm campaign provides ample evidence of such incivility. Take for example, ex-Governor Sarah Palin who, in order to depict the Democratic candidates she most wanted to defeat in November, placed a map on her website, marking each of these politicians' districts with a bull's eye (The Huffington Post, 2011). Or, senatorial candidate Sharron Angle, who spoke to constituents, explaining that if the election did not turn out the way they hoped, they might be forced to resort to "second amendment remedies" to defeat Harry Reid (Stein, 2010). Democratic Senator Joe Manchin, in an effort to assure his constituency that he was not in favor of Obama's "cap and trade" bill, put a commercial on TV where he was shown shooting a bullet through a copy of the bill (Madison, 2010). All of these examples show how uncivil and violent rhetoric can have some harmful effects on our democratic process.

During a 2010 commencement address at the University of Michigan, President Obama reflected on the problems that arise from this fragmented, partisan news environment, saying,

If we choose only to expose ourselves to opinions and viewpoints that are in line with our own, studies suggest that we will become more polarized and set in our ways. And that will only reinforce and even deepen the political divides in this country. But if we choose to actively seek out information that challenges our assumptions and our beliefs, perhaps we can begin to understand where the people who disagree with us are coming from...If you're someone who only reads

the editorial page of The New York Times, try glancing at the page of The Wall Street Journal once in awhile. If you're a fan of Glenn Beck or Rush Limbaugh, try reading a few columns on the Huffington Post website. It may make your blood boil; your mind may not often be changed. But the practice of listening to opposing views is essential for effective citizenship; it is essential for Democracy (Obama, 2010).

Obama noted many of the negative effects discussed in this chapter. He touches on problems regarding a lack of mutual understanding as well as radicalization. Further, he expounded on some possible ways to improve the situation, encouraging the students to look outside their own echo chambers to find different opinions and viewpoints. The President clearly emphasizes that listening to opposing viewpoints is essential if our form of Democracy is to thrive.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

While this work is of course a study on cable news, in many ways it simply uses cable news, and MSNBC and Fox News specifically, as a case study on the broader political communication process. The study emphasizes that in looking at the effects of political media on American news consumers, no single part of the communication process can be taken alone. Instead, it illustrates how any thorough understanding of the media's effects on public opinion about politics must look at who is disseminating the message, what they are saying, who they are saying it to, and through which media outlet are they saying it.

Unlike identifying the speaker of the media message or the outlet through which they speak, understanding exactly what is being said and who it's being said to, are much more difficult to pinpoint, especially in the context of TV news. By performing a novel analysis of both *what* people see on cable news as well as *who* sees it, this study quantifies two of the most complex communication junctures. This work helps to clarify much of the current discussion about cable news, which is largely based on speculation, generalization, and reputation. I find support for my hypothesis that selectivity by both news organizations and news consumers is largely driven by political preferences.

I will briefly review the most important findings on the content and audience compositions of cable news outlets before discussing future avenues of research, and reflecting on what can be done to ameliorate some of the harmful, polarizing, audience effects we find today.

Findings

The content analysis employed in this study revealed several noteworthy findings. We saw strong support for the assertion that cable news coverage is overwhelmingly negative and subjective. Further, the sample provided ample evidence of cable news' reliance on the horserace and conflict frames in political reporting. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the analysis provided clear evidence of partisan bias on both networks. On Fox News, the treatment of Republicans was far more favorable than the treatment of Democrats, while the reverse held true for MSNBC. Additionally, both networks spent more time speaking negatively about the opposition than positively about the party with which they are ideologically aligned.

The analysis of cable news audiences also demonstrated many important trends. I found that cable news viewers were, for the most part, older, more highly educated, more conservative, and from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Those who regularly watch cable news were also more politically interested and knowledgeable than those who rarely watch cable news. Further, these regular viewers held stronger partisan positions than those who don't watch cable news. Next, the analysis looked specifically at the audiences of MSNBC and Fox News. Here, we found that people with liberal political belief systems were largely gravitating towards MSNBC while almost entirely ignoring Fox News. The reverse trend was supported for more conservative news consumers. The results illustrated that not only do MSNBC and Fox News have distinct, loyal audiences, but also that cable news is largely comprised of two main echo chambers—conservative and liberal—with few people regularly exposing themselves to both points of view. The final portion of this analysis looked at people's perceptions of MSNBC and Fox News and their primary motivations for choosing these outlets. I found that there is indeed confusion about what type of news is coming out of MSNBC and Fox News, with less than 50% of Americans

correctly identifying the partisan slant of these networks. Further, despite the predominance of opinionated, partisan commentary on cable news, the data support the fact that most people are tuning in to these networks for information other than opinionated commentary.

MSNBC vs. Fox News

There has been much popular debate about the equivalency, or false equivalency, as many would put it, between MSNBC and Fox News. This study sheds light on the debate by quantifying and comparing many aspects of their coverage, yet it also reveals why this debate is yet unsettled. Looking first to the content on MSNBC and Fox News, we find little, if any, significant differences in levels of tone, subjectivity, and partisan slant. Both networks seem to be applying the same niche media model to their broadcasts, relying heavily on subjective opinions, partisan commentary, and sensationalism. However, when we look to the audience compositions of MSNBC and Fox News we do find some discernible differences. First, the Fox News audience is more politically fragmented than the MSNBC audience. More conservative Americans are regularly watching Fox News than liberals who are regularly watching MSNBC. Further, more liberals report never watching Fox News than conservatives who never watch MSNBC. Second, my regression analysis illustrated that political belief systems (party ID and ideology) are much stronger predictors of exposure to Fox News than to MSNBC.

Why is Fox News' audience more ideologically fragmented than MSNBC's audience if the news they present is equally partisan? There are two possible explanations that seem the most plausible for this discrepancy—the reputation of Fox News and the uniqueness of Fox News. Thinking back to chapter six (tables 6.16 and 6.17), we see clearly that more Americans identified a conservative slant on Fox News (47%) than a liberal slant on MSNBC (36%).

Perhaps political belief systems come more into play when thinking about Fox News than when thinking about MSNBC simply because more people perceive Fox as an ideological network. Liberals may be staying away from Fox News more than conservatives are avoiding MSNBC because the “bias buzz” surrounding Fox News garners more press attention and more criticism than it does for MSNBC.

The second explanation looks to the uniqueness of Fox News. As has been discussed throughout this study, there is a general sense, especially among conservatives, that the mainstream media contains a liberal bias. With this in mind, Fox News becomes much more unique in its perspective than MSNBC, which can be seen as just one of many liberal media outlets. Thus, it makes sense that a higher percentage of conservatives would rely on Fox News, as they have nowhere else to go for news with a conservative slant. The uniqueness of Fox News is also reflected in the ratings, where they consistently attract more than twice the nightly audience of MSNBC. A final possible explanation for the discrepancy between audience and outlet selectivity, is the cable news sample utilized in this study. Perhaps a broader, or even just different, sample of MSNBC and Fox News would reveal that Fox News is in fact more ideologically biased than MSNBC. If this were the case, the more fragmented Fox News audience would make logical sense. However, because this study used a reasonably representative sample that was not skewed by any major election, or national event, I hypothesize that the former two explanations are more apt in explaining this difference.

Future Research

This study builds and expands on the existing scholarship on television and cable news in several ways. First, I focus primarily on the ideological nature of cable news. Previous work has used Fox News as their signature conservative outlet, but often rely on network news, CNN, or newswires as the contrasting outlet. Here, I directly compare the two most notoriously ideological cable channels—MSNBC and Fox News. Further, while most previous work looks at either the content of the news or the audience of the news, this study examines partisan selectivity by news outlets and news consumers simultaneously, painting a more holistic picture of the communication process.

Utilizing the sample from this study, there are several additional areas worthy of future study. First, I'd like to move beyond the ordinary least square regressions and conduct logistic regressions, which would allow me to find the probability of specific news consumers watching MSNBC or Fox News based on a variety of their characteristics. Further, I would like to expand the content analysis coding book to include measures of the personality frame in political reporting as well as the presence of purely entertainment content on these broadcasts. The next step I would take to expand and enrich this study would be to expand my sample of cable news. An ideal sample would look at the entire prime time lineup on both networks over an extended period of time (at least one month). By applying the models used in my study to this broader sample, the findings would be more generalizable, and less subject to the criticism that the data were skewed by specific world events.

Looking to other future research paths, there are two comparisons that would likely yield interesting and informative results. The first would compare MSNBC and Fox News coverage during a period of heightened campaign information (preceding an election) to a more stable

period, such as the one analyzed in this study. This would allow some interesting comparisons about political news coverage of campaign-centered politics to governing-centered politics. I hypothesize that the differences would be much less than expected, further highlighting cable news' dependence on the horserace frame. The second path would look at the results of this study in comparison to a parallel study of partisan political news on the Internet. This work would allow informative conclusions about the future trends of selectivity and fragmentation, as news consumers continue to move online in search of news. Here, I would expect to see two interesting findings. I hypothesize that both the content and audiences of online news sites would be more fragmented, and more ideologically extreme than what we find on cable news. However, I do not think that the audience effects would be nearly as strong. Part of the justification for this hypothesis comes from the literature on the persuasive powers of television. This hypothesis is also informed by the differing roles of a TV news consumer versus an Internet news consumer. TV viewers are largely passive, with little action required beyond hitting the power button on the remote control. Internet audiences are much more active, as they must continue clicking, scrolling, and reading to get information.

Discussion- What Should We Do?

At the close of Jon Stewart's "Rally to Restore Sanity" he said, "The country's 24-hour political pundit perpetual panic conflictinator did not cause our problems, but its existence makes solving them that much harder" (Craig, 2010). Stewart's descriptive, albeit hyperbolic, portrayal of political news does find some level of support in this study. For example, his statement clearly references the ubiquitous, opinionated, negative, and conflict driven nature of cable news

content, which is clearly demonstrated in this study. However, where we diverge is in the level of blame attributed to the news outlets themselves for the harmful audience effects. Unlike Stewart, who finds the mere presence of this type of news harmful to our Democracy, I conclude that we must not remove all blame from the news consumers. More than their actual news packages, it is the way MSNBC and Fox News are used by consumers, as well as the way they advertise to the public, that causes harmful audience effects like political polarization.

After reading this study, many news consumers may likely come away with a quite pessimistic image of political news today. However, we must not forget that with increased media choice we also see some important positive results. People now have access to more political information than ever before. If someone wants to inform themselves about politics, they can do so by reading a newspaper, turning on the TV or radio, clicking onto a political website or blog, or even by signing into a social network from their mobile phone. Not only are there more platforms for political news, but there is also space for a much wider array of political viewpoints. Again, an interested news consumer could easily learn about a political topic from the perspective of both major political parties as well as countless other voices, which in the past had no outlet through which to share their opinions.

Taking all of this into consideration, the essential question to ask oneself is, what can be done to improve the current political news environment? This question requires two distinct trains of thought. The first asks what can we (the news consumers) do? And the second asks, what can they (the news outlets) do? The former question is an easier one to answer, as the deleterious effects of this news environment come primarily from people not understanding the type of news they are consuming, and by confining themselves to political echo chambers. Media literacy, or understanding the perspective, corporate ownership, and political ties of any news

outlet you regularly rely on would alleviate much of the confusion by making news consumers much more critical of the information they consume. With regard to the echo chamber, we, as news consumers, must make a conscious effort, no matter how difficult, to expose ourselves to different political opinions and points of view. This simple act of listening is not likely to change your opinion, but would at least provide the frame of reference necessary to understand where the other side is coming from.

For news outlets, which are bound by corporate vested interests, these fixes are much more challenging than for the autonomous news consumer. Put quite simply, bias sells. This is not to say that MSNBC and Fox News do not have a responsibility to their audiences, but it is to point out that a purely objective news channel would likely receive very low ratings, and thus have trouble staying on the air at all. I can however put forward two possible changes to cable news that would decrease the negative effects on news consumers, while allowing them to continue working within their fragmented, niche media model. The first suggested change would require outlets like MSNBC and Fox News to openly admit the political angle of their coverage. Many cable executives have claimed that their networks clearly distinguish opinion from factual reporting, but my work in the field shows this claim to be completely false. Since this distinction clearly is not working, these networks would be well advised to simply make known the overall partisan tone of the network. The second, and much more hypothetical change I would suggest to cable news, would be to keep the same partisan opinionated commentary, but to include the voices of both conservatives and liberals on a single network. Unlike the CNN show Crossfire discussed earlier, I do not suggest pitting two extreme partisans against each other, but instead to provide each with their own programs from which to broadcast their views. Many people have lamented that MSNBC and Fox News are a “tag team” of agreeing information. This is to say

that unless the viewers actively change the channel they will continue to hear the same opinions and points of view from a chain of homogenous hosts. Say for example, this hypothetical prime time line up opened with The O'Reilly Factor, but was then immediately followed by The Rachel Maddow Show. This simple change of placement would hugely increase incidental exposure to the opposite point of view, greatly ameliorating the problems with mutual understanding.

METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX

Chapter 5:

Coding Book

MSNBC: The Rachel Maddow Show (9pm) Hardball with Chris Matthews (7pm)
Fox News: The O'Reilly Factor (8pm) The Sean Hannity Show (9pm)

1. Show

- 1= *Hardball with Chris Matthews 0308*
- 2= *Rachel Maddow Show 0308*
- 3= *Sean Hannity Show 0308*
- 4= *O'Reilly Factor 0308*
- 5= *Hardball with Chris Matthews 0310*
- 6= *Rachel Maddow Show 0310*
- 7= *Sean Hannity Show 0310*
- 8= *O'Reilly Factor 0310*

2. Segment

Delineated by different story topics- Listed sequentially for each show

3. Turn

Each speaking turn—However, if one person speaks for longer than 4 minutes, the turn will be broken down into shorter turns based on subject matter

4. Topic

What is the topic being discussed in that turn

5. Who

Who is the speaker?

- 1= *Host*
- 2= *Democratic Guest*
- 3= *Republican Guest*
- 4= *Neutral Guest*

6. Time

How long is the turn in minutes

7. Tone of Turn

What is the speaker's general tone towards the topic they are discussing?

1= negative tone

2= neutral tone

3= positive tone

8. Objective vs. Subjective

Overall, is this turn factual or opinion?

1=objective

2= subjective

9. Polls

Does the turn contain a reference to a poll?

0= no poll

1= yes poll

10. Media Reference

Does the turn contain a reference to the media (in general)?

0= no

1= yes

11. Fox News Reference

Does the turn reference Fox News?

0= no reference

1= negative reference

2= neutral reference

3= positive reference

12. MSNBC Reference

Does the turn reference MSNBC?

0= no reference

1= negative reference

2= neutral reference

3= positive reference

13. Partisan Reference

Does the turn mention any Republican/Democratic personality or policy?

0= no reference

1= Republican reference

2= Democratic reference

3= Both

14. Republican Tone

If the turn does mention a Republican personality or policy, what is the speakers tone towards them/it?

1= negative reference

2= neutral reference

3= positive reference

15. Democrat Tone

If the turn does mention a Democratic personality or policy, what is the speakers tone towards them/it?

1= negative reference

2= neutral reference

3= positive reference

Ratios Used to Code Segments

1. Objective vs. Subjective- I employed a 2:1 ratio of subjective to objective speaking turns in order to code an entire segment as subjective
2. Tone (general and partisan)- I employed a 3:1 ratio of negative to positive speaking turns in order to code an entire segment as negative.

Statistical Models

Tone:

T test compare Means

MSNBC	1.515
Fox News	1.458

Significance= .323

Objectivity:

T test compare means

MSNBC	1.740
Fox News	1.680

Significance= .174

Liberal Tone:
T test compare means

MSNBC	2.327
Fox News	1.287

Significance=.000

Tone Towards Democrats
Bivariate Crosstabulation

	Negative #	%	Valid %	Neutral #	%	Valid %	Positive #	%	Valid %
MSNBC	0	0%	0%	4	20%	31%	9	45%	69%
Fox News	17	65%	81%	3	12%	14%	1	4%	5%

Conservative Tone
T test compare means

MSNBC	1.255
Fox News	2.200

Significance=.000

Tone Towards Republicans
Bivariate Crosstabulation

	Negative #	%	Valid %	Neutral #	%	Valid %	Positive #	%	Valid %
MSNBC	17	85%	85%	2	10%	10%	1	5%	5%
Fox News	4	15%	25%	6	23%	37.5%	6	23%	37.5%

Chapter 6:

Cable News Exposure vs. Race
ANOVA means comparison

White	2.96
Black/African American	3.14
Asian	2.97
Latino	2.84

Significance= .240

How much do you enjoy keeping up with the news vs. Exposure to Cable News
ANOVA means comparison

Not at all	1.89
Not much	2.39
Some	2.81
A lot	3.33

Significance = .000

How much do you enjoy keeping up with the news vs. Exposure to Cable News
Bivariate Crosstabulation

	A lot	Some	Not Much	Not at All
Never	10%	18%	26%	48%
Hardly Ever	7%	15%	23%	24%
Sometimes	25%	36%	38%	19%
Regularly	59%	31%	14%	9%

How closely did you follow the 2010 midterms vs. Exposure to Cable News
ANOVA mean comparison

Not at all Closely	2.49
Not too Closely	2.84
Fairly Closely	3.22
Very Closely	3.45

Significance = .000

How closely did you follow the 2010 midterms vs. Exposure to Cable News
Bivariate Crosstabulation

	Very Closely	Fairly Closely	Not too Closely	Not at all Closely
Never	8%	10.5%	18%	27%
Hardly Ever	7%	9.5%	12%	18.5%
Sometimes	18%	28%	37.5%	33%
Regularly	68%	52%	32%	21%

Chi Square Significance=.000

OLS Regression Analysis of Cable News Exposure on Enjoying Keeping up with the News and Attention to the 2010 Elections

	B	Beta	Significance
Constant	4.123		.000
Enjoy News	-.361	-.284	.000
Follow 2010	-.204	-.203	.000

$R^2=.174$

Significance =.000

Which Party Controls the House of Representatives vs. Exposure to Cable News

T-test mean comparison

Incorrect	2.93
Correct	3.08

Significance =.098

Who is the Current Attorney General vs. Exposure to Cable News

T-test mean comparison

Incorrect	3.00
Correct	3.27

Significance =.002

Ideofold vs. Exposure to Cable News
Bivariate Crosstabulation

	Very Partisan	Partisan	Moderate
Never	21%	15%	14%
Hardly Ever	6.5%	11%	14%
Sometimes	22%	30%	32%
Regularly	50%	45%	40%

Chi square Significance = .004

Combining Party ID and Ideology

- 1 → 10 = very conservative Republican → very liberal Democrat

if (party=Republican and ideo=very conservative) PartyIdeo=1.
 if (party=Republican and ideo=conservative) PartyIdeo=2.
 if (party=Republican and ideo=moderate) PartyIdeo=3.
 if (party=Republican and ideo=liberal) PartyIdeo=4.
 if (party=Republican and ideo=very liberal) PartyIdeo=5.
 if (party=Democrat and ideo=very conservative) PartyIdeo=6.
 if (party=Democrat and ideo=conservative) PartyIdeo=7.
 if (party=Democrat and ideo=moderate) PartyIdeo=8.
 if (party=Democrat and ideo=liberal) PartyIdeo=9.
 if (party=Democrat and ideo=very liberal) PartyIdeo=10.

OLS Regression Analysis of Fox News Exposure on “PartyIdeo”

	B	Beta	Significance
Constant	3.428		
PartyIdeo	-.176	-.440	.000

R²=.193

Significance =.000

OLS Regression Analysis of MSNBC Exposure on “PartyIdeo”

	B	Beta	Significance
Constant	1.732		
PartyIdeo	.077	.218	.000

R²=.048

Significance =.000

Agreeing/No Point of View News vs. Age
Bivariate Crosstabulation

	Young	Adult	Old	Very Old
Getting News that Shares your Point of View	26.7%	25.6%	27.8%	34.9
Getting news that doesn't have a particular political point of view	73.3%	74.4%	72.2%	65.1%

Chi square Significance = .009

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