The Tangled Web: An Analysis of Bias Found on News Websites

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ABSTRACT

In addition to creating a new medium for news dissemination, the Internet has transformed the journalism industry. The World Wide Web allows audiences to consume made-to-order news that is consistent with their political outlook because niche websites abound. This makes the industry more competitive. There is a growing body of research that suggests even mainstream news coverage of political matters is becoming more ideologically biased. Multiple factors have forced the agenda setting theory to evolve as audiences have more choices to reinforce individual beliefs, albeit risking the greater good of society. This research assesses news stories published on the websites of three major cable news networks to determine whether the stories present the news objectively. Data was gathered three times a day for six days. The data included taking screen shots of the three news websites and compiling all news stories for further analysis. Stories were coded according to a predetermined guide. Upon completion of coding, variables were tested using two statistical tests: a one-way ANOVA and a Chi-square. The statistical analysis determined there is no statistical difference in the occurrence of bias among the three news organizations based on the number of sources used in a story or when comparing the story topic to the number of stories on a web. However, the post hoc analysis did include a discussion for how bias does exist on each of the websites.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

The founding fathers of America understood the necessity of a free press to perform a watchdog function and to inform the public, in particular, about matters regarding government affairs. Modern journalists are trained to uphold the industry standard of objectivity and to adhere to ethical behavior as defined by professional organizations such as the Society of Professional Journalists. Despite these standards and expectations, some factions in society have long referred to the industry as the liberal media. In contrast, specific mainstream news organizations are criticized for blatantly promoting a conservative agenda. A Pew Research poll in 2009 found that 60 percent of respondents said political bias occurs in news organizations, and more than 70 percent of respondents perceive news organizations favoring one side for political or social issues (Pew Research, 2009).

The World Wide Web has changed the landscape of the news media and how news is disseminated and received. Traditional news outlets must battle against niche websites that reinforce ideological bias without providing the ever important counter argument to create balance. Furthermore, the immersion of social media has allowed both fake news and biased news to spread rampantly. As of 2013, most Americans continued to utilize mainstream news for information instead of alternative news sources. However, that research also determined that individuals do not actively avoid news that is ideologically different, and there is a growing trend for individuals to seek news from organizations with similar attitudes and beliefs (Garrett, Carnahan, and Lynch, 2013). Ultimately, as McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver noted, audience members choose media based on personal preferences, and the message interpreted is a result of individual experiences (2014).

Importance of the Study
A news organization’s ideological stance can be perceived using a number of measures including opinion commentary, prominence of news topics, and content of news stories. Three prominent cable news networks exist in America – CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC – providing both 24-hour televised news coverage and online news coverage. The Pew Research Center identified the ideological profile of each news organization’s audience. Almost 45 percent of the Fox News audience identifies as conservative (10 percent identify as liberal), and 30 percent of the MSNBC audience identifies as liberal (17 percent identify as conservative) (Pew Research, 2017). Some of each organization’s most prominent television personalities of past and present have similar ideologies (i.e. Bill O’Reilly, Keith Olbermann, and Rachel Maddow). News organizations have editorial divisions, which make them susceptible to accusations of being politically biased. However, news coverage must remain objective, and editorial content should be clearly identified.

This study aims to assess the websites of the aforementioned cable news networks and compare only news stories – written as opposed to presented using video footage – for incidences of bias, to determine if the bias occurs as a result of number or types of sources, and whether any bias is consistent with the perceived ideological stance of the organization. If stories fail to utilize an adequate number of sources or a variety in the types of sources, unbalanced reporting can occur, which can cause a positive or negative tone to a story instead of neutrality. Data will also be collected to assess occurrences of the insertion of writer’s opinion into news stories. This is relevant because it is narrowly focused on the news content of the online medium, which provides easy-to-access news that can be shared with the click of a button from anywhere there is an adequate service signal. Furthermore, because the data is on a website, it is archived for the masses and easily can be referenced for personal or professional reasons. It is important
to make a distinction between the integrity and quality of the news content as opposed to the stance of the editorial department.

**Statement of the Problem**

Iyengar and Hahn claimed that it has now become permissible for news organizations to publish politically biased news (2009). Although research has found that individuals do not actively avoid news that is ideologically different, there is a growing trend for individuals to seek news from organizations with similar attitudes and beliefs (Garrett, Carnahan, and Lynch, 2013). Pew Research determined Democrats are twice as likely as Republicans to use CNN as the primary source for national and international news, and Republicans are three times as likely to use Fox News for the same information (Pew Research, 2009). An online experiment conducted by Iyengar and Hahn concluded that individuals, whom identify ideologically as conservative, prefer Fox News; individuals, whom identify ideologically as liberal, prefer CNN or NPR (2009). This is consistent with predictions made by some scholars during the early twenty-first century (Garrett, Carnahan, and Lynch 2013). The partisan division has evolved. Approval has fallen for mainstream news, and the approval for specific news organizations depends on political preferences. In 2007, 61 percent of Democrats had a favorable view of Fox News. Two years later, that figure dropped to 43 percent (Pew Research, 2009).

The public needs to be accurately informed, and the press needs to fulfill the watchdog function as was originally intended. News organizations must refrain from allowing any opinion to be infused into news content and should also strive to create a better balance of relevant stories instead of focusing on a salacious topic. Overzealous news coverage, especially when laced with political opinion, combined with editorial coverage can widened the ideological rift. It can also harm the relationship between the press and the people. Data collected by Pew Research
Center showed there is a lack of trust in news organizations (2009). The public must hold news organizations accountable until news organizations rebuild trust by improving their credibility. An objective press is necessary for a functional democracy.

**Definitions of Terms Used**

Agenda Setting – The ability of the media to establish the importance of a topic in the minds of its audience

Ideological bias – Bias that occurs based on fundamental principles or beliefs of an organization.

Salience – Prominence of a topic or idea

Source – A person or record providing information to be disseminated to the masses through publication

Tone of the article – The significant inclusion in a news story of more positive or negative statements, which result in a news story losing its neutrality

Writer’s opinion – Occurrences of the writer’s opinion in a news story that is often the result of added modifiers

**Organization of Remaining Chapters**

Chapter two provides readers with a review of literature that emphasizes the original agenda-setting theory; evidence of increasing polarization in the media and possible explanations for it; potential consequences of the growing ideological divide; and finally, how the agenda-setting theory has evolved with the inception of new technologies. Chapter three outlines the methodology of the study and discusses its validity and reliability. The results of the study and its analysis comprise chapter four. Chapter five summarizes the paper and discusses the limitations of the study and areas for further research.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature
Philosophical and Ethical Assumptions

Neil Postman argued that all technological advancements present both advantages and disadvantages (1998). The advent of technological advances in communication has affected many areas of our lives, some which are still unrealized by the general public. One area that has been analyzed by scholars is how the web has the influenced mass communications. Concerns about the future of print journalism and advertising revenue coupled with audiences trending toward online coverage forced journalistic communities to reconsider how news is presented. As a strategy for survival, almost all news organizations launched online coverage sometime near the turn of the century (Boyer, 2010). As Sagan and Leighton noted, “the impact of the Internet on journalism is simply a microcosm of the larger phenomenon of dramatic change brought about by the online digital revolution” (2010, p. 119).

Traditional journalism and its business model have been affected by technology and economic downturn, and news organizations have been forced to adapt or collapse (Eberlein & Porlezza, 2014). News organizations face stiff competition in the online realm against niche competitors. To stay relevant, many news organizations have begun to cater specific content to the audiences, and the successfulness of these changes are easily determined with data from the Internet. Although creating politically slanted content has been profitable for news organizations, a partisan divide has consequences for democracy.

Many scholars are able to see the bigger picture of a fragmented media and fragmented society. Iyengar and Hahn warned that continued increases in news media and media choices may result in greater polarization of the audience (2009). Stroud expresses concern about partisan selective exposure and polarization creating a society that is fragmented and less tolerant. She identifies the challenge as “figuring out how to increase community-building forces
in the face of increasing opportunities for selectivity” (2010, p. 572). McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver believe media agenda is a community that requires some level of agreement, and without consensus, the stability of a civic community is jeopardized. “There is caution in this for us all. More than at any time in history, we have the opportunity to find satisfying personal community, but also the opportunity to divert attention from the civic community that sustains us all” (p. 800).

Theoretical Basis

McCombs and Shaw theory of agenda setting has been researched extensively since it was first published in 1972. They recognized that the news media is the primary source for political information, in particular, for national politics because the information covered by news organizations was possibly an individual’s only contact with politics. They declared that “the political world is reproduced imperfectly by individual news media” (p. 184). Specifically, the media informed the public what to think about. This phenomenon is achieved by the amount of time or space devoted to a topic, the prominence of a topic, and editorial coverage. The greater the coverage, the more an audience thinks about a topic (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). There are several factors that determine whether the news media will cover a topic and how it will be covered. Tien Vu said story selection is largely intuitive based on a gatekeeper’s experience (2013). If a story is deemed important enough to be broadcasted or published, it will be limited by time and space in comparison to other topics also being covered. Furthermore, only certain aspects of a topic can be conveyed and highlighted, which is the framing aspect of agenda setting (Fortunato & Martin, 2016). Framing a topic tells the audience how to think about a topic (Dreier & Martin, 2010).
For their research, McCombs and Shaw focused on the forms of media popular at the time – newspapers, newsmagazines, and television, which they noted had a time constraint. As Fortunato and Martin acknowledged, discussions about the function of agenda setting now need to include the current “technological communication environment” (p. 131) as a topic may gain prominence by outside influencers circumventing mainstream media. As they said, “every time the communication environment changes, individuals and organizations have to adjust their communication strategy to reach the audience” (p. 130). To be effective, organizations must understand both how the message is disseminated and how information seekers gather information. Therefore, media formats will continue to change to meet consumer needs (2016).

It has been determined agenda setting can occur for a variety of reasons depending on how the media is being used. Whereas in the past the focus was about news media transferring an agenda to the public, that is now only one example of current agenda-setting processes. One example of other factors affecting agenda-setting effects is whether information is actively sought or the result of casual exposure. Another is whether the media source is mainstream or niche. Today, a prioritized agenda exists, or that information people learn from the news and determine to be most important. News organizations are able to track conversations on public issue by monitoring social media activity, which can garner its own news coverage and becomes a two-stage process (McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 2014).

McCombs and Shaw, along with Weaver, acknowledge that their original agenda-setting theory has expanded since its inception. Today, they identify seven components.

- Basic agenda setting, the impact of the media agenda on the public agenda regarding the salience of issues, political figures and other objects of attention (the first level of agenda setting)
- Attribute agenda setting, the impact of the media agenda on the public agenda regarding the salience of the attributes of these objects (the second level of agenda setting).
- Network agenda setting, the impact of the networked media agenda of objects or attributes on the networked public agenda of object or attribute salience (the third level of agenda setting).
- Central to understanding the strength of agenda-setting effects is the concept of need for orientation, which details the psychology of each individual’s encounter with the media. More recently, dual psychological paths linking media exposure and agenda-setting effects have been detailed.
- Consequence of agenda-setting effects at all three levels for attitudes, opinions, and behavior.
- Origins of the media agenda, which range from the prevailing cultural and ideological environment to news sources, the influence of the media on each other, the norms and routines of journalism, and the individual characteristics of journalists.
- Agendamelding, the way we merge the civic agendas of the media and our valued reference communities with our personal views and experience to create a satisfying picture of the world (p. 782).

McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver note that while agendas are treated as separate and distinct in theory and analysis, they are actually bundled together in reality. This bonding of messages from a variety of sources – mainstream media, social media, and personal relationships – creates a story consistent with the world as known through experience. This is agendamelding. McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver intentionally delineated agendamelding as a single, unhyphenated word, which they define as “the intimate, often unconscious process by which we borrow from a variety of agendas to find, or create, the personal communities in which we live” (p. 782).

The Literature

For the consumer, the launch of online news sites was beneficial in terms of access to a broader range of news organizations and the immediacy of content. Previously, there was a delay before audiences were able to consume the news. They either had to wait for newspapers to land on doorsteps or at newsstands or until regularly scheduled broadcast news aired. Today, consumers are forever connected to the news because of the smart phone or other devices that can easily be transported and connected to Wi Fi. Not only do these devices allow consumers
forever to be connected, they also allows for content to be published by anyone with a camera or video camera despite credibility issues or verification of authenticity (Sagan & Leighton, 2010). With an abundance of choices made available on the World Wide Web, news organizations now are battling for audiences against other news organizations, the amateur journalists, and niche industries that profit by creating sensationalized fake news in a penny-per-click advertising scheme as described by an NBC news story in December 2016. Boyer argues that a new role exists for journalists as consumers have become over-saturated with the news. They are now responsible for providing clarity about matters of importance and identifying that which is believable and trustworthy (2010). The increase in contributors has challenged the gatekeeping function that traditional journalism was entrusted to uphold (Eberwein & Porlezza, 2014).

According to the perspective of deliberative democratic theory, a citizen must be exposed to diverse viewpoints for a healthy democracy (Dilliplane, 2011). Despite this, the current state of media reflects a growing ideological divide as it relates to a marketplace of ideas. Gentzkow and Shapiro’s research found that news outlets will modify information in an effort to support consumer’s prior beliefs (2006). A study released by the Pew Research Center regarding media coverage of President Donald Trump revealed that more conservative news organizations were less inclined to dispute the president’s comments and gave more glowing reviews of his performance. Coverage also included fewer sources such as outside experts. Left-leaning news organizations are more negative toward Trump and his administration. More than 80 percent of MSNBC’s stories about Trump were negative (2017). Because different news organizations cover the same topic but focus on varying attributes of the topic, the political world appears differently to the various news organizations’ audiences (Muddiman, Stroud, & McCombs, 2014).
It’s important to consider that the cause of bias in the media may be the result of multiple factors. While members of the media fulfill the role the gatekeepers who decide which information is most important and where it will be included in a news story, audiences wield the power of cancelling subscriptions or choosing other news stations or websites if they don’t approve of content. Consumers expect news organizations to provide information, and the accuracy of the information determines its quality and its value to the audience. There is a combined demand from consumers and pressure from competitors to produce accurate content (Mullainathan & Shleifer, 2005). News organizations are service based; however, they are also businesses and must be profitable to survive the competition. Today, editors consider whether an article will be read and by how many readers, data that can easily be tracked by the number of clicks when published online (Tien Vu, 2014).

As Newton discussed, audience have the power of choice. He described this as a “chicken-and-egg problem” (p. 583), meaning it’s unclear whether the media actually creates specific attitudes and behaviors or just reinforces an audience’s preconceptions (1999). Stroud’s analysis explained that consuming even just one conservative or liberal source increases the chances of consuming another (2010). Iyengar and Hahn describe exposure on slanted news coverage as an ‘echo chamber’ (p. 34). Instead of challenging what audiences believe, it reinforces what they already think (2009). When individuals select news media based on political predispositions, it is referred to a partisan selective exposure. Stroud’s research gives evidence that partisan selective exposure and polarization are related (2010). Elite opinions are transmitted to the public via media, and if audiences with strong political beliefs choose media that reinforce those beliefs, polarizing attitudes may develop. Ryan specifically considered if or how anger can motivate audiences to seek information and determined, using three studies, that anger does
incentivize political communication. However, he questioned what type of information is sought because of anger, concerned that the information could be either biased or misleading (2012).

The success of Fox News suggests that slanting news is profitable (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). As the news media has transitioned toward niche programming that serves to both inform and entertain, journalists have begun to take a stance on political matters and express individual views (Feldman, 2011). News organizations know their audiences and can present information to best appease them. In an experimental setting, Republicans and conservatives prefer news coverage from Fox News; Democrats and liberals prefer CNN and NPR. This preference even extended beyond controversial issues and also included softer topics. Specifically, they noted conservatives would rather rely on Fox News for topics such as vacation destinations, and liberals avoid Fox News even for sports-related topics (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). It’s significant to note that within individual news organizations, news may be slanted multiple ways depending on the segment and particular audience. Gentzkow and Shapiro observed this comparing CNN’s domestic cable channel and its international channel (2006). Dilliplane compared the current options for news media to shopping in the cereal aisle – there is something for everyone’s individual tastes (2011).

Mullainathan and Shleifer’s researched whether media competition would eliminate or reduce media bias. Their research suggested that competition affected prices but didn’t reduce slanted coverage. “Powerful forces motivate news providers to slant and increase bias rather than clear up confusion (p. 1034).” Specifically, competition actually compels publishers to slant the news in effort to appeal to an audience’s prejudices, which only further divides the market and generates greater revenue for news organizations (2005). Xiang and Sarvay’s research expanded on Mullainathan and Shleifer’s. It revealed that conscientious consumers are inclined to purchase
the news from multiple sources to determine the truth themselves, effectively learning more information than a single, objective news source. However, news organizations are aware of these conscientious consumers and will attempt to avoid competition by raising prices, and ultimately increasing bias (2007). As a result, numerous news organizations today produce slanted news coverage using a variety of mediums, attempting to attract partisan consumers (Smith & Searles, 2012).

Iyengar and Hahn believe it’s significant that the rapid changes in information technology and growing partisan divide have occurred concurrently. Prior to cable television and media expansion on the internet, audiences were limited by the number of newscasts, which provided similar experiences (2009). Nie, Miller, Golde, Butler, and Winneg studied the specific effects of the web on political news. They learned that individuals are more likely to become either more liberal or conservative when they view politically slanted cable news and also consume online news with a similar slant. Furthermore, individuals become more interested in niche political issues when they consume online news than individuals who rely solely on television news. Online news, which is produced at a lower cost than other forms of the news, makes it permissible to provide more diverse coverage and include issues that may not be found on mainstream television (2010). News media uses the frequency of exposure to a topic to persuade the public about its importance and make it a public agenda. Social media allows for messages to be repeated and can create salience without influence from the news media (Fortunato & Martin, 2016).

Social media platforms also allow for content to be shared without constraints such as fact checking or editorial judgment. This coverage can be as widespread as news from mainstream sources (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). In a democracy, the function of the news
Media bias in the news requires media to inform citizens, which requires it to select and frame messages. Because of the prevalence of social media, this responsibility has become more difficult as social media allows for more messages to be transmitted to the masses (Fortunato & Martin, 2016). Fake news coverage is growing, in part, because the web and social media create an environment conducive to its growth: professional-looking websites are easy to create, and one click can share fake news to hundreds. The increased political polarization is also a factor because of a psychological need for news to be consistent with an individual’s beliefs. (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017).

Dreier and Martin use the fate of ACORN to demonstrate how agenda setting and framing works both in terms of the news media’s coverage and outside influences. Special interests groups flooded the web with negative stories about the organization until the mainstream media picked up the story. Once the news media picked up the story, it was prominently featured in both traditional news coverage and opinion coverage. Politicians and other public figureheads began commenting on the topic, which then became new news. Because of the immediacy of certain platforms used by news organizations – 24/7 cable coverage and news websites – information wasn’t verified before being repeated. Public outrage followed, and the organization eventually had to close because it lost funding (2010). As the ACORN example illustrates, no form of the media exists in a vacuum. Instead, it must be remembered that traditional news media, digital media, and advertising affect each other (Fortunato & Martin, 2016).

**Significance/Rationale**

As the literature suggests, the agenda-setting function of the mass media has evolved greatly since the 1970s. This is in no small part a result of the technology boom that gave us constant access to the World Wide Web, which creates an open forum for anyone to share a
message. This forum has caused a shift in the identity of the gatekeeper away from being solely that of news organizations. Now, in an effort to stay competitive, many news organizations are publishing biased content. The marketplace is being flooded with non-centric political coverage from both the mainstream media and alternative media, creating a polarization that reverberates throughout society.

This evolution challenges the most basic principle of journalism, and it is driven by revenue potential. It began with a shift from local news stations to 24-hour coverage on cable, where producers learned biased rhetoric, like that of Bill O’Reilly and Keith Olbermann, garnered viewers and advertising dollars. Audience preferences for ideologically based broadcast coverage has been well documented. Each major news conglomerate also provides web-based coverage – the medium of convergence that combines print and broadcast while also allowing for citizens’ thoughts to become public. There is much less research available that focuses only on partisan bias of mainstream media’s websites.

**Specific Purpose**

This research will gather examples of bias found on mainstream media websites and determine whether the bias is consistent with perceptions of the ideological perception of the news organization.

**Research Questions**

RQ 1: Which of the selected mainstream websites present news stories that contain bias?

RQ 2: Are the incidences of bias consistent with the perceived ideological stance of the news organization?
Chapter 3: Scope and Methodology

Scope of the Study

This study relied on content analysis to assess whether mainstream media is objective in its coverage of the news on their websites. Specifically, the research considered whether the websites provide ideologically slanted coverage that is consistent with the conclusions of previous research, which is largely focused on television programming, regarding liberal or conservative bias. The following news organizations were used for the study: Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC. The Pew Research Center has determined MSNBC appeals to left-leaning audiences, CNN appeals to mixed audiences, and Fox News appeals to a right-leaning audience (2017).

There are multiple reasons for focusing on only mainstream media websites. First, as previously mentioned, much of the prior research has been devoted to other mediums. Another reason is the analysis is timely and relevant considering the rapid technological advancements that allow for a constant stream of news via the Internet. Niche websites, such as Vox or Breitbart, are being excluded because they are example or horizontal media instead of vertical media. Finally, time restraints are a consideration; an exhaustive study of media outlets is not feasible.

Methodology of the Study

This study utilized a content analysis, which Eriksson and Kovalainen explain the purpose as “to inspect all empirical data for recurrent instances, such as words, themes or discourses” (2008, p. 187). Data was only collected from stories that were published in written format, excluding from analysis any photographs and video coverage.
The research questions of this study required a quantitative content analysis. A quantitative content analysis produces a numerical description by recording systematic counting in an objective manner (Neuman, 2006), making it appropriate to compare data such as the number of headlines related to a chosen topic. Multiple coders were used.

**Data Collection**

Data was collected three times a day for six days at 6 a.m., 12 p.m., and 7 p.m. (all times Central). Screen shots were taken of the top portion of the Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC websites, as viewers would first see it.

The websites were methodically accessed, with the first website accessed first on days one and four; the second website accessed first on days two and five; and the third website accessed first on days three and six. The main story from the first website accessed each day was the topic of analysis for that day. Any news story related to the selected topic was captured for analysis from each website.

The data was recorded using a predetermined coding form, and two coders coded each story. Coders were trained beforehand to ensure consistency.

**Data Analysis**

Research Question 1, which of the selected mainstream websites presents news stories that contain bias, was tested using a one-way ANOVA. The hypothesis was as follows: Each news site will create a perception of bias on the basis of the number of sources for a given story. A one-way ANOVA was used because each of the news sites – Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC – are independent, categorical variables. The number of sources used in the story and the type of sources used were continuous variables.
Research Question 2, are the incidences of bias consistent with the perceived ideological stance of the news organization, was tested using a Chi-square. The hypothesis was as follows: If the topic reflects positively for conservative (liberals), Fox News (MSNBC) will have more stories about the topic; If the topic reflects negatively for conservative (liberals), Fox News (MSNBC) will have fewer stories, thus deemphasizing the topic. This creates two categorical variables, Fox News and MSNBC, and positive or negative tone. Positive, neutral, or negative tone will be determined by the standard established by the Pew research. There must be twice as many negative (positive) statements for the tone to be considered negative (positive) (2017).

Validity

Neuman said “validity is part of a dynamic process that grows by accumulating evidence over time” (2006, p. 192). If research is truthful or correct in its description, theory, or analysis of reality, it is said to have validity. Measurement validity is determined by the fit of conceptual and operational definitions.

This research replicated certain aspects of the recently released study by the Pew Research Center (2017), including capturing screenshots at three times during the day for analysis. It also replicated seven of the nine source categories as defined by the Pew research. Finally, the question(s) about the frame of the story was similar to the Pew research. The research from Pew asked whether the frame of the story was leadership and character or core ideology and policy agenda. As this study is not focused on President Trump, possibilities for frame were either policy or personal attributes. It should be noted, the recent research from Pew was not focused on bias, which is the focus of this study.

Reliability
Reliability was achieved by results being dependable or consistent. If results are the same over time, such as when using a test-retest method, the results are said to have stability and reliability. Having multiple coders improved the reliability of the study for the variables in which the coders were in agreement (Neuman, 2006).

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethics, as they apply to this study, are in regard to accuracy of the information presented because the study does not directly involve individual participants. Instead, the emphasis was to conduct the research systematically and objectively in the study design, analysis of data, and results reported (Rubin, Rubin, Haridakis, & Piele, 2010).
Chapter 4: The Study

Introduction

Data collection began at 6 a.m. Monday, October 30, 2017, and continued three times a day for six days at 6 a.m., 12 p.m. and 7 p.m. C.S.T. On days one and four, the story topic was determined by the top stories on CNN, which were the special counsel indictment and the terrorist attack in New York City on Halloween; on days two and five, the story topic was determined by the top stories on MSNBC, which were the special counsel indictment and the conflicting testimony of Attorney General Jeff Sessions. The top stories on Fox News were used for the story topic on days three and six and were the New York City terrorist attack and President Donald Trump’s trip to Asia.

Upon completion of the data collection, data was organized in preparation for coding. Screenshots of each website were used to count headlines and determine whether stories could be accessed by more than one headline on the site. Headlines were also recorded to determine an approximation of the length of time the story was kept on the website or whether new content was produced.

Articles that had been collected during the data pull were assessed for relevance. If, after further review, the content was editorial, it was eliminated. In order for it to be declared editorial in nature, it needed to be described as an opinion piece or identified in the web address as an opinion piece or it had to be identified as an analysis or composed by an analyst. A question and answer piece was removed as were short daily briefings of the day’s news. Remaining articles were edited to remove identifying information about the news site with the exception of hyperlink information and if the news organization identified itself in the body of text. Two stories were excluded after learning the original datelines were months prior to the study.
During the coding process, coders counted the number of sources used in each story and identified the source type from a list of options that included the following: White House representative, Congressional Democrat, Congressional Republican, Interest group, Expert, Poll, Journalist, Citizen, Law Enforcement Officer, Foreign representative, and other. Coders listed all source types that were coded as other. The types of sources were adapted from published research by the Pew Research Center (2017).

Sources to be coded as a White House representative included the President, White House employees, and lawyers representing the President. Anonymous sources who were identified as White House employees were also to be identified in this category. Congressional Democrat or Congressional Republican included any senator or representative who identified as either Republican or Democrat. Independent representatives were coded as other. In instances when political affiliation was not identified in the article, a Google search was conducted to determine the appropriate affiliation.

Sources were coded as an interest group if an individual was representing an organization with a vested interest in the topic being discussed or if information was gathered using the organization’s resources. An expert was an individual with substantial experience to speak on the topic with authority. For example, because Chris Christie was a former U.S. Attorney, he would be knowledgeable about the proceedings of the special counsel. A poll was a survey conducted by a creditable organization.

Any citation from a person identified as a journalist was coded as journalist. This category also included other news organization from which information was gathered from previously published material. One challenge with identifying sources in this category is that
some stories only provided a hyperlink to a previous story by the organization as a way to cite the source of the information.

The category of Law Enforcement Officer was a broad category that included members of local police departments, federal officers, and if necessary, military personnel. This category also included representatives of organizations such as Department of Homeland Security, which is tasked with a specific area of law enforcement. Also, the United States Attorney General was included in this category. For as Martin Heinrich, New Mexico senator, was quoted as saying in “Sessions under renewed scrutiny on Capitol Hill, Jeff Sessions is “the highest law enforcement officer in the country” (CNN, November 3, 2017).

An individual not known by the masses was coded as a citizen. Journalists may speak with random individuals to provide a more localized or personal account of major events. Any individual representing a foreign country was coded as foreign dignitary. The Other category was a catch-all for sources that didn’t fit into the previous categories. Some individuals listed in this category included Mark Zuckerberg, Hillary Clinton, and New York Governor Andrew Cuomo. Documents were also included in this category, and in hindsight, documents could have had a stand-alone category. Some of the documents included were official records, such as a marriage license or court papers.

The emphasis of each story was also coded, and the list of possibilities included public policy, the 2016 election, societal issues, defense, sports, climate, disaster, and other. Coders were instructed to identify a story as public policy if its primary focus was related to efforts to create policy or pass legislation. The 2016 election was an unusual category that included any story focused on the election or subsequent investigation. This category was included because the election has continued to be a topic of discussion in the media since its conclusion. A societal
issue was any general topic that society, as a whole, faced. Suggested topics given to help coders identify this category were equality or a health issue, like America’s opioid crisis. Topics relating to the military were coded as defense. Any story focusing on sports, at any level, were coded as sports. Climate stories were stories related to the climate or weather and its aftereffects. The category disaster was specific in that the occurrence was a human-made disaster or tragedy. Natural disasters would instead be coded using the climate category. The other category included stories that did not logically fit in any previous category, and coders were instructed to briefly describe the topic and identify the story’s headline.

Coders identified the tone of the article and whether it was positive, negative, or neutral. In order for the article to be considered positive, it had to have twice as many positive paragraphs as negative paragraphs. In order for the article to be considered negative, it had to have twice as many negative paragraphs as positive paragraphs. Stories that did not have twice as many positive or negative statements were coded as neutral. Statements could include transitional paragraphs or quotes from sources. This method of determining positivity or negativity was replicated from recent Pew research (2017). It is important to note that the nature of the story’s topic did not determine whether a story was positive or negative. A terrorist attack and special investigation into the possibility of collusion during a presidential election are negative topics, which comprised the topics for five of the six days data was collected. However, if a story related to the investigation only quotes sources who say collusion did not occur and the charges filed are unrelated, the story could potentially be positive in tone. Instead of relying on the coder’s opinion about whether a statement was good or bad, the coder was to determine whether praise or criticism was evident.
Coders were instructed to choose yes or no as to whether writer’s bias was present in the story and to keep a list of examples of the bias. Specifically, any bias that may have been created by the sources chosen or the content from the sources was not an example of bias. Instead, coders were to look for modifiers such as “sharply critical,” or “appears to have greatly exaggerated.” Inter-coder reliability was lowest for this category.

The category ideological bias was divided into three options – Republican/conservative, Democrat/liberal, or neither. For a story to qualify as ideologically biased, it must either encourage or discourage a topic in a manner consistent with either ideological platform. For example, a story that included only quotes in favor of universal health care should be coded as consistent with a liberal platform. However, a story in favor of increasing military spending would be considered more consistent with a conservative platform.

Finally, coders determined whether a story included embedded hyperlinks and counted the number of hyperlinks (up to five) in a story. This data could be used during post hoc analysis to support the occurrence of agenda setting and reinforcement of a topic’s importance.

Results of the Study

Two coders reviewed 102 stories, and 22 stories were coded by both to determine inter-coder reliability for the following subjective items: tone, writer’s opinion, and ideological bias. The website dfreelon.org was used to calculate Scott’s Pi. For the tone of the article, Scott’s Pi was .648. Scott’s Pi was undefined for ideological basis; however, the percentage agreement was 100 percent. Scott’s Pi was low for writer’s opinion at .083 despite the percentage agreement being 63.6 percent.

RQ1: Which of the selected mainstream websites presents news stories that creates bias?
H1: Each news site will create a perception of bias on the basis of the number of sources for a given story.

**ANOVA**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sourcesnumber</th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups (Combined)</td>
<td>87.771</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>43.886</td>
<td>2.813</td>
<td>.065</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linear Term Unweighted</td>
<td>46.829</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>46.829</td>
<td>3.002</td>
<td>.086</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weighted</td>
<td>5.942</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.942</td>
<td>.381</td>
<td>.539</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deviation</td>
<td>81.830</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>81.830</td>
<td>5.245</td>
<td>.024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>1544.542</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>15.601</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1632.314</td>
<td>101</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The hypothesis was not supported as the results of the analysis of variance suggests that there is no significant statistical difference among the websites when comparing the number of sources and the tone of the article (positive, negative, or neutral) because the significance or p value is greater than .05. One point of contention is that MSNBC had only five news stories to be coded despite 18 data pull sessions because of the organizations reliance on video footage. Furthermore, there was no correlation between the number of sources and the tone of the article.

RQ2: Are the incidences of bias consistent with the perceived ideological stance of the news organization?

H1: If the topic reflects positively for conservatives (liberals), Fox News (MSNBC) will have more stories about the topic; if the topic reflects negatively for conservatives (liberals), Fox News (MSNBC) will have fewer stories, thus deemphasizing the topic.
Again, there is no statistical difference between the news sites regarding the number headlines and the story emphasis because the significance is greater than .05. This statistical test included MSNBC.

**Discussion**

The topic of the news media’s objectivity has been debated for decades. Conservatives often refer to the industry as the liberal news media. Fox News unabashedly favors a conservative platform and was even referred to as “a news program that often acts as an unofficial arm of the White House communications department” by a competing news outlet (CNN, October 31, 2017). In the past, Fox News could credit its success, in part, to outspoken pundits like Bill O’Reilly and Glenn Beck. MSNBC followed a similar formula with Keith Olbermann and now Rachel Maddow. The opinionated strategy proved to be profitable and helped garner a reputation for each news group.

Although each of these personalities and others have or had a presence on their organization’s respective websites, the divisive commentary is primarily tailored for a television audience. On each news group’s website, a cornucopia of options is available for the audience’s choosing – news stories, analysis, opinion, video footage, or sponsored stories. The competitive
online medium offers each individual consumer the option to view what he or she wants, when he or she wants it, and there is an abundance of alternatives available.

A post hoc analysis was done comparing CNN and Fox News for instances of writer’s bias with CNN having more examples of writer’s bias. This was unexpected because of the three news groups assessed, CNN has the most ideologically moderate audience with 26 percent of audience members identifying as liberal democrats and 19 percent of audience members identifying as conservative republicans (Pew Research, 2017). Accordingly, it could be expected that CNN would have the fewest examples of writer’s bias to appease its broad audience. However, excerpts from CNN stories include the following examples of writer’s bias:

“found plenty of time to cover other stories” – “‘I want to quit’: Fox News employees say their network’s Russia coverage was ‘an embarrassment’”

“the odds of such a measure passing are almost nil” – “Little chance Congress can kill Mueller’s funding”

“conservative critics are likely to complain loudly” – “Little chance Congress can kill Mueller’s funding”

“angrily denied and worked to discredit” – “Trump ‘seething’ as Mueller probe reaches former aides”
“seemed to fit an ongoing narrative” – “Top Senate Republicans (literally) dodge questions on Trump aide indictments”

CNN could be infusing opinion into stories to emulate Fox News and MSNBC in an attempt to achieve similar success. Another possibility is it’s trying to stay competitive against other websites, including niche websites.

MSNBC and Fox News also had examples of writer’s bias, including the line “sometimes contentious questioning” in the article “Facebook, Twitter and Google Reps Grilled by Senate About Russian Propaganda” (MSNBC, October 31, 2017) and Fox News referring to John Podesta’s resignation as “mysterious” in its article “Podesta brothers fight back against Trump, Mueller and Fox News” (October 31, 2017). The limited number of examples of writer’s bias by Fox News could be for a variety of reasons. First, Fox News included in its coverage short stories that emphasized less controversial aspects of a topic, such as a story about a student who attended school the day after the terrorist attack despite being injured. Also, Fox News relied on other news outlets for information including *The New York Times* and the Associated Press, both which have reputations for high standards of journalistic quality. Finally, for the purpose of this study, focusing on examples of writer’s bias limited itself subjective word choice by the writer. Bias could also be achieved by limiting the types of sources interviewed and the quotes chosen for publication. Carefully selected quotes or tweets could cause an article to be positive or negative without the influx of any writer’s bias.

In McCombs and Shaw’s original study about agenda setting, they referenced a quote by Bernard Cohen who declared the the media “may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (1972, p. 177). The news topics featured during the six days of collecting data provides
an example of this. Depending on a person’s ideological stance, Fox News could be accused of attempting to distract readers from the headliner story about the special counsel’s indictment announcement. In addition to providing coverage about the individuals indicted, Fox News ran stories about other individuals who *may* be implicated by the investigation and who were affiliated with the opposing political candidate. Unfortunately, when a story about the opposing political candidate broke during the week of data collection, the story was never the top story at six a.m., and data was not collected for analysis.

Also, it should be noted that an industry standard exists suggesting news stories should include a minimum of three sources. However, as noted during this research process, the number of sources can be less influential that the types of sources used. A news stories that relies on five Congressional Republicans can be create a specific tone despite having more than the recommended three sources because each source may provide a similar viewpoint, which creates an unbalanced story. Furthermore, the increasing reliance on anonymous sources is troubling. Although a fear of retribution for the sources is understandable, the overuse of anonymous sources can hurt the credibility of a news organization.

Despite the study finding no conclusive statistical differences between websites in regards to tone, number of sources, and types of stories, the sites continue to be perceived as having ideological ties to political parties. This could be a result of the television stations reliance on controversial personalities and the time devoted to shows hosted by those individuals.
Chapter 5: Summaries and Conclusions

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited largely by its time constraints. The data collection period lasted for only six days. However, during those six days, a terrorist attack occurred, and individuals were indicted by federal agents investigating a matter involving the President of the United States of America. These are topics that, because of the current political environment, can be especially polarizing. Had the study occurred during a slower, less controversial news week, the results could have been different.

It was also limited because the study included only cable news organizations, which, because of their 24-hour television stations, must provide continuous footage for viewers. This could cause an imbalance in news and editorial coverage that could be carried over to websites. Also, the MSNBC website relies heavily on video coverage, which greatly limited the number of stories that could be coded. It should also be noted that some of the headlines on the MSNBC website were hyperlinks to a story on the NBC News website instead of original content created by MSNBC.

Because the research did not include analysis of visual elements including photographs or video footage, this caused another limitation. In the age of convergence, most news organizations provide information using a variety of mediums. Including video coverage would have provided a more complete analysis, especially of MSNBC.

Another limitation was discovered by chance during the data collection period. One of the websites was simultaneously accessed using the laptop and Internet browser of a mobile phone. This revealed differences despite being the same web address. Comparisons could have
been made using websites accessed by mobile devices such as smart phones or tablet, instead of a laptop. This study also did not include coverage from mobile apps.

Finally, the study is limited because it relied on only quantitative data. While using quantitative data allows us to make statistical comparisons among the news outlets, a qualitative assessment helps us to make meaning of the data and how it relates to society.

**Further Study or Recommendations**

As this study was narrowly focused on cable news organizations, possible research could include a similar study of network news organizations and regional or local news groups. Further research could be done comparing the results of each study to determine similarities and differences between different types of news organizations. It could also be beneficial to duplicate the study in five or ten years to assess any changes to news media practices or whether political coverage improves or worsens with a change in leadership in Washington.

Other possible research topics could include an analysis of what consumers actually consume on news websites to determine whether users are seeking unbiased information or analysis, which could reinforce ideological opinions. This line of research could include a discussion of individual’s need for orientation and would contribute to the discussion of the role of psychological effects in agenda setting. This research might also contribute to a discussion about the prominence of editorial comment if more users are accessing opinion pieces than news stories.

**Conclusions**

Although the statistical results of this study did not support the hypotheses, this research still has relevance regarding political bias in the news. Like this study, previous research has provided evidence that bias does exist in news coverage. However, this research highlights the
depth of the problem as subjective news coverage is now permitted by some of the largest news organizations in America. This poses a more important question as to why it is permissible to publish biased news stories? Speculation would suggest revenue is a factor. News organizations rely on advertising dollars, and securing funds requires an audience. The success of Bill O’Reilly and Keith Olbermann implies consumers like commentary to help find meaning of the news.

This research also demonstrated how salience is created. “The agenda-setting effects of the media on the public’s perception of the priority issues of the day result from the high degree of redundancy in the media messages received by the public about the priority issues of the day” (McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 2014, p. 790). Over the course of six days, three news topics generated more than 100 news stories on three news websites. However, during the 18 data collection periods, the number of topic-related headlines counted on the same three news sites totaled more than 550. Audiences were bombarded. Although some news stories were featured multiple times (the total number of headlines linked to news stories was 194), more than 300 headlines linked to either video footage or opinion commentary. However, there were also additional stories not added in the counts because the topic of the story wasn’t the chosen topic of the day (See Appendix B). This has major implications considering multiple news stories could not been deemed objective.

Audiences have the freedom to accept or reject the news media’s messages. When those messages are political in nature and include more than factual information, both acceptance and rejection have consequences that can widen the ideological rift. However, this doesn’t occur in isolation because the influence of social media has become far reaching, and the presence of fringe outlets allow for an echo chamber. Both create competition for traditional news groups that are forced to straddle a line between principle and survival.
References


Freelon, D. ReCal: reliability calculation for the masses. Retrieved from:

http://dfreelon.org/utils/recalfront/


APPENDIX A

Coding Sheet

Date______________________  Time______________________  News site______________________

*Topic Prominence on website*

1. (Q2) How many headlines, related to the topic, can you see without scrolling down? ____
2. (Q2) How many headlines are related to the topic? ____
3. (Q2) Is the top story related to the topic? _____yes _____no
4. (Q2) How many news stories about the topic are on the website? (written, not video footage) ____

*Individual Story*

Headline______________________________________________________________________________________

5. (Q2) How long is the story piece kept on the website? _____<12 hrs _____12-24 hrs _____> 24 hours
6. Was the story removed from the websites and later added? _____yes _____no
7. (Q2) Could the story be accessed by more than one headline at the same time? _____yes _____no
8. (Q1) How many sources did the article include? _____
9. (Q1) What type of sources were used in the story
   _____White House representative
   _____Congressional Democrat _____Congressional Republican _____Interest group _____Expert _____Poll
   _____Journalist _____Citizen _____LEO _____Foreign _____other
10. (Q2) What was emphasized in the story? _____public policy _____2016 campaign _____societal issue
    _____defense _____sports _____climate _____disaster _____other
11. (Q2) What was the tone of the article? _____Positive _____neutral _____negative

_Determine whether statements by either the author or each source is a positive or negative assessment. In order for the article to be considered positive, there must be twice as many positive as negative assessments. In order for the article to be considered negative, there must be twice as many negative as positive assessments. If there are not at least twice as many positive or negative statements, the story should be coded as neutral._

12. (Q2) Did the news story contain any examples of writer’s opinion? _____yes _____no

13. (Q2) What is the perceived ideological bias? _____liberal _____conservative _____neither
14. Are hyperlinks embedded in the story that link to other related stories? _____
15. If there are hyperlinks, how many? _____
APPENDIX B

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CNN</th>
<th>FoxNews</th>
<th>MSNBC</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Headlines seen without scrolling</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total topic-related headlines</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>566</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total headlines for written news stories</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>