

CABLE NEWS COVERAGE OF THE 2012 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Is cable news programming, “fair and balanced”? This study addresses this empirical question by examining a snapshot of cable news: daytime news coverage on Fox News, CNN and MSNBC during the final five weeks of the 2012 presidential campaign. Specifically, this thesis focuses on the cable news time slot from 11-12 weekday mornings (Pacific time) during the run up to the 2012 Presidential Election, which is dedicated to news-oriented programming. The study does not include evening programs offered by the three networks that are explicitly opinion-oriented, such as The Bill O’Reilly Show or The Rachel Maddow Show.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

According to researchers, over the past two decades cable news has undergone a profound shift away from balanced reporting toward a focus on partisan guest opinions. Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel define the changing landscape of 24/7 cable news in their book, *The Elements of Journalism*: "...in the new media culture of continuous news, the news has become more piecemeal; sources are gaining power over the journalists who cover them; varying standards of journalism are breaking down the gatekeeper function of the press; inexpensive, polarizing argument is overwhelming reporting..." (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007, p. 47). Journalism.org reported a worrying trend in coverage of elections, concluding that independent journalists are a shrinking source in shaping the candidate narratives, while campaigns and partisans have assumed a much larger role in defining the press discourse (Journalism.org, 2013).

Researchers also have argued that economic drivers-- in particular the quest for ratings – motivates cable news networks to provide viewers with partisan information. This pursuit is not new to media and certainly is not solely facilitated by viewer preference for partisan coverage. It is also driven, researchers say, by the goal of delivering viewers to advertisers (Fowler, 2011; Coe, 2008; Cline, 2002).

Yet cable networks continue to call their programming format "news," and it creates an expectation that such programming adheres to the values articulated in the codes of ethics that cover electronic newsgathering. The Radio Television Digital News Association (RTDNA), for example, specifically charges television journalists to "present the news fairly and impartially, placing primary value on significance and relevance." To

do so, news needs to be presented to viewers in an equitable fashion that does not show favoritism to one side or the other. In other words, news reporting needs to show a balance. An example would be equitable amount of time (coverage) given to each candidate. This would signify fair and impartial coverage for both sides.

Is cable news programming, “fair and balanced?” This study addresses this empirical question by examining a snapshot of cable news: daytime news coverage on Fox News, CNN and MSNBC during the final five weeks of the 2012 presidential campaign. Specifically, it focuses on the cable news time slot from 11-12 weekday mornings (Pacific time) during the run-up to the 2012 Presidential Election, a time slot dedicated to news-oriented programming. The study does not include evening programs offered by the three networks that are explicitly opinion-oriented, such as The Bill O’Reilly Show or The Rachel Maddow Show.

The study examines (1) the amount of time given to the coverage of each candidate and (2) whether the content of the coverage was favorable or unfavorable. It asks which network(s) were the most equitable in their coverage of the two presidential candidates. Questions include (1) which cable newscasts gave more time to a specific candidate, (2) which candidate was featured most often as the lead story and (3) which news programs used journalists as the primary source to report on the candidates compared to which utilized opinion guests as primary sources of information.

A presidential campaign is an appropriate place to study the issue of equitable coverage—it is a high-profile event that has two clear, legitimate, opposing sides. If cable news networks are adhering to ethical standards, they should be covering both sides equitably and thoroughly

Historical Perspective

The industry of journalism has always walked a fine line between what is informative and what sells. Many argue that journalists should only be concerned with the truth, but anyone on the business side of the media industry will say that's not what sells viewers on buying papers, or watching television news. The question, essentially comes down to whether to tell the reader/viewer what they need to know or what they want to hear. Adhering to ethical standards does not necessarily equate to making enough profit to keep a news organization in business.

Early media analysts took divergent positions on these motivations of the press. In the 1920s, Walter Lippman argued that the general public is fundamentally selfish and the press simply feeds this self-interest; the press sees the reader more as a target for advertising than a citizen in a democracy. To gather a sufficient number of people to be of interest to advertisers, newspapers serve up a news diet that fits within the existing range of expectations and stereotypes of the readers. What news the newspapers choose to select is as much based on convenience (time and effort required) as on the public importance of events (Lippman, 1922).

John Dewey usually stood in the opposite corner from Lippman. Although he agreed with Lippman regarding economic self-interest and the management of public opinion, Dewey believed the press could be reformed. In fact, he claimed, it needed to do so to allow the possibility for the social and interdependent nature of human existence (Dewey, 1927). Reformation of the media would mean believing the reading public was made up of thinking people, rather than just eyeballs to be sold to advertisers.

The late 20th-century social historian Christopher Lasch describes Lippman's viewpoints (and Dewey's) in a way that might be quite applicable to current opinionated news coverage. "The role of the press, as Lippman saw it, was to circulate information, not to encourage argument. The relationship between information and argument was antagonistic, not complementary. He did not take the position that reliable information was a necessary precondition of argument; on the contrary, his point was that information precluded argument, made argument unnecessary. Arguments were what took place in the absence of reliable information. Lippman had forgotten what he learned (or should have learned) from William James and John Dewey: that the search for reliable information is itself guided by the questions that arise during arguments about a given course of action" (Lasch, p. 5, 1997).

More recently, another social theorist, Jurgen Habermas, has shown a possible different role for news media with his idea of the public sphere (Habermas 2006). Habermas might see opinion news as an opportunity for creating a modern day public sphere that can focus on the needs of society by providing information to examine issues important to the public in general.

Instead, cable news networks seem to be allowing news to morph into "spin" campaigns for special interest groups. Opinions are being masked as newsworthy reporting, which in turn may very well be persuading cable news audiences regarding their political views (Kovach & Rosenstiel; Journalism.org; Fowler; Coe; Kline). This is certainly a turn away from the ethical standards set by the RTDNA.

Ethical Perspectives

The ethical standards from the RTDNA that pertain to this study provide useful perspectives on equitable professional practice. The code asserts that professional electronic journalists should 1) “provide a full range of information to enable the public to make enlightened decisions,” 2) “clearly label opinion and commentary,” 3) “present a diversity of expressions, opinions, and ideas,” 4) “guard against extended coverage of events or individuals that fails to significantly advance a story, place the event in context, or add to the public knowledge” (RTDNA, 2012).

Kovach and Rosenstiel suggest it is important to explain in news reports a sense of how the story came to be and why it was presented the way it was. They say that insisting on such practice will help develop a more discerning public that can readily see the difference between journalism of principle and careless or self-interested imitation (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001).

As Lasch said, “Increasingly, information is generated by those who wish to promote something or someone...without arguing their case on its merits or explicitly advertising it as a self-interested material either. Much of the press, in its eagerness to inform the public, has become a conduit for the equivalent of junk mail” (Lasch, p. 8, 1995).

Recent Research on Equitable Cable News Coverage

Recent research suggests the three cable news networks have each pursued definable market niches. A study by Nancy Fowler shows that Fox News demonstrated a conservative bias, while MSNBC exhibited a liberal leaning. CNN fell squarely in the middle (Fowler, 2011). A July 2013 Gallup study confirmed this. It showed that 79% of the Fox News group (viewers) describes their political views as conservative, 17% as moderate, and 2% as liberal. Among the CNN group (viewers) 21% are conservative, 51% are moderate, and 26% are liberal (Gallup, 2013).

The Gallup study also showed that “two-thirds of core Fox News viewers identify themselves as Republican, and 94% either identify as or lean Republican. By contrast, 46% of core CNN viewers identify as Democrats, and 63% identify as or lean Democratic” (Gallup, p. 7, 2013).

Another study showed that the CNN and Fox News labels function as ideological signals to the viewer, with this signal being most pronounced among ideologues whose views are supposedly at odds with those attributed to the network. The “messenger” does appear to be overwhelming the “message” (Turner, 2007).

Other research has shown that cable news networks and programs have increasingly defined themselves in relation to particular political perspectives (ADT Research, 2002). Research also found that cable news programs were becoming ever more “prone to opinion mongering” (Coe, 2008). In the current cable news environment, the source of the content (i.e., the network or program) is especially important because many cable news networks and programs have begun a kind of partisan branding. The

most notable example of this trend is Fox News, which was created with the goal of providing a counterbalance to the “liberal media” (Coe, 2008).

The news media are moneymaking businesses; their customers are advertisers, not viewers. However, they still must deliver a good product to lure viewers in order to sell those viewers to make a profit.

British cultural theorist Stuart Hall said, “The media do not simply and transparently report events which are ‘naturally’ newsworthy in *themselves*. ‘News’ is the end product of a complex process, which begins with a systematic sorting, and selecting of events and topics according to a socially constructed set of categories” (Hall, p. 648, 2000). By framing news stories in such a way as to be entertaining, while supporting the individual viewpoints of the targeted audience, the media accomplish their goal of packaging and selling eyeballs (product) to advertisers (buyers) (Hall, 2000).

To create that audience, veteran journalist Robert MacNeil said, the operating mandate behind televised news is to keep everything brief, not to strain the attention of anyone but instead to provide constant stimulation through variety, novelty, action, and movement. As mentioned previously, all television gravitates toward drama (conflict), and what passes for drama is often belligerent people barking at each other, like soap opera actors (Thomas, 2006).

To produce this arena in opinion news, networks often employ two opposing viewpoints and claim that such a format promotes the concept of balanced or neutral news. Quite often those opposing opinions become, as MacNeil pointed out, arguments or “barking” at each other (Thomas, 2006). The format may provide entertainment for viewers, but does not necessarily provide accurate information.

Cable Networks, in the name of “balance,” pit a conservative guest against a liberal guest on any range of issues or topics. More often than not, the two guests interrupt (or as MacNeil would say, “bark”) and argue with each other while the moderator (anchor) does little to facilitate the flow of the discourse. The objective content of the two sides is questionable at best, but the outcome can be deemed a success by the network if it held its viewership enraptured. Market share and advertising dollars are the determining factors of how much success.

These types of opposing arguments are key to this study, because this type of programming format is prevalent during election coverage on cable news networks. Recent research shows cable news networks allow one candidate to receive more time than his opponent (Pew Research, 2013).

According to Media Matters, Fox News ran more than two and a half hours of Governor Romney speeches while giving only 27 minutes to President Obama’s during the final days prior to the election (Media Matters, 2012). Pew Research showed that 71 percent of MSNBC’s segments about Romney were negative, while Fox News coverage of Obama was negative 46 percent of the time (Pew Research Center, 2012). For this study, one of the questions regarding the presidential election coverage is does each cable network provide equal time to opinion guests speaking on behalf of each candidate?

According to Pew Research, in 2012 commentary and opinion reporting were far more prevalent on cable news (63% of the airtime) than straight news reporting (37%), (Pew Research, 2013). As mentioned, this type of format matches guests (usually with opposing opinions) and an anchor who has discretion to steer the conversation in any

direction he/she prefers. Guests may have expertise in their field, but their comments are free to be subjective or shaded toward their beliefs and causes.

There are several probable reasons why commentary and opinion reporting is significantly replacing conventional journalism. Within the last ten years, the Internet has changed how most people get their news. Cable news, which enjoyed a surge in ratings from 1996-2004, has plummeted into a highly competitive and fragmented market. The Internet is now the main source for people wanting news (Pew Research Center, 2011)*. According to Pew, CNN viewership is down 8% since 2008 while Fox News has dropped 3%. MSNBC, always low in the ratings, stayed flat. Pew Research points out that the notion of a primary news source is obsolete (Pew Research Center, 2010). Among cable networks, 23% of the voting population name the Fox News Channel as a main source; 18% cite CNN and 9% MSNBC (Pew Research Center, 2012).

As a result, all three-cable news networks (MSNBC, CNN, and Fox News) must compete for viewership as their market continues to shrink. The networks, to varying degrees, present partisan reporting in the form of opinion news, to carve out market niches and aim at specific audiences. In other words, the networks have motivation to provide “news” that their viewers “want” to hear and watch.

For these reasons, the changing format of cable news has become essentially less objective and, to some extent, more entertaining.

*The July 2013 Gallup study shows that television is once again Americans’ main source for news. However, of the 55% of Americans Gallup says now get their news from television, only 16% of them get their news watching the three cable networks (Gallup, 2013).

Rather than just having a journalist reporting from the field, the relatively new genre of opinion news includes guest experts espousing their personal beliefs, on air, in the studio. Media researcher Jonathan Morris did demographic studies as far back as eight years showing that cable news viewers are older, and more polarized (Morris p. 56, 2005). Fox News channel appeals to that older audience, which has become disillusioned with what it perceives as a liberally biased mainstream media (Morris, p. 707, 2007).

Pew Research showed similar findings that about a third of people say they prefer news sources that share their point of view (Pew Research Center, 2010). Fox News watchers prefer following stories that align with their own political views, compared to CNN viewers who are more likely to prefer in-depth interviews with public officials who explore different sides of issues (Morris, p. 26, 2005).

Television news reporting generated from the field is more likely to closely toe the line of objectivity. However, such news is more expensive to produce, especially in a 24/7 environment. Constantly sending out teams of reporters, videographers, and producers to multiple locations can run up the payroll alone, compared to an anchor sitting at a desk talking to someone across from him or her. It becomes even less expensive when networks can have guests use a webcam from their home or office.

CNN, for example, has substantially increased the percentage of its broadcasts devoted to opinion news-oriented topics and formats (Weatherly, p. 92, 2007). According to Brad Adgate, senior vice president of research for Horizon Media, in March 2012, CNN significantly reduced its investigative reporting staff. He concluded that investigative journalism was on its way out. He said, “That is what is usually the first to go, because it is not a profit center” (The Daily Show, 2013).

Through the increase in opinion news, cable news programs have spawned unlimited opportunities for the proliferation of partisan news reporting. Network newscasts (ABC, CBS, NBC), on the other hand, are limited to a half-hour daily program in which gatekeepers selectively choose which definitive stories will fill those 22 minutes (minus commercials).

Cable news, which airs 24/7, must find creative avenues to fill each hour of broadcasting. An increasingly popular and inexpensive answer is to take a current topic, bring in a guest panel with opinions from opposing sides, and then let the anchor(s) moderate.

Are cable newscasts taking advantage of this simple, economical formula to advocate their own (and their viewer's) political agendas? According to Kevin Coe, cable news networks define themselves in relation to particular political perspectives and increasingly take a more explicitly partisan position (Coe 2008).

Pew found that between spring and summer of 2012, only 14% of Barack Obama's narrative on Fox programs was positive in nature, while 86% was negative. Pew Research also found that in the 2012 period, just 3% of MSNBC's coverage of Romney was positive, while 71% was negative. Meanwhile, CNN's coverage fell somewhere in between. Negative stories on Romney were at 36% compared to 21% for Obama (Pew Research, 2013).

A Gallup study showed that, "Just 2% of the Fox News group (viewers) compared with 57% of the CNN group (viewers), approves of the job President Barack Obama is doing. The study also showed 97% of Fox viewers disapproved, while 40% of CNN viewers disapproved of the job President Obama was doing" (Gallup, p. 8, 2013).

Kovach and Rosenstiel refer to this as Journalism of Affirmation, for its appeal is in affirming the preconceptions of the audience, assuring them, gaining their loyalty, and then converting that loyalty into advertising revenue (Kovach, Rosenstiel, 2010).

Fox News leads in ratings over MSNBC and CNN combined by a ratio of approximately 2-1 (TV by the Numbers, 2013). According to Coe, a major factor behind the success of Fox News is its hostile media effect. Individuals with negative perceptions of mainstream media are increasingly turning to Fox News as their primary source of news on national and international events (Coe, 2008).

McQuail could be describing today's cable news environment of opinion news when he characterizes bias as: explicit argument and compilation of evidence favoring one viewpoint; a tendentious use of facts and comments, without any explicit statement of preference; the use of language that colors an otherwise factual report and conveys an implicit but clear value judgment; and omission of points favoring one side, in an otherwise straight news report (McQuail 1977).

Hackett carries this further: "Most definitions in common language regard news bias as the intrusion of subjective "opinion" by the reporter or news organization into what is purportedly a "factual" account. When a story does not distinguish clearly between its authorship's interpretations and the facts reported, it is a biased or slanted report (Hackett, p. 232, 1984).

Given the necessity for cable news to succeed through viewer satisfaction, equitable reporting may be in conflict with each network's quest for success. That is, if success is defined by gaining a greater market share over its competitors.

CHAPTER II

SUMMARY

If you were undecided as to whom to vote for in the 2012 presidential election, what sources would you use to help you decide? If you chose cable news, would you want to watch news that is equitable; meaning, does the newscast give equal time to both candidates and their issues? Or do you want to watch news that will affirm your political leanings and possibly steer you toward a candidate based on the candidate being shown and talked about more often than the other candidate, not to mention in a more favorable light? This study addresses these questions by examining daytime news coverage on Fox News, CNN and MSNBC during the final five weeks of the 2012 presidential campaign. The presidential campaign was chosen for the study because it is a high-profile event that has two clear, legitimate, opposing sides.

Research shows that the three cable news networks vary in the amount of equitable coverage they give a topic. News coverage by the three also ranges in the type of reporting they provide the two political parties. It has been shown that Fox gives more coverage to conservative issues and candidates while MSNBC does the same from a liberal standpoint. CNN has been shown to report on political topics from somewhere closer to the middle. Fox also gives more positive coverage to conservative candidates, while MSNBC does the same for liberal candidates.

Research also shows that economic factors come into play as to why there is this discrepancy among networks. Cable news ratings have been dwindling for a number of years. As the networks compete for viewers, all three have pursued specific market niches by creating program formats tailored to certain audiences. Fox was the first to

steer in that direction in order to give viewers, what it calls an alternative to liberal mainstream media bias.

Currently, the cable news trend is to use a format intended to boost ratings by providing viewers with information they are interested in hearing. This is done by scheduling opinion guests to fill news programs. This is a direct deviation from traditional newscasts, which aired journalists, usually in the field, reporting on specific events. These reporters were expected to show both sides of issues and to ethically, and without bias, provide pertinent information to viewers.

Opinion guests are not bound by ethical codes, such as those given by the RTDNA. They may be experts in their fields, but they are allowed to espouse their personal points-of-view without any fact checking by the networks. Two of the questions this study asks is what percentage of certain newscasts have journalists doing the reporting compared to the amount of time dedicated to guest opinions.

By focusing on equitable news coverage, this study's goal is to shed light on how fair and balanced news coverage is on cable news and how much time is given to airing more subjective information. If cable news networks are adhering to ethical standards, they should be covering both sides equitably and thoroughly.

This study focused solely on the cable news time slot from 11-12 weekday mornings (Pacific time). Coding was done to track the outcome to the following questions:

Q1: Did cable news networks show favoritism toward a presidential candidate by allotting more airtime to one over the other?

Q2: Along with time allotted to discuss each candidate, is either mentioned, by name, significantly more often than the other? *This question was chosen to see if networks positively promote a particular candidate by referring to him more often by name or title.*

Q3: Were the newscasts equitable regarding the number of times each candidate led the news segment.

Q4: Did the lead story show the featured candidate in a positive or negative light?

Q5: Are the newscasts equitable regarding the number of opinion guests who represent either candidate's views?

Q6: How much time do opinion guests on each side receive? *Example: If two conservative guests are in the same segment, their individual times are totaled into one aggregate time.*

Q7: When correspondents report from the candidate's campaign trail, how much time is each correspondent given?

Q8: How many related stories are included in the correspondent's reports that show the candidate they are covering in a favorable light? *Also know as sidebars, an example*

might be a campaign stop where the candidate is shown eating ice cream with potential voters.

Q9: Are the three networks equitable regarding the polls shown on their newscasts, or do the polls shown consistently favor a particular candidate?

CHAPTER III

METHOD

Cable news networks consist of MSNBC, CNN, and Fox News. Late afternoon and evening time slots are filled with personalities and opinions. According to Media Matters in America, Roger Ailes, the Fox News Network chairman, contends that Fox News separates news from the programming that he also refers to as talk shows (Bolert). For that reason, this study specifically monitors programs defined as newscasts at a mid-day time slot (pacific time) for their news orientation. The programs studied were *CNN Newsroom*, *America Live with Megyn Kelly (Fox News)*, and *News Nation on MSNBC*. All shows air between 11 and 12 (Pacific Time) on weekday mornings.

Regarding the questions, content analysis was used to code specific behavior and patterns by the newscasts, the anchors, and their guests. The following categories were selected for coding:

1. Aggregate time each candidate receives.
2. Number of times each candidate is mentioned specifically by name.
3. Number of times each candidate leads the news segment.
4. Number of times the candidate who leads the news segment is shown in a favorable or unfavorable light.
5. How many opinion guests are interviewed who represent the views of each candidate?
6. How much time does each opinion guest receive?

7. When correspondents report from the candidate's campaign trail, how much time is each correspondent given?
8. How many related stories are included in the correspondent's reports that show the candidate they are covering in a personable/favorable light?
9. How many polls are shown that favor a particular candidate?

A constructed week sample of all three newscasts was tracked and coded from October 1 to November 2. Twenty-five newscasts for each of the three cable networks were recorded (75 aggregate). Three programs for each cable network were coded per week. Three coders each coded one episode of each network per week. The programs were chosen to represent different days. Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday were chosen from the first week (October 1-3). Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday were selected from the second week (October 9-11). The third week (October 17-19), Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday were selected. The fourth week (October 22-24) started over with Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. The fifth week (October 30-November 1) Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday were the selected days.

Each coder was given a packet of questions for each newscast. Coder sheets, based on the nine questions asked, are included in the appendix. Coders used a smart phone for the timed segments. They were instructed to start timing when a candidate was first mentioned, which was usually after the anchor started to introduce the segment on the presidential race. The timing was stopped and restarted during the transition between guest opinion speakers from opposing sides. If a guest interrupted and was allowed, by the anchor, to continue talking, the timing was stopped and restarted for the side now

talking. Political affiliation of the guest was determined either by the title given on the lower third of the screen or by Googling the individual's background. Some guests (8 for MSNBC, 2 for CNN, 0 for Fox) were determined to be neutral and were not counted in the coding process.

Determining whether a candidate was being shown in a favorable or unfavorable light was based only on obvious situations. Examples would be MSNBC leading with a Romney gaffe, or Fox discussing a possible coverup by Obama regarding Benghazi.

Each candidate was considered "called by name" if his last name or his title (Governor or President) was used. Regarding counting the number of times candidates were mentioned by name, coders did not take into consideration the context (favorable or unfavorable) in which the candidate was being mentioned.

The polls were determined to be pro-Obama or pro-Romney if they showed the candidate leading or showing a candidate significantly gaining in battleground states. The source of the polls was not considered. The race was a close one, and polls throughout the period varied between showing Romney in the lead and Obama in the lead. Some polls consistently showed Romney ahead, and others consistently showed Obama ahead. The simple objective of this research question was to see if there was an imbalanced trend of showing an inequitable number of positive polls that favored a particular candidate. In other words, did any of the three networks possibly use polls to create an air of "winning" for a particular candidate?

Intercoder reliability was tested on the newscasts from the last week in September 2012. According to Wimmer & Dominick (2006), coder reliability can be determined by percentage of agreement or using Cohen's *kappa*. In this case, coder agreement was

literally 99 to 100%. Coders were allowed to pause and rewind as much as they would like to ensure accurate counting.

A Chi Square analysis and when applicable, ANOVA, were used to determine whether the results demonstrated statistical significance.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This study examines the equitableness of coverage by the three cable news networks regarding the 2012 presidential election. Primarily it uses time as the determining factor as to how balanced the three networks were toward both candidates during their newscasts. Along with time, the study also took into consideration the number of times either candidate was mentioned by name, how many opinion guests or network reporters were used to represent the views of either candidate, and did any of the three networks consistently show polls favoring one candidate or the other.

In half of the questions, significance level of .05 or less was achieved. The rest did not have enough data for a significance level to be determined, but these categories did show interestingly consistent trends. The five-week period did not allow for a greater amount of data collection.

RQ 1. Aggregate Time Each Candidate Received

This question examines the aggregate time each candidate received on each network (Table 1, Fig. 1). MSNBC gave 111 minutes of coverage to Obama. Fox gave 12 minutes, while CNN gave the president 36 minutes. Fox gave 81 minutes of coverage to

	MSNBC	CNN	FOX
Obama	111	36	19
Romney	50	62	87

Table 1. Aggregate time each candidate received

Romney. CNN gave 57 minutes to Romney, while MSNBC aired 50 minutes of coverage for Romney.

The greatest difference was between MSNBC, which presented more coverage of Obama by about a 2-1 ratio and Fox, which favored Romney by more than a 6:1 ratio. CNN provided more Romney coverage by a ratio of not quite 2:1. A Chi Square analysis yielded a value of 71.23, $df=2$, $p < .0001$, in effect, a highly significant difference.

ANOVA analyses of the time networks devoted to each candidate showed a statistically significant difference for Obama among the networks ($F=26.12$, $df=2$, $p < .001$). The significant pairs were MSN vs. Fox and MSN vs. CNN. The Fox vs. CNN mean difference was not significant.

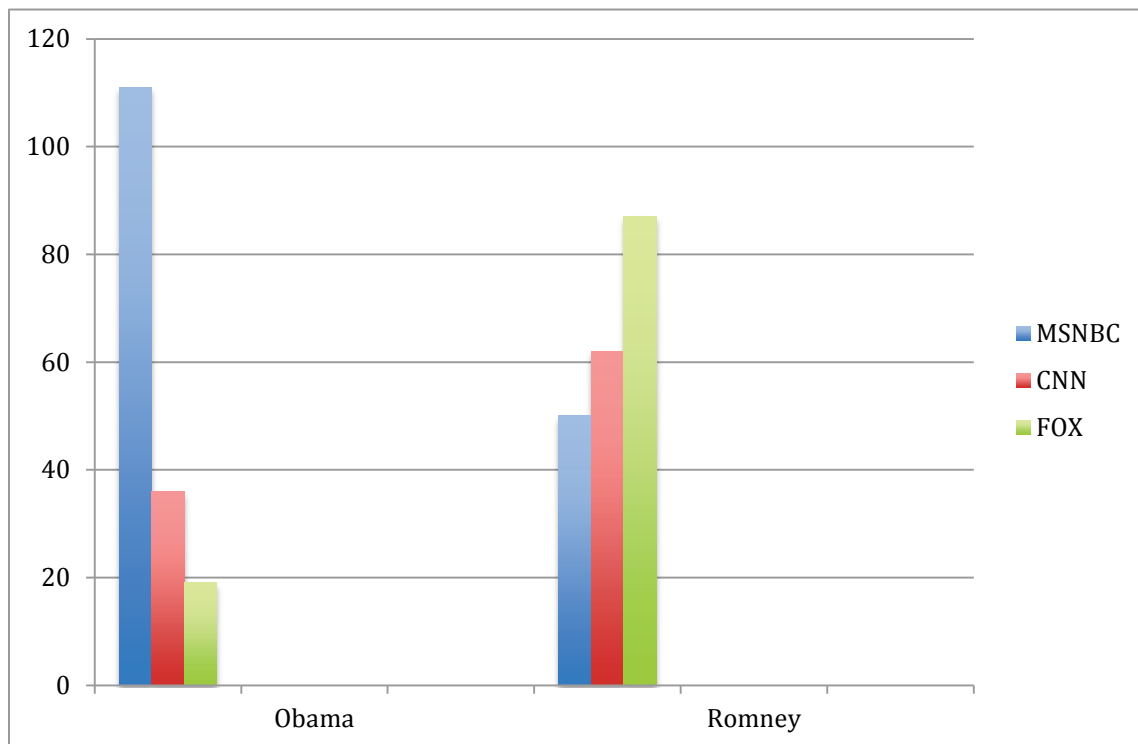


Figure 1. Aggregate time each candidate received.

An ANOVA of the time devoted to Romney among the three networks did not reach significance ($p = .066$). The N of 15 is relatively small, and the differences were not as great as with Obama.

RQ2. Number of times each candidate is mentioned specifically by name.

RQ2 examines the number of times each candidate was mentioned by name on each network (Table 2, Fig. 2). CNN and Fox had similar results. CNN mentioned Romney by name 223 times compared to 178 for Obama, while Romney was mentioned on Fox 247 times compared to 171 times for Obama. Both candidates were mentioned by name almost equally on MSNBC (Romney 270-Obama 285). This category does not take into consideration whether a candidate was mentioned in a positive or negative context.

The greatest difference was between MSNBC and the other two networks. MSNBC mentioned Obama by name by about a 3-2 ratio compared to Fox and CNN. A Chi Square analysis yielded a value of 11.16, $df=2$, $p < .0038$. The amount of times CNN and Fox mentioned Obama was nearly the same.

	MSNBC	FOX	CNN
Obama	285	171	178
Romney	270	247	223

Table 2. Number of times each candidate is mentioned specifically by name.

ANOVA analyses of the times networks referred to each candidate by name showed a statistically significant difference for Obama among the networks ($F=6.47$, $df=2$, $p < .004$). The significant pairs were MSN vs. Fox and MSN vs. CNN. The Fox vs. CNN mean difference was not significant.

An ANOVA of the times Romney was referred to by name among the three networks did not reach significance ($p = .443$).

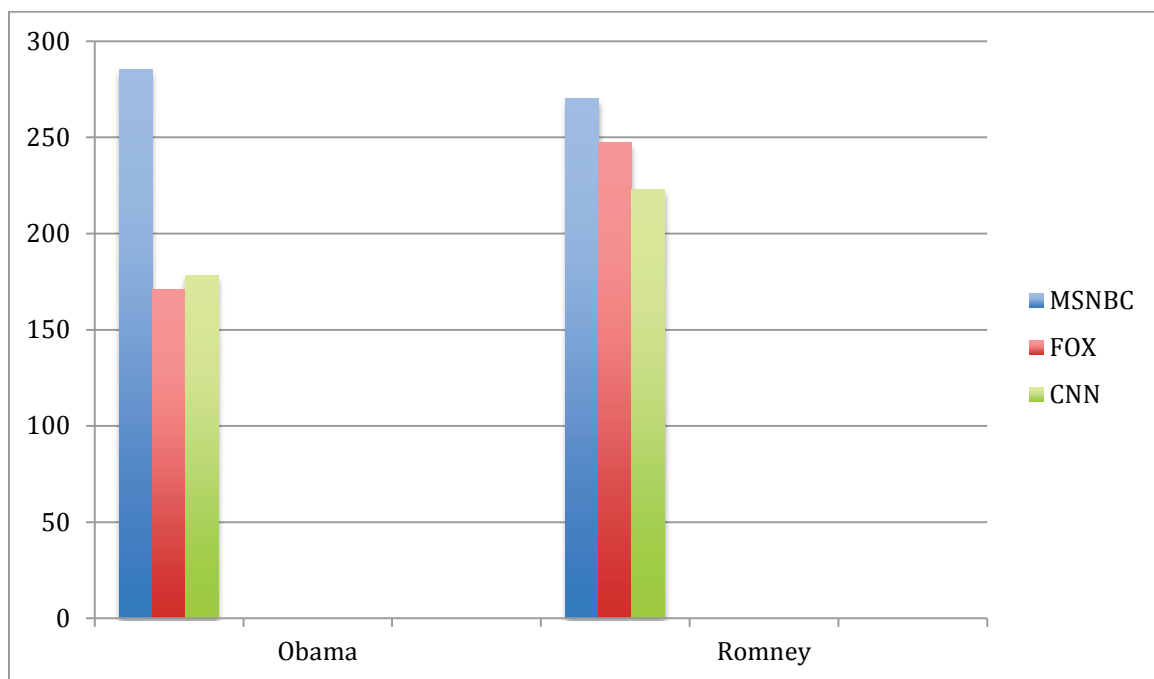


Figure 2. Number of times each candidate is mentioned specifically by name.

RQ3. Number of times each candidate led the news segment.

MSNBC led with Obama 10 times (Table 3, Fig. 3). Fox and CNN led with Romney the majority of the time (11 times for Fox and 10 times for CNN). MSNBC led with Romney five times, while Obama was the lead story on Fox four times and five times on CNN.

The greatest difference was between MSNBC, which led with Obama by a 2-1 ratio and the other two networks, which favored Romney by the same 2-1 ratio. A Chi Square analysis yielded a value of 5.65, $df=2$, $p < .059$, a finding that approached significance.

	MSNBC	FOX	CNN
Obama	10	4	5
Romney	5	11	10

Table 3. Number of times each candidate led the news segment.

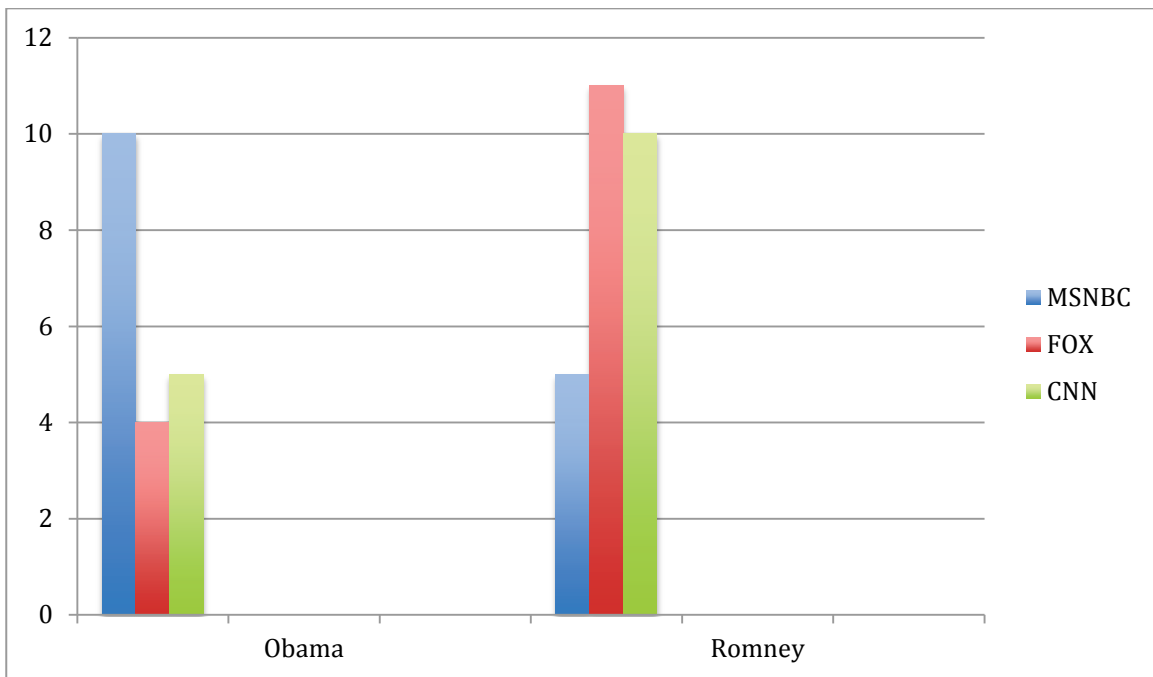


Figure 3. Number of times each candidate led the news segment.

RQ4. Number of times the candidate who leads the news segment is shown in a favorable or unfavorable light.

MSNBC led the newscast with a positive story on Obama 10 times (Table 4, Fig. 4). There were no negative lead stories by MSNBC on Obama. Fox led with Obama four times, and all four were negative in content. CNN led with Obama five times and all five lead stories were positive. There was not enough data during the sampling period to do significance testing.

Obama	MSNBC	FOX	CNN
Favorable	10	0	5
Unfavorable	0	4	0

Table 4. Number of times Obama is shown in a favorable or unfavorable light.

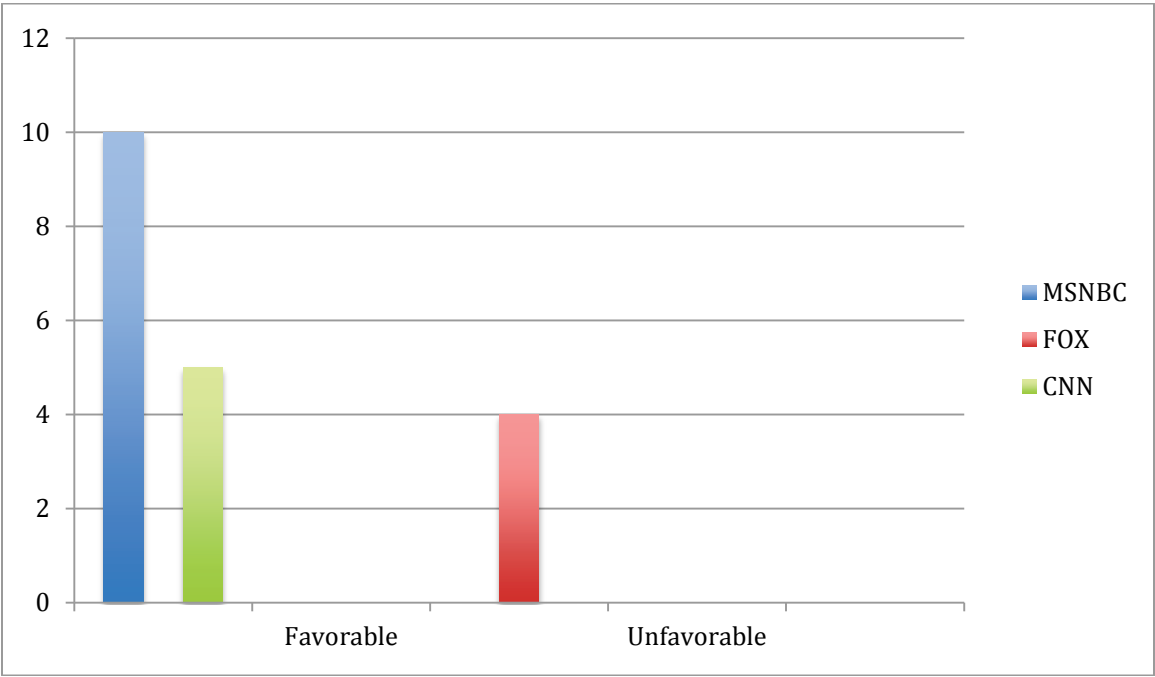


Figure 4. Times Obama was lead story and shown favorably vs unfavorably

Fox led its newscasts 11 times with Romney, and all 11 were positive toward the Republican candidate. CNN led 10 times with stories on Romney. Eight were positive and two were negative. MSNBC led with Romney five times. Romney was featured by MSNBC in a positive light three times and in a negative context twice.

RQ5. How many opinion guests are interviewed who represent the views of each candidate?

MSNBC used 45 opinion guests (Table 5, Fig. 5). Thirty-three were pro-Obama, while 12 were pro-Romney. Fox used 14 opinion guests who were pro-Romney and four who were pro-Obama. CNN only had three opinion guests, and all three were pro-Romney. The greatest difference was between MSNBC, whose opinion guests favored Obama by about a 3-1 ratio, while Fox had 14 guests who favored Romney compared to only four for Obama, representing close to a 4:1 ratio.

Romney	MSNBC	FOX	CNN
Favorable	3	11	8
Unfavorable	2	0	2

Table 5. Number of times Romney is shown in a favorable or unfavorable light.

A Chi Square analysis yielded a value of 11.83, df=1, p <.0006, a highly significant difference.

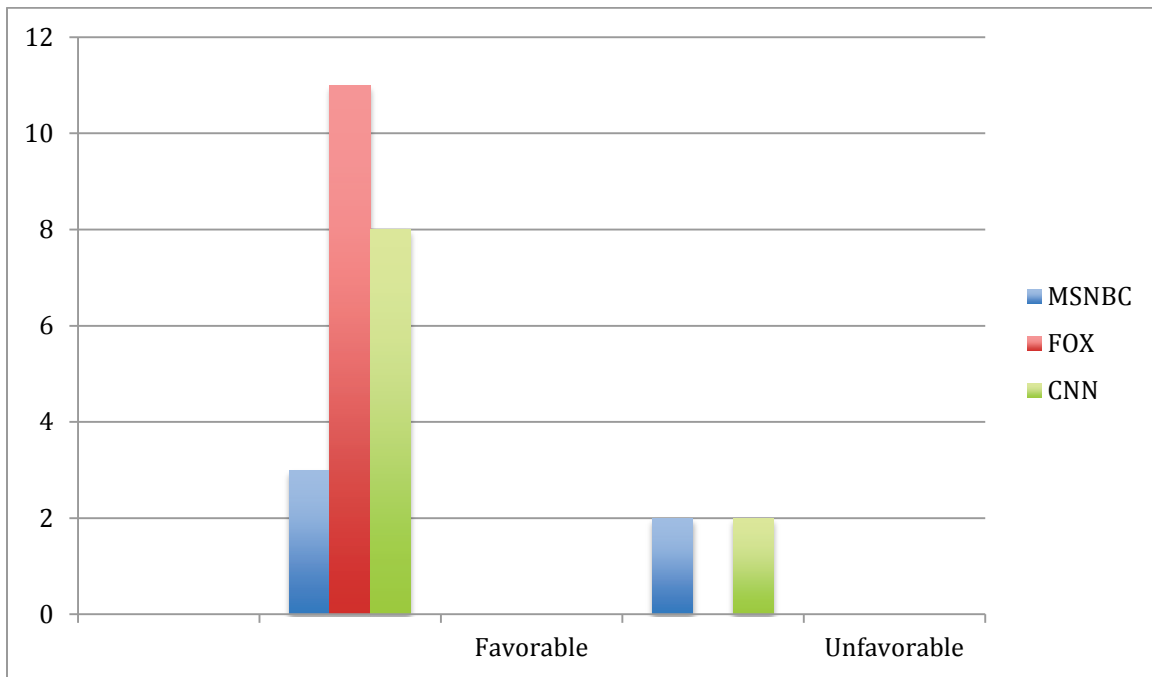


Figure 5. Times Romney was lead story and is shown favorably vs unfavorably

RQ6. How much time does each opinion guest receive?

On MSNBC, pro-Obama opinion guests received twice the amount of time as pro-Romney guests (92 minutes-46 minutes) (Table 6, Fig. 6). Pro-Obama opinion guests spoke for seven minutes on Fox, while pro-Romney guests gave their views for 46 minutes. CNN only had pro-Romney opinion guests and they had an aggregate time of less than seven minutes. CNN apparently had a different policy toward using guests. The greatest difference was between MSNBC, which presented more coverage of Obama by about a 2-1 ratio and Fox, which favored Romney by more than an 8:1 ratio. CNN had only pro-Romney guests. A Chi Square analysis yielded a value of 41.72, $df=2$, $p < .0001$, a highly significant difference. ANOVA analyses of the time networks devoted to each candidate showed a statistically significant difference for Obama among the networks ($F=80.30$, $df=2$, $p < .001$). The significant pairs were MSN vs. Fox and MSN vs. CNN.

The Fox vs. CNN mean difference was not significant. An ANOVA of the time devoted to Romney among the three networks also showed a significant difference

	MSNBC	FOX	CNN
Obama	33	4	0
Romney	12	14	3

Table 6. Number of opinion guests interviewed representing each candidate's views

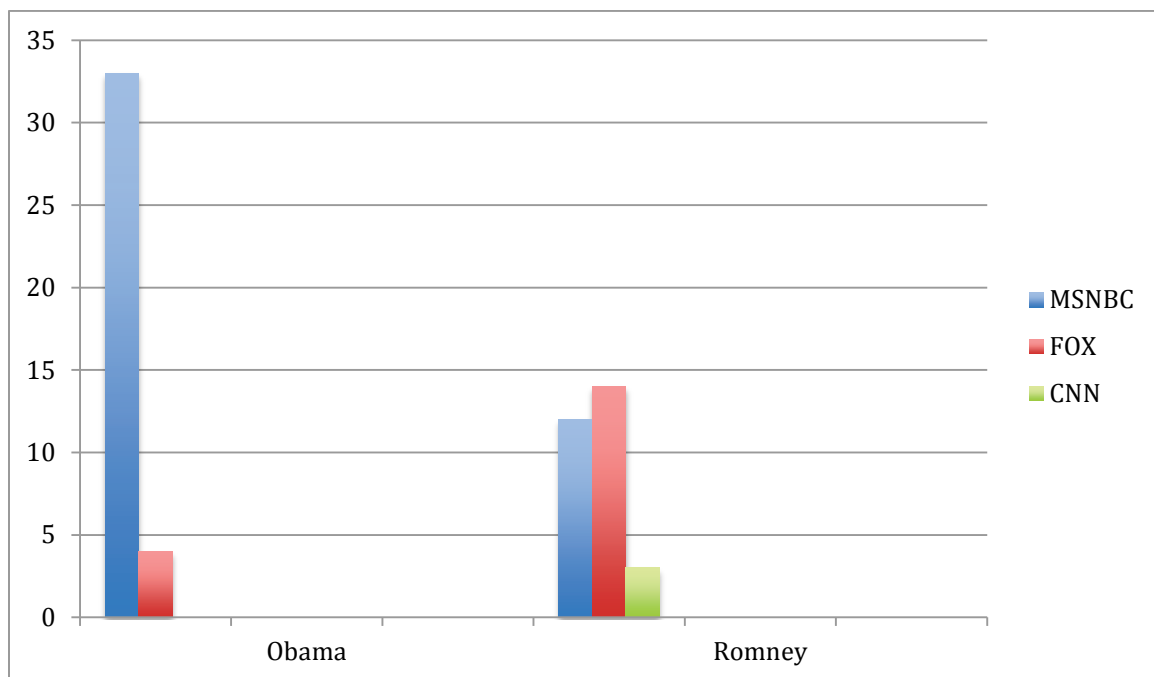


Figure 6. Number of opinion guests interviewed representing each candidate's views

RQ7. When correspondents report from the candidate's campaign trail, how much time is each correspondent given?

CNN journalists covered the two candidates for 53 minutes (Table 7, Fig. 7).

Obama got 24 minutes of reporting, while Romney received 29 minutes.

Fox gave 29 minutes to reporter coverage. Romney received 20 minutes of that journalistic coverage while Obama got eight minutes. MSNBC had 11 minutes of

journalistic coverage on the two candidates. Obama received seven minutes to Romney's four.

The greatest difference was between CNN, which presented more coverage of Obama by about a 3-1 ratio compared to MSNBC and Fox. Fox favored Romney by more than a 5:1 ratio compared to MSNBC. CNN provided more Romney coverage by a ratio of nearly 4:1 compared to MSNBC.

A Chi Square analysis yielded a value of 3.82, $df=2$, $p < .148$. The findings were not significant.

	MSNBC	FOX	CNN
Obama	92	7	0
Romney	46	46	7

Table 7. Time granted each opinion guest

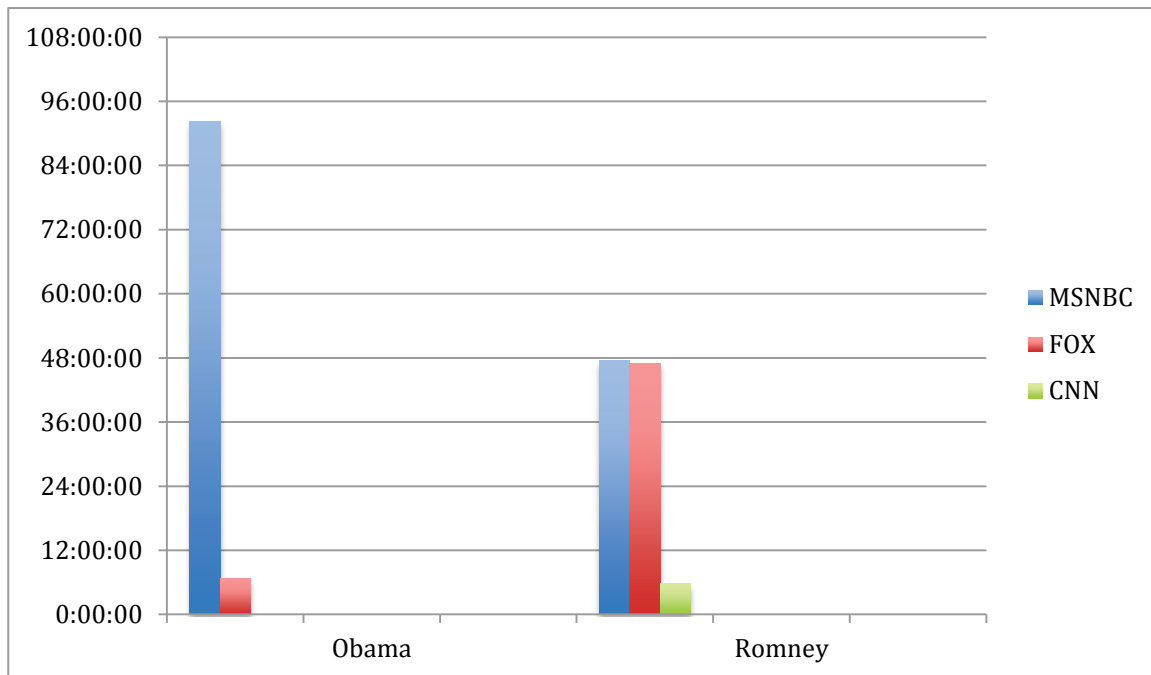


Figure 7. Time granted each opinion guest.

RQ8. How many related stories (sidebars) are included in the correspondent's reports that show the candidate they are covering in a personable/favorable light?

An example might be a campaign stop where the candidate is shown eating ice cream with potential voters.

Fox and CNN each had three sidebars while MSNBC had none (Table 8, Fig. 8). All three sidebars on Fox dealt with Romney while CNN had two sidebars for Romney and one for Obama

	MSNBC	FOX	CNN
Obama	7	9	25
Romney	4	20	29

Table 8. Time each correspondent is given (minutes)

This category was expected to show which networks were equitable or inequitable regarding the time given to the more human-side of the candidates. However, MSNBC never aired a sidebar during the news hour coded. Fox and CNN did three each. With such little data in this category, no statistical analysis could be done.

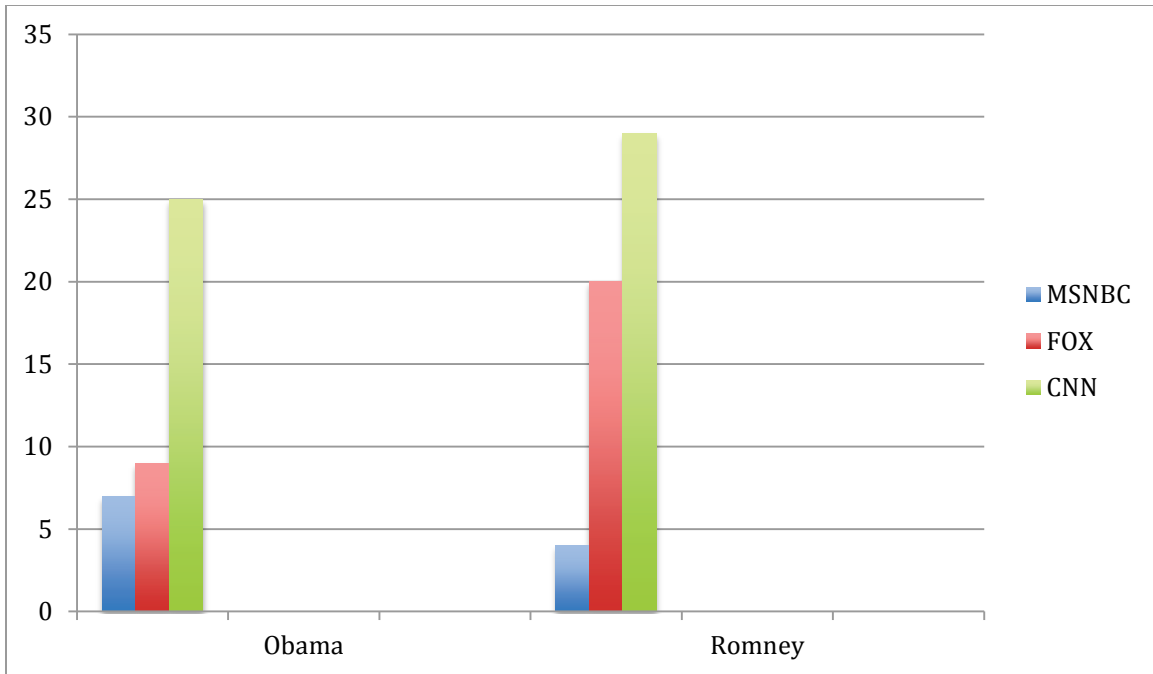


Figure 8. Time each correspondent is given (minutes)

RQ9. Number of times a poll is shown favorable to a candidate.

Fox showed 10 polls with all 10 showing Romney in the lead (Table 9, Fig. 9). CNN showed 32 polls with 14 polls favorable for Obama and 18 favorable for Romney. MSNBC showed 21 polls. Sixteen showed Obama being favored and five showed Romney being favored.

MSNBC and Fox had the greatest difference. MSNBC showed polls favoring Obama by a 3-1 ratio while all 10 polls Fox aired favored Romney. CNN showed more polls favoring Obama but the balance was closer to equitable by 18-14.

A Chi Square analysis yielded a value of 16.16, $df=2$, $p < .0003$, a significant difference.

	MSNBC	CNN	FOX
Obama	16	14	0
Romney	5	18	10

Table 9. Number of polls that showing candidates in favorable light.

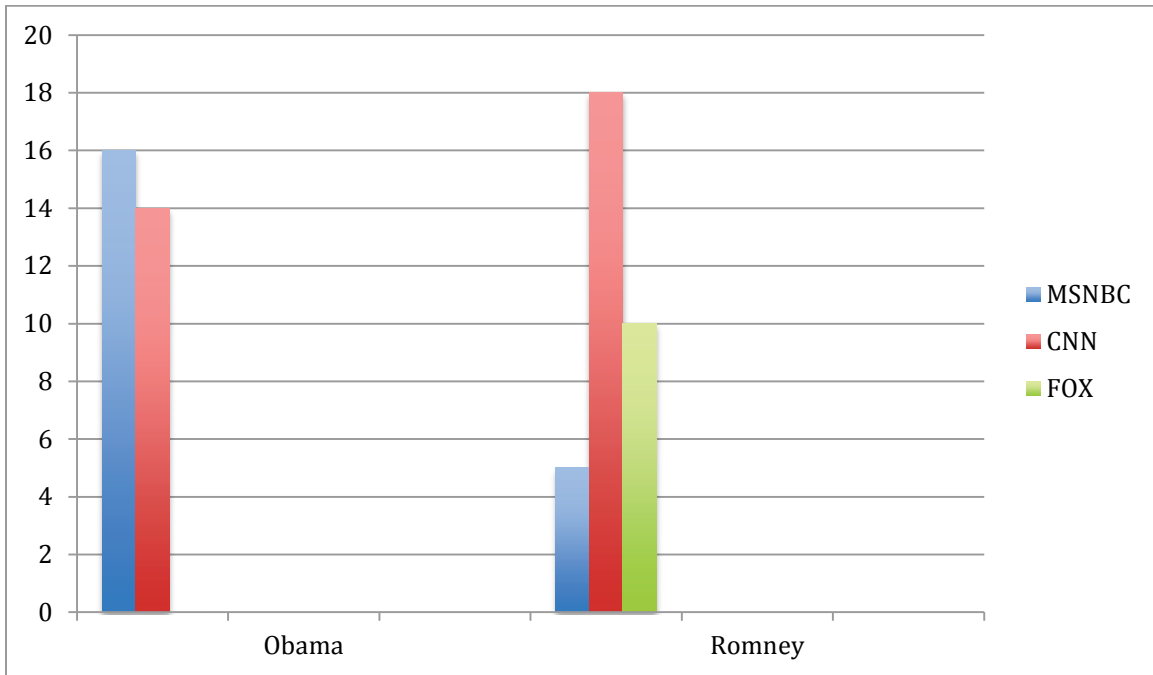


Figure 9. Number of polls show favorable to a candidate.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Prior research shows that Fox and its viewers demonstrated a conservative bias, MSNBC and its viewers exhibited liberal leanings, and although the majority of CNN viewers had liberal leanings, CNN fell somewhere toward the middle. Research also shows that a significant portion of cable news viewers prefer news sources that share their point of view. Research shows that, as a result, cable news network programs have begun a type of partisan branding.

One of the key programming formats used by cable news networks to create and maintain this type of viewership loyalty is to provide information that their viewers want to hear and already agree with. As a result, opinion guests, to some extent, are replacing journalists on cable news programs. One of the motivating factors for cable networks to tailor their news format in this fashion is economics. Networks are then able to package these viewers and sell them as eyeballs to advertisers.

This can, at least partially explain research results that show Fox airing hours of Governor Romney's speeches compared to only minutes given to President Obama (Pew Research, 2012). Similarly, Pew Research demonstrated that a large percentage of coverage on Romney by MSNBC was negative, while the Fox coverage on Obama was negative at least half of the time. CNN continued to fall somewhere toward a more neutral approach by airing negative stories on either candidate less than a third of the time. Pew also confirms that opinion news is aired on cable news 67% of the time compared to 37% straight news reporting.

This study, for the most part, mirrors these prior findings on Fox and MSNBC. Where the results are surprisingly different is seen in the CNN numbers. In this study, CNN showed a distinct trend of following Fox by providing more coverage for Romney. CNN was not nearly as equitable in its reporting as previous studies have shown.

Out of 94 minutes of coverage on the two candidates, CNN gave Romney 63% of the airtime. That probably helps explain why Romney was mentioned 45 more times than Obama.

CNN mirrored Fox regarding which candidate led the newscast. Both networks led with Romney twice as often, while MSNBC led with Obama twice as often. Eight out of the ten times Romney led the CNN newscast, the story on him was positive. Fox always ran positive stories, while MSNBC ran three positive stories and two negative ones.

CNN ran five stories on Obama and all five were positive compared to Fox leading with four Obama stories, which were all negative. MSNBC ran positive stories about Obama all ten times the president was the lead story.

While Pew Research shows the majority of cable news programming is now opinion-based, the time slot for this study gave mixed results. RQ5 showed MSNBC overwhelmingly aired opinion guests (139 minutes) compared to journalists (11 minutes). However, CNN aired less than six minutes of opinion-based news compared to 53 minutes of reporter coverage on the campaign. Fox had 53 minutes of opinion news compared to 28 minutes of conventional reporting. MSNBC also had 45 opinion guests on the newscasts compared to 18 for Fox and only three for CNN.

RQ8, which looked at the number of sidebars aired on either candidate, did not turn out to be substantive. During the five-week period, FOX and CNN each ran three. MSNBC had none.

The closest CNN came in this study to being equitable was with regard to the polls shown during the newscasts. It had 18 positive polls for Romney compared to 14 for Obama. Fox and MSNBC followed their political leanings: Fox had 10 polls and all ten were positive for Romney. MSNBC had 16 polls that were positive in Obama's favor compared to only five for Romney.

The nature of the poll was not taken into consideration. The reason behind choosing this as a category was to find out if networks were possibly using polls to create an air of "winning" for a particular candidate. The emphasis, like the other eight categories was on equitableness. Not only was inequity prevalent for MSNBC and Fox, but considering that poll results show considerable range on any given day, depending on the pollster, it was interesting that Fox, in particular, never showed a poll favoring Obama, while during the same time period, MSNBC found many.

The results also give an interesting twist to the various media theories cited in the Theory section. Nearly a century later, Lippman's belief that the media provide their audience with what they want, rather than reporting on the public importance of events continues to ring true. Research, including this study, seems to bear that out.

Also, Lippman believed the media's role was to circulate information and not encourage argument, and that arguments are what take place in absence of facts. Dewey felt reliable information came from argumentation. Habermas' public sphere also encouraged public debate regarding issues.

This study seems to support Lippman. Cable news networks appear to be tailoring their information for select audiences. Networks provide what viewers want to see and hear with the intent to then package them to advertisers (Dallas Smythe saw news as a way to sell viewers (eyeballs) to advertisers. CNN might have been the exception in the past, based on prior research. However, even though previous studies showed CNN to be more equitable than the other two stations, certain demographics still showed the majority of its audience had liberal leanings. This study suggests that CNN is perhaps now targeting a more conservative audience, similar to Fox viewers.

The type of arguments that Dewey and Habermas deemed as healthy and that would actually encourage factual information to rise to the top does not seem to be working. Opinion news in this study is not shown to be equitable on both sides. This study did not examine whether the information given by opinion guests in the newscast is factual, but it does show that cable networks gave a proportionately inequitable amount of time to the two sides, which shows that these newscasts are less than “fair and balanced.”

As Kovach and Rosenstiel, along with others, point out, the trend seems to be moving toward airing opinions and masking them as newsworthy reporting, which may be, in some ways, influencing cable news audiences with regard to their candidate choices come voting time.

Based on the data compiled in this study, it would seem that the three cable networks are not adhering to certain ethic codes listed previously in this paper that were set down by the RTDNA. Specifically, these are: a full range of information is not provided, opinions and commentaries are not clearly labeled, there is little diversity of

opinions or ideas, and extended coverage is given to individuals beyond what is needed to advance the story.

Lasch's words seem to fit this study's findings, "Increasingly, information is generated by those who wish to promote something to someone..."(Lasch, 1990). The findings of this study appear to support Lasch. The disparity in coverage of Obama across the networks was significant, while the findings for Romney coverage typically were not. One possible explanation is that coverage of an incumbent is different from that of a challenger, but why that might be the case is unclear.

Some limitations of this study evolve around the short time-period (five weeks) that was used for the study. The study also only looked at a single hour-long time slot. As a result, the statistical power for several of the content analysis categories is insufficient. When a newscast yielded only one coding decision, such as which candidate led the segment, results did not reach significance even though disparities were evident. And because of empty cells, too little data was available in some categories to effectively use Chi Square analysis.

A recurring trend does seem apparent, though, with regard to the nine questions. In all categories, a lack of equitable reporting exists regarding the coverage of the two 2012 presidential candidates. None of the networks, let alone Fox, was fair and balanced.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS

As mentioned, the one major surprise in this study was that CNN did not follow the trend of being equitable compared to findings by previous research. Its coverage of the two presidential candidates definitely showed a leaning toward Romney, the conservative candidate.

For years, CNN has been losing market share to Fox. As a result, CNN has brought in new management and shaken up its programming lineup. What this study suggests, based on its findings, is that CNN is trying to take back some of its market share by competing directly with Fox for conservative viewers. It would be interesting to see, through future studies, if CNN continues to veer away from equitable reporting and pursues a more conservative approach in other political coverage. This would seem to support this study's belief that economics drives news coverage and trumps providing fair and balanced reporting because there is no financial gain in being evenhanded.

Future studies might also look into areas outside of politics to determine the degree of equitableness shown by the three cable news networks. The George Zimmerman trial might be an example. Since the networks show definite liberal or conservative bias, does that style of inequitable reporting also show up in racial and other issues? The Farm Bill, which was a hot issue in summer 2013, could be another example. Similar to the presidential campaign, this issue had two distinct sides – farm aid and food stamps. It would be interesting to see if reporting by the three cable networks follows the same inequitable coverage as shown in this study.

One of the major limitations of following the equitableness of cable news is the small number of news programs dedicated to actual news. Most hourly program slots are filled with host personalities who clearly make apparent their political leanings. Martin Bashir for MSNBC and Neil Cavuto for Fox are two examples. They cover the top stories of the day but add their personal, subjective commentary into the reporting.

This study's question of how equitable is cable news regarding coverage of the 2012 presidential election is clearly answered: There was not very much fair and balanced reporting of the two candidates. The coverage does not pass the litmus test of ethical standards set by the RTDNA, either. Research, including this study, shows the trend of cable news to continue its migration toward opinion-based information.

Since that is the case, should cable news networks be calling their programs "news" at all? It's disturbing to think, as mentioned in the last section, that opinions being masked as newsworthy reporting may very well be persuading cable news audiences regarding their political views.

MSNBC refers to itself as "your place for politics." Maybe instead of the three networks calling their programs "news," when they cover the political arena, they should label themselves as "your place for conservative beliefs" or "the place for liberal views."

This study was designed to ask the question whether cable news was equitable in its coverage of the two presidential candidates. As stated in the summary section, if you were undecided about whom to vote for in the 2012 presidential election, what sources would you use to help you decide? If you chose cable news, would you want to watch news that is equitable; meaning, does the newscast give equal time to both candidates and their issues? Or do you want to watch news that will affirm your political leanings and

possibly steer you toward a candidate based on the candidate being shown and talked about more often than the other candidate, not to mention in a more favorable light?

The conclusion of this study is that watching cable news will provide you with options to find the news you want to see and hear, but watching only one network will not give you equitable, fair and balanced information that will allow you to make an objective choice as to whom to vote for.

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