Journalism of affirmation?

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JOURNALISM OF AFFIRMATION?

BY

BEN CARDER

English/Journalism (BA), College of Liberal Arts, 2006

THESIS

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

In

Political Science

December, 2008
INFORMATION TO USERS

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12-15-08
Date
DEDICATION

For my two best friends, SJC and ETC. Thank you. Love ya...mean it!
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This could not have been written without the much needed and much appreciated assistance of Andy Smith and Alynna Lyon. Thank you for your help, patience and guidance.
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ABSTRACT

JOURNALISM OF AFFIRMATION?

by

Ben Carder

University of New Hampshire, December 2008

Polls and studies suggest news outlets appeal to specific “niche” audiences; where news broadcasts seemingly “give the people what they want,” through their reporting. Does the broadcast news media manipulate news content in a manner that is consistent with their “niche” audience?

Because Democrats and Republicans have differing views on the economy’s vitality, this study analyzes how the media frame unemployment data: what elements of an unemployment report are emphasized; how much time is devoted to a certain aspect of it across networks? This study believes news networks “spin” unemployment reports positively or negatively, depending on their “niche” audience and what party holds the presidency. The overall findings indicate, however, the media focus disproportionately on the unfavorable aspects of unemployment reports, independent of which party holds the presidency or what its “niche” audience is. Previous studies with similar findings say this “shaping of reality” can influence how people vote.

December, 2008
INTRODUCTION

Near to the end of the Hezbollah-Israeli war of 2006, a photograph taken in Lebanon by a Reuters photographer appeared on the front pages of newspapers around the world. The photograph depicted the city of Beirut's skyline, blurred by dark, swarthy plumes of smoke, after an Israeli Air Force bombing.

Not long after the picture had been published, bloggers familiar with the computer program Photoshop noticed repeating smoke patterns and called into question the veracity of the picture. After some internal investigation, Reuters suspended and eventually fired the photographer who took the picture for improperly using photo editing software (Frenkel, 2006) or for what others called his “blatant evidence of manipulation” (Lappin, 2006).

While few claim “blatant” manipulations of news content happen with any regularity, polls and a handful of studies suggest news outlets manipulate per se by appealing to specific “niche” audiences. If this is indeed the case – that the broadcast news media manipulates news content in a manner that is consistent with its “niche” audience – it has the potential to impact democracy. The press serves as the intermediary between citizens and their elected representatives (Splichal, 2002: 92). It is through the press that elected representatives reach citizens, and citizens
respond by electing those they consider most qualified to serve the public. Thus, when it comes to democracy, citizens are reliant upon an honest media. But if certain news outlets are emphasizing issues more than a competing news outlet – doing so to satisfy their "niche" audience, perhaps – that kind of selectivity can determine policy (quoted in Lee, Moretti, and Butler, 2004) make or break an incumbent president's re-election bid (Hetherington, 1996: 373) or any other presidential hopeful's ambitions. As former MSNBC and Fox News contributor Jeff Cohen once said, "The media is the nervous system of a democracy. If it is not functioning well, democracy can't function" (Greenblatt, 2004: 17).

This study will test whether or not news organizations are manipulating news content to meet the expectations of their audience. Prior to doing this, however, this study will trace the history of a partisan media, as well as polling data that suggest news audiences split along partisan lines. It will also look at studies that both corroborate and refute the notion that media organizations manipulate news content. The research design section will describe, in detail, what this study is investigating: the media's portrayal of economic news content, specifically, the portrayal of the nation's unemployment level. Determining content manipulation will be done by analyzing several different dependent variables, including the tone of unemployment reports (how negatively or positively does a news broadcast "spin" the
unemployment report?), the length of the segment (how much time is dedicated to talking about the unemployment report in the broadcast?), the placement of the unemployment report (is the unemployment report the broadcast’s top story, or is it mentioned at the middle or end of the broadcast?), and the day it is reported (did the news organization report on the unemployment level the day it was released by the Labor Department or several days later?). Determining partisanship, or where on the ideological spectrum networks lean, will be done by comparing this study’s findings to a study done by the Project for Excellence in Journalism (Just, 2007) that analyzed how favorable or unfavorable news outlets were to Democratic and Republican presidential candidates.

By this study’s conclusion, the results should provide a more accurate depiction of whether or not news content is being manipulated by broadcast media organizations, depending on whether the stated hypotheses are supported or refuted. Of course, studies can always be improved upon; thus, regardless of whether the stated hypotheses are confirmed, recommendations for future research will also be made.
CHAPTER I

"NICHE" NEWS

The notion that news outlets – newspaper or broadcast – appeal to targeted audiences is not a recent phenomenon. In many European countries – and in 19th and early 20th Century America – newspapers were known to favor particular political parties. In Great Britain, The Sun, The Daily Mail, The Telegraph, The Times, and The Express are papers that traditionally promote the Conservative party; while papers like The Daily Mirror, The Guardian, and The Independent favor the left-wing policy stances of the Labor party (Cridland, 2004; British Newspapers Online, 2007). Similar to the contemporary press in the United Kingdom, national newspapers in the United States, historically, were owned by political parties, each appealing to targeted audiences. In his book, Just the Facts: How Objectivity Came to Define American Journalism (2000), David Mindich traces the history of a partisan press back to the Revolutionary era when newspapers were financially connected to political parties. It wasn’t until 1837 and the “Panic” aftermath that newspapers became less partisan, as the “penny press” was one of the few businesses that came out of the country’s economic downturn relatively unscathed (Mindich, 2000: 17). Unlike the more expensive and
party-owned papers, whose content was meant to persuade rather than inform, the papers that sold for one cent (hence the term "penny press") were more popular with the public due to their inexpensive price, their fact-based reporting and their funding from advertising dollars, rather than political parties. Today, though journalists differ on whether pure objectivity can be attained – or if it even should be (Mindich, 2000: 4) – the prevailing credo in the profession is to at least strive for fairness and balance when stories of a political nature are presented to the public (quoted in Schudeson, 1978). John H. Hinderraker, a media critic and fellow at the conservative Claremont Institute, believes that the 20th Century shift to an objective media, not a media that caters to a "niche" audience, is what is best for American journalism, saying, "It's important that there be media outlets that are reasonably unbiased [and] that are consumed equally by liberals and conservatives. Along side them should be other news sources that are tilted in one direction or the other" (France and Lowry, 2004: 111). But it is this idea of bias – giving preference to a particular perspective or ideology – and the belief that all news sources are biased, that has led many people to seek out a "journalism of affirmation," news that not only informs, but conforms with one's political perspective (Greenblatt, 2004: 5).

The Pew Research Center is an independent survey research organization based in Washington, D.C. that asks the public questions
regarding their feelings about the press, politics and policy stances of the United States government. In 2004, Pew conducted a survey of 3,000 American adults, asking them various questions about their news viewing habits. According to the poll, 36 percent of respondents said they sought a news source that shared their view (Dimock, 2004). Though the majority of respondents said they didn’t care whether or not their news source presented content from a particular perspective, the 36 percent who did care was enough for Pew Research Center executives to take note.

“_It isn’t that a majority of the public really wants to see news with a view, but some do,_” said Scott Keeter, director of the Pew Research Center. “_For some conservatives and Republicans, they may feel they have found that in Fox_” (Greenblatt, 2004: 6).

The Fox News Channel hit the broadcast airwaves on October 7, 1996. Since then, it has been a frequent target of political pundits, researchers and columnists as a case study that appeals to a “niche” audience (Della Vigna and Kaplan, 2006; Groseclose and Milyo, 2005; Kull, 2003; Cook, et al, 2004). In the same 2004 Pew Research Center study, respondents seemed to corroborate some researchers’ findings – among them, that Fox News appeals to Republicans more than Democrats, and that Bush supporters overwhelmingly watch Fox News over alternative networks like CNN, a network watched by more Democrats than Republicans (Dimock, 2004). Further, 35 percent of those who watched
Fox News regularly were Republicans. The next most-watched network among Republican respondents was CNN (19 percent).

Terry Eastland, a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, says that the emergence of Fox News Channel came as a result of media moguls listening to a conservative public's complaints; a conservative public that "was being asked to continue to get its news from people who, by and large, held liberal views" (Eastland, 2005: 43). The Fox News Channel, Eastland states, is a member of the new media (the blogosphere, talk radio, and 24/7 cable news), the kind of media that "tends to be more hospitable to conservative views," hence presenting news with a conservative audience in mind. And according to a study done by Steffano Della Vigna and Ethan Kaplan, the Fox News Channel has expanded that conservative audience. In their study, "The Fox News Effect: Media Bias and Voting," (2006), Della Vigna and Kaplan found "significant" evidence in the 9,256 towns examined that the emergence of Fox News Channel on residents' cable programming increased the Republican voting share between 0.4 and 0.7 percent when comparing the 1996 and 2000 election results. Not only was there a greater share of new Republicans in areas where Fox News was airing, but in historically Democratic districts, the Republican voting share increased as well (Della Vigna and Kaplan, 2006: 13). Though Kaplan and Della Vigna submit that these residential areas may have been becoming more conservative in
voting “independent” of the Fox News Channel’s airing, (Della Vigna and Kaplan, 2006: 19), they nonetheless find “a significant effect of exposure to Fox News on voting...suggests that the media can have a sizeable political impact” (Della Vigna and Kaplan, 2006: 20).

The Fox News Channel maintains their coverage is, as their motto states, “fair and balanced,” but these and economic indicators leave some suggesting that the Fox News Channel model – allegedly appealing to a “niche” audiences through content manipulation – is a model worth following if a network wants to increase ratings. For example, since 2000, the Fox News Channel is the only news network that has significantly increased its regular viewership, going from 17 percent to 25 percent (Dimock, 2004: 1). This percentage increase is largely due to an increase in Republican viewership (Dimock, 2004: 1). During George W. Bush’s acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention in 2004, seven million people watched the speech on the Fox News Channel – more than any other broadcast network (DeMoraes, 2004: C07). Further, according to Nielsen Ratings, January 2008 marked the sixth consecutive year the Fox News Channel led the ratings race among cable news outlets (TV Newser, 2008 A). Jeff Cohen, a news analyst for the liberal media watchdog Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), said he was once directed by his superiors to “out-fox Fox” while working for MSNBC,
following Fox News Channel's example of how to attract a "niche" audience (Greenblatt, 2004: 24).

Though Cohen left MSNBC five years ago, news reports indicate that similar tactics may still be taking place at "America's place for politics." For instance, The New York Times reported in November 2007 that MSNBC executives have yielded to the fact that their programming appeals to a more liberal-minded audience – though they claim this wasn’t done intentionally.

"It happened naturally," said Phil Griffin, an NBC executive that is in charge of MSNBC's programming (Steinberg, 2007). MSNBC hasn't overtaken Fox News in the evening news cable ratings war, but honing their programming with a particular audience in mind has increased their ratings share 33 percent in 2007 alone, according to Nielsen (Steinberg, 2007).

MSNBC and the Fox News Channel are not the only networks whose content is appealing to targeted audiences. Again, according to the previously cited 2004 Pew Research Center poll, CNN is another network that seems to be appealing to a specific audience. Twenty-eight percent of those who regularly watch CNN are registered Democrats, versus 19 percent of Republicans who watch regularly. Another news source is CBS Evening News, with 19 percent of the respondents who watch regularly registered as Democrat, versus the 12 percent of those who watch
regularly registered as Republican. Other news programs – *NBC Nightly News*, *ABC World News* and *The News Hour with Jim Lehrer* – had a more balanced viewership among Democrats and Republicans. A study conducted by Shanto Iyengar and Richard Morin supported Pew's poll findings. In their study, Iyengar and Morin passed out several different printed news stories to participants and attached one of four news sources to its headline – Fox News, NPR, CNN and BBC. When the stories were political in nature, such as the war in Iraq, participants that described themselves as either Democrat or Republican preferred reading stories from specific news sources. For Republican participants, they overwhelmingly chose the Fox News piece; for Democrats, they split their preference between CNN and NPR (Iyengar and Morin, 2006).

Some studies argue, however, that if news networks do indeed present content with a particular audience in mind, it is not the audience that makes that determination. Some say it is a function of networks' sources for news content. News organizations are often reliant upon governmental representatives when stories of a political nature are being reported; thus, the perceived slanting of news content is merely a function of what party is in power and what party is the most willing to talk (Sigal, 1973; Gans, 1980; Hallin, 1986; Bennett, 1990; Solely, 1992). Others say that slanting of news content comes from the political ideology of journalists themselves. In Robert Lichter and Richard Noyes'
Good Intentions Make Bad News: Why Americans Hate Campaign Journalism (1995), the authors cite surveys showing a larger proportion of journalists identify with the Democratic Party more than the Republican Party. Others say that because news stories are assigned to reporters and vetted before being printed or broadcasted, content manipulation comes from newspaper editors and broadcast news producers (Page, 1996: 22). But a study published in The New York Times makes the argument that the news media does choose content with the audience in mind. Matthew Gentzkow and Jesse M. Shapiro analyzed all the words spoken by congressmen in the 2005 Congressional Record to see what were the most frequently used words among Democrats and Republicans (Goolsbee, 2006: 3). They then classified the most frequently used words as either “Democrat” or “Republican.”

Next, they analyzed 417 newspapers – approximately 70 percent of the total number of newspapers in circulation in 2006 – to see how often the newspapers used these “partisan” words. For example, did the Deseret Morning News’ stories about Social Security use the Republican word “personal accounts” or the Democratic word “private accounts”? As their hypotheses predicted, papers considered to lean conservative, such as The Washington Times and The Deseret Morning News, used Republican phrases more frequently; while papers considered to lean liberal, like The Boston Globe and The San Francisco Chronicle, used Democratic phrases
more frequently. They came to the conclusion that customers are the predominant force behind news content after looking at the ratio of campaign contributions by zip code, comparing those numbers to the circulation data of specific newspapers by zip code. True to form, the circulation rate of Republican or Democratic-leaning papers corresponded to the amount of Democratic or Republican campaign contributions in the measured areas. For example, circulation rates of The Los Angeles Times were lower in southern California, a region where Republican campaign contributions were high.

Despite Gentzow and Shapiro’s findings, the driving force behind the manipulation of news content will continue to be debated. In the meantime, Gentzow and Shapiro say their results are “good news” (Goolsbee, 2006: 3) – the news media is not taking its cues from the ideological perspectives of its owners or its reporters, but rather the people journalists serve: news consumers. In essence, the news media are simply reflecting what their readers or viewers want to hear.

But a joint study done by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) and Knowledge Networks indicates why that may not be such “good news” after all. PIPA and Knowledge Networks conducted a series of polls from June 2003 through September 2003 to get an impression of the American public’s feelings regarding the United States’ involvement in Iraq. Their data set included the responses of more than
8,600 respondents. What they found was that despite the "consensus view" (Kull, 2003: 2) in the U.S. intelligence community that Saddam Hussein was not involved with al Qaeda or the September 11th attacks, their polling indicated more than half of the respondents (57 percent) believed Iraq was either directly involved in the attacks or "gave substantial support" to those who carried out the attacks (Kull, 2003: 3). Other misperceptions were held by the public as well, including the belief that weapons of mass destruction had been found in Iraq and that world public opinion favored the United States' invasion. To determine where these misperceptions were coming from, respondents were also asked from what source they got their news from most frequently. Among those that held one or more misperception, 80 percent got their news primarily from the Fox News Channel, whereas just 23 percent of those that got their news primarily from PBS held one or more misperception (Kull, 2003: 13).

While these findings may appear damning (the notion that network news sources are dispersing false information), some of PIPA and Knowledge Network's other findings suggest alternative factors might be at play in viewers' misperceptions. For example, misperceptions were highest among Republicans but particularly among those that supported George W. Bush for re-election in 2004 (45 percent misperceived) (Kull, 2003: 18). This suggests political bias might factor into these
misperceptions, not necessarily misleading information reported by Fox News. There were also misperceptions among those that opposed President Bush and planned on voting for the Democratic presidential nominee in 2004, but to a far lesser extent (17 percent misperceived).

Figure 1
News Viewers and the Frequency of Misperceptions Regarding the Justifications for the Iraq Invasion

**Frequency of Misperceptions:**
Evidence of al Qaeda Links, WMD Found, World Public Opinion Favorable

**News viewers with one or more misperception about the war in Iraq**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PBS Viewers</th>
<th>FNC Viewers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: PIPA/Knowledge Networks
Democrats and Republicans have decidedly different opinions of how things ought to be run in the United States and what issues ought to be prioritized. Whether it is health care, education, the environment, dealing with the poor, or simplifying the tax code, opinions vary, and those opinions are often a function of one’s political ideology (Kohut, 2006). Even when it comes to assessing the state of the country’s economy, the answers frequently depend on the person being asked and where their allegiances lie on the political spectrum (Kohut, 2006). According to a 2006 study done by the Pew Research Center that asked self-identified Democrats, Republicans and Independents about the state of the economy, 56 percent of Republicans...
said the economy was in “excellent” shape; among Democrats, however, just 23 percent said it was in “excellent” shape (Figure 2). Similar findings were found in 1999, but at that time, it was more Democrats than Republicans calling the economy “excellent.”

Figure 3 - Partisan Views of the Economy

What explains such differing views over time? Political ideology? Opposition to the sitting president? Perhaps inspired by this question and similar surveys conducted at the time, David Niven attempted to answer these questions in his study “Bias in the News: Partisanship and Negativity in Media Coverage of Presidents George Bush and Bill Clinton” (2001). Over the course of 10 years, Niven performed content analysis of 150 nationwide newspapers and coded the content as either positive or negative, depending on whether the stories credited or blamed the sitting president for the country’s economic state. Niven found that stories were
neither more negative nor more positive for Bush or Clinton, suggesting that the media does not necessarily take party identification into account when reporting on the economy. What he did find, however, was that a higher number of stories were reported under both presidents when the unemployment rate increased. This suggests not so much a partisan bias in the news, but rather a bias toward negativity:

The higher the unemployment rate, the more coverage given to unemployment, the longer the coverage, the more prominently placed the coverage, the more the president is likely to be prominently mentioned and the more negative the coverage is likely to be (Niven, 2001: 39).

Niven's findings indicate that news organizations may not manipulate content per se but may manipulate what news consumers' focus on when it comes to analyzing the economy (Farnsworth and Lichter, 2006: 19).

This theory – that media influence what people think about based on how often and to what extent something is reported – is best illustrated in Marc J. Hetherington study, "The Media's Role in Forming Voters' National Economic Evaluations in 1992" (1996). In his study, Hetherington found that when voters were questioned about the economy, there was "clear evidence" voters' perceptions were "far more negative than the economic data would have anticipated" (Hetherington, 1996: 381). Further, more than 70 percent of the people who voted in that year's
year's election believed the economy was worse in 1992 than in 1991, when in fact the opposite was true. Broadcast news networks' portrayal of the economy in 1992 as negative, despite the improving economy (quoted in Patterson, 1993), may have impacted voters' perceptions. Hetherington's finding that the more voters consumed campaign coverage, the more likely they were to negatively view the economy (Hetherington, 1996: 391) seems to corroborate that statement, for Hetherington's and other studies show a correlation between the media's negative portrayal of the economy and negative consumer sentiment (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2008).

Similar to Niven's study, Hetherington shows how content may not be being manipulated per se, but that the media may be manipulating how people feel about the economy by emphasizing negativity. Such feelings often translate into actions at the voting booth, as Hetherington concluded that voters' retrospective evaluations of the economy were "significantly related" to George H.W. Bush's failed re-election bid (Hetherington, 1996: 372). In essence, the media have the ability to shape reality—whether that reality is best typified by how Democrats view the economy during a Republican presidency or how Republicans view the economy during a Democratic presidency. This "shaping" of reality effectively undermines former CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite's signature send off—"And that's the way it is,"—for the question of "What
happened today?" becomes something of an unknown (Nelson, 2004: 1A).

This shaping of reality, as it were, is further demonstrated in Christopher Hewitt’s “Estimating the Number of Homeless: Media Misrepresentation of an Urban Problem” (1996). In this study, Hewitt looked at a different kind of unknown: the number of homeless in America.

As Hewitt notes in his study, there are several ways in which to estimate the number of homeless at any given time, such as by asking local experts, acquiring attendance figures from homeless shelters around the country or by surveying soup kitchens in cities with high rates of homelessness, such as New Orleans, Atlanta and Washington, D.C. (Jervis, 2008). Because there are so many ways to estimate the number of homeless in America, it is understandable why different organizations have different estimates. In 1991, for example, a Census report estimated 229,000 were homeless on any given night; while the Urban Institute estimated 455,000 were homeless on any given night (Hewitt, 1996: 434). What Hewitt found surprising, though, was the fact that a significant portion of media organizations consistently cited the higher homeless estimates (2 to 3 million, according to a report compiled for a congressional committee by the Community for Creative Non-violence, referenced by Hewitt), despite the “consensus” view among social
scientists that the most reliable range was between 250,000 and 750,000 homeless on any given night (Hewitt, 1996: 438).

Looking at all available articles between 1981 and 1992 that referenced homelessness, Hewitt analyzed content in a variety of periodicals located in the Readers Guide to Periodical Literature. This guide included well-known newspapers and news magazines considered to lean liberal or conservative. Some of the papers and magazines examined included the liberal New Republic and Nation magazines, as well as conservative magazines like National Review and Commentary (Hewitt, 1996: 435). In Hewitt’s analysis, there were 186 references to a homeless estimation made by a study or organization. The estimates ranged from less than 200,000 to as many as 4 million. The homeless number most consistently referenced was the estimation of 3 million homeless on any given night, which originated from a report by the Community for Creative Non-violence. It was cited 53 times (the second most frequent homeless estimation cited was 2 million at 20 times) (Hewitt, 1996: 437).

What was particularly noteworthy in Hewitt’s study and therefore pertinent to this study’s research question – do news organizations manipulate news content in a manner that’s consistent with its “niche” audience – was Hewitt’s finding that the homeless estimate a magazine or periodical most frequently cited depended on the magazine’s
ideological predilections. For example, according to Hewitt’s findings, liberal magazines cited the higher homeless estimation 85 percent of the time, while conservative magazines cited the lower homeless estimation 86 percent of the time (Table 1).

Table 1. Homeless Estimates Cited by Type of Publication (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Magazine</th>
<th>Favor High</th>
<th>Favor Low</th>
<th>(n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Popular magazines</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>(14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal magazines</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>(26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative magazines</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>(28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scientific-Professional</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>(21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York Times</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>(24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington Post</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>(35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>(186)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Hewitt, "Estimating the Number of Homeless: Media Misrepresentation of an Urban Problem"

This finding may shed light on findings from the Pew Research Center (Kohut, 2006), where a greater percentage of Democrats view dealing with problems of the indigent as a top priority than do Republicans – 69 percent vs. 36 percent, respectively (Kohut, 2006: 11).

Based on Hewitt’s findings, it is apparent that just as news organizations seem to target “niche” audiences through hiring practices...
(Carter, 2006), they also seem to target "niche" audiences by utilizing content that confirm certain viewpoints. Though Hewitt doesn't make such a statement in his work, his finding that "liberal periodicals [were] more likely to report the high numbers and conservative periodicals the low ones" suggests it (Hewitt, 1996: 440). Thus, depending on the media organization and its ideological backing, the media seemingly define what is or is not reality.
CHAPTER III

ADDRESSING THE RESEARCH

RESEARCH DESIGN

The previously cited studies, surveys and polls all raise the question if news organizations are appealing to niche audiences through content manipulation. They each use their own set of findings that either confirm or fail to confirm their hypotheses: whether those findings are the media focus on the negative more often than the positive (Niven, 2000; Hewitt, 1996; Hetherington, 1996); news consumers prefer certain news outlets over others (Dimock, 2004); news consumers erroneously interpret data (Kull, 2003); or news outlets erroneously report data (Hewitt, 1996). None of them, though, adequately address this study's specific research question: Does news content appeal to news networks' base of consumers through manipulation? This section will address how this question might be answered through variations of some of the previously cited research. In addition, what is considered a network's base of consumers (their “niche”), what is considered news content, what will be used as cases for study, what time frames will be observed, how this study defines “manipulation,” and how this study will define the variables used
to measure content manipulation will also be addressed.

Answering this study's research question will entail the adoption of a methodology similar to one developed by Niven when he examined the partisan nature of newspapers and their linkage of the unemployment level to the performance of Presidents Bush and Clinton during their respective presidencies. He analyzed the content of 150 different newspapers and coded the content as either "negative" or "positive," depending on how critical or meritorious the article was to the president and his policies. Though Niven didn't find sufficient evidence to suggest newspapers were harsher on one president over another - or more praiseworthy of one president over another - he did find that there were more negative articles than positive ones, particularly when the unemployment levels were at their highest levels under each president. To Niven, this suggests a bias toward negativity, "that bad times merit more attention than...good times" (Niven, 2001: 41).

Like Niven, this study will use "unemployment" as a searchable term, but instead of analyzing content from newspapers, this study will analyze content from transcripts of television news broadcasts that can be found in the Lexis-Nexis database. In addition to "unemployment" as a searchable term, this study will also use "Labor Department" and "employment" as searchable terms. These words are often used when unemployment is not specifically stated in a news broadcast.
This study is using unemployment as an indicator of content manipulation for a number of reasons. One of them is that the economy is consistently among the top national concerns of Americans (Bowman, 1993; Dimock, 2002; Funk, 2005; Kohut, 2006). Further, the state of the economy is something Democrats and Republicans have decidedly differing opinions of; it is therefore capable of being manipulated through a news report’s emphasis on the losses in the manufacturing sector rather than the gains in the healthcare sector, for instance. An example of how Democrats and Republicans have differing opinions of the economy was found in a poll conducted by Pew in February 2008. This poll showed that when Republican and Democratic respondents were asked to describe the state of the economy, a greater percentage of Republicans characterized the economy as being in good shape than did Democrats—30 percent of Republicans while only 9 percent of Democrats characterized the state of the economy as “excellent” or “good” (Kohut, 2008: 36). A potential explanation for this discrepancy in viewpoints of the economy may be due to the party affiliation of the sitting president. When these polls were taken, the sitting president was a Republican, George W. Bush. Party affiliation affects how one views the vitality of the economy and these views are often “an indirect assessment of the
president's job performance" (Fiorina, 1981 quoted in Hetherington, 1996: 379). Once again, polls indicate as such. The same 2008 Pew poll showed that of those who described the economy as being in "poor" or "fair" shape, 46 percent said the president deserved "a great deal of blame." What's more, the percentage of those saying he deserved a great deal of blame split along party lines – 66 percent of Democrats versus 17 percent of Republicans (Kohut, 2008: 9).

A second reason why unemployment is being used as an indicator of content manipulation is because unemployment is frequently used as a metric by the media in assessing the economy's vitality. While the gross domestic product and the consumer confidence index are other ways of gauging the economy's health, the assessment of employment "is probably the single most reliable indicator" in determining whether the economy is headed for a recession (Hall et al., 2001).

But just as there are a number of ways to assess the state of the economy, there are a number of ways news organizations can manipulate content, or that is to say, a number of ways in which they can couch or frame the state of the economy through an unemployment report. For example, the tone of a broadcast, where in a broadcast something is discussed (the placement), how much time is devoted to a topic, or how long it takes a news broadcast to report on something after it becomes public knowledge, are all variables to consider when
determining the extent of content manipulation. These variables can all be applied to the framing of the state of the economy.

While assessing how news organizations frame a story – in this study’s case, the state of the economy – may be an interesting exercise on its face, its relevance goes deeper than sheer intrigue. Indeed, how news organizations frame the state of the economy can influence how people vote. As Hetherington discovered in his study, negative reporting of the economy during George H.W. Bush’s re-election campaign influenced how people voted in 1992. Despite the economic expansion occurring in the months leading up to Election Day, the media focused on the negative aspects of the economy far more than the positive, and news consumers took note (Hetherington, 1996: 372). Hetherington’s finding is relevant to this study, particularly because of the time frame in which this study is being conducted (2008, an election year). Just as the media may have played a role in how people voted in the 1992 presidential election, the media may yet play a role in how people vote in the 2008 presidential election, one of the time frames this study is observing. The justification for the time frames examined in this study will be discussed in greater detail later.

In the meantime, measuring and defining the variables for this study – the tone of the unemployment report, the placement of it in a broadcast, the time devoted to the topic, and how long after the
unemployment report is released by the Labor Department it is reported by news outlets – should help determine the degree of content manipulation among news organizations. These variables will all be operationalized in a scale format. For instance, regarding the tone of the reporting, 1 = very favorable, 2 = favorable, 3 = neutral, 4 = unfavorable, 5 = very unfavorable, 9 = not reported. Assessing the tone of broadcasts will be the most difficult thing to operationalize as assessing tone is highly subjective (Media Observatory, 2006). To ensure some degree of objectivity regarding the assessment of tone, this study will adopt a coding technique similar to one employed by the Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ). The PEJ is an organization affiliated with the Pew Research Center that conducts a number of empirical analyses regarding the performance of the press and other media-related issues. In their analysis of how favorably networks covered the Democratic and Republican candidates for president in 2008, the PEJ assessed tone by analyzing reporters’ use of quotes, assertions made, or innuendos used in how they related to presidential candidates or the story being covered about the presidential candidates. For a story to be considered “positive” or “negative,” the story had to have 1.5 times more positive comments than negative comments or 1.5 times more negative comments than positive comments. In addition, the study gave more weight to the first three paragraphs or first four sentences (whichever came first) of reports
on presidential candidates. These comments were counted twice, as opposed to the others that were counted only once. Comments were coded as “neutral” if the entirety of the report yielded two or three comments, no matter whether the comments were positive or negative. Comments were also coded “neutral” if the number of “positive” and “negative” comments were less than 1.5 times the other (four “positive” comments, five “negative” comments = “neutral”).

This study’s assessment of tone will be quite similar to how the PEJ assessed tone, but with some variations. For starters, because the PEJ study did not define what they counted as “comments,” this study’s will consider “comments” as sentences. Another differentiation will be that instead of counting a newspaper story’s first four comments twice – or in this study’s case, its first four sentences twice – this study will count only the first sentence twice, as news broadcast stories are typically much shorter than newspaper stories (Brooks, 2000: 43). Another variation will be that instead of considering only “favorable” comments, this study will also consider “very favorable” comments. Therefore, comments will be labeled “very favorable” when there are more than two times the number of “positive” comments than “negative” comments and vice versa. The remaining aspect of tone will mirror the Project for Excellence in Journalism’s methodology: calling a story “favorable” if the number of positive sentences are 1.5 times the number of negative sentences (and
vice versa) and calling a story “neutral” if the total number of sentences amounts to two or three, or if the number of positive or negative comments is less than 1.5 times the other.

Broadcasts will be judged “favorable” or “unfavorable” based on the words used to describe the unemployment level or the economy itself. Examples of a broadcast that would be considered “unfavorable” are those that use words like “recession,” “turbulent,” “downturn,” “struggling,” “dismal;” reports that cite the negative aspects of the unemployment report (specific job sectors that lost jobs, like manufacturing, retail, healthcare, etc.); negative quotes from reporters, financial experts, or elites that cite negative aspects and/or prospects of the economy’s function (“For the sputtering economy, January’s job losses are an ominous road sign”) (CBS Evening News with Katie Couric, 2008 A). Examples of a broadcast that would be considered “favorable” are those that use words like “good,” “upbeat,” “growth,” “strong;” citing positive aspects of the unemployment report and positive quotes from reporters, financial experts or elites that credit the economy’s function (“One hundred and ten thousand jobs were created last month, the most since May;” “We have had 49 consecutive months of job creation. That is the longest uninterrupted job growth on record...”) (Special Report with Brit Hume, 2007). Examples of a broadcast that would be considered “neutral” are those that have an equal number of “favorable” or
“unfavorable” number of sentences, when there are less than 1.5 times the number of positive or negative sentences to the other, or when there are two to three sentences in the entire unemployment report ("In MoneyWatch news, unemployment held steady in November at 4.7 percent as the economy created 94,000 jobs. On Wall Street, stocks ended the day...") (CBS Evening News with Katie Couric, 2007).

The second variable measured in this study – placement – will be coded thusly: 1=top story, 2=middle story, 3=end story, 9=not reported. The placement of stories in news broadcasts will be determined by their placement around advertisements. In a 30-minute news broadcast, there are three commercial breaks. A story will be considered “top” if the report comes before the first commercial break. It will be considered “middle” if it comes after the first commercial break or between the second and third commercial break. It will be considered “end” if the report comes just before the third commercial break (discussion or reading of the unemployment report, immediately followed by a commercial break), or after the third commercial break. In a 60-minute broadcast, there are six commercial breaks. A story will be considered “top” if it comes before the first or second commercial break. It will be considered “middle” if it comes between the second and fifth commercial break. It will be considered “end” if it comes after the fifth or sixth commercial break. Though many factors go into the placement of a
news story within a 30 or 60-minute news broadcast – timeliness, impact, interest, relevance (Brooks, 2000: 407) – generally speaking, the placement of stories in a news broadcast is indicative of how prominent news networks believe a story to be (Khan and Hitlin, 2008). This study considers stories high in a broadcast as stories considered to be prominent or worthy of attention; if it is near to the end, the less prominent it is considered to be.

The third variable to be taken into consideration is the day in which unemployment is reported by news outlets. When the unemployment level is reported on – if it is reported at all – will not be uniform on all news broadcasts. One news outlet may report on it the day the Labor Department releases the numbers, another may report on unemployment several days after its release. As such, the day unemployment is reported will be coded thusly: 1=reported on day of release, 2=reported next broadcast, 3=reported two broadcasts later, 4= reported greater than two broadcasts later (up to five days), 9=not reported. Similar to the placement of stories in a news broadcast, the day unemployment is reported reflects how important the news outlet considers it to be. There are exceptions to this rule, of course. For example, a day rife with news – such as a terrorist attack or controversial Supreme Court decision – might cause the unemployment report to go unmentioned. In these cases, it does not suggest that the network considered the report to be
unimportant to its "niche" audience per se, but nonetheless, less important than the news that was reported.

The fourth and final dependent variable taken into consideration is the length of reports on the unemployment level and its impact to the economy. The average length of a broadcast news story is 20 to 30 seconds; they rarely last longer than two minutes (Brooks, 2000: 408). The length of these segments could vary from broadcast to broadcast. As such, the length of stories will be coded thusly: 1 = story 15 seconds or less, 2 = story 16 to 25 seconds, 3 = story longer than 25 seconds, 9 = not reported. Similar to the placement and day of reporting variables, how much time is devoted to the topic of unemployment is indicative of how receptive and how interested news networks consider it to be to news consumers. Several studies done by the Project for Excellence in Journalism suggest that viewers prefer stories that have both breadth and depth, two things that require more time in which to devote to a story (Rosensteil, Gottlieb and Brady, 2000). Thus, the longer a story is, the more important the network considers the report to be, for it is devoting more of its air time to one story when it could be airing others. However, because of the story's perceived importance, more time is devoted to it rather than others. Conversely, the shorter the story is, the less important the network considers the report.
The preceding definitions of variables are all functions of how important news networks consider a story to be (Niven, 2001: 36). More specifically for this study, they are functions of how important news networks consider a story to be to its "niche" audience. And how important a news network considers a story – particularly those political in nature – may boil down to how they portray the president. As the previously mentioned polls indicate, Democrats and Republicans have differing opinions of the economy at any given time, which often depends on the president occupying the White House (Kohut, 2006; 2008). And as Hetherington notes in his study, views of the economy "are an indirect assessment of the president's job performance" (Fiorina, 1981 quoted in Hetherington, 1996: 379).

To determine whether or not news networks frame the state of the economy in ways that correspond to the prevailing viewpoint of its "niche" audience (news outlets with a Democratic audience are likely to report on the economy as being in bad shape under a Republican president, while news outlets with a Republican audience are likely to report on the economy as being in bad shape under a Democratic president), this study will observe time frames where economic conditions were as similar as possible under the presidencies of William J. Clinton and George W. Bush. An analysis of the unemployment and economic conditions under Presidents Clinton and Bush reveal that August 2000 –
January 2001 and September 2007 – February 2008 represent very similar time frames regarding the country’s unemployment and economic conditions (see Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month/Year</th>
<th>Unemployment (%)</th>
<th>Change</th>
<th>Jobs Added/Lost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>August 2000</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>+0.1</td>
<td>100,000 Lost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2000</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>-0.2</td>
<td>250,000 Added</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2000</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td></td>
<td>184,000 Added</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2000</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td></td>
<td>94,000 Added</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2000</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td></td>
<td>133,000 Lost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2001</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>+0.3</td>
<td>268,000 Added</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2007</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td></td>
<td>110,000 Added</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2007</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td></td>
<td>166,000 Added</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2007</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td></td>
<td>94,000 Added</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2007</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>+0.3</td>
<td>18,000 Added</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2008</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>-0.1</td>
<td>17,000 Lost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2008</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>-0.1</td>
<td>63,000 Lost</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

Both time frames had an unemployment indicator that remained fairly consistent throughout the latter portion of the respective years (3.9% under Clinton in 2000, 4.7% under Bush in 2007), both showed four instances of job gains and two instances of job losses during the respective six-month periods, and the unemployment rate jumped three-tenths of a percent heading into the respective new year (3.9% to 4.2% in January 2001; 4.7% to 5.0% in December 2007).

Another reason this study chose these respective time frames was because of the frequency in which the media talked about the economy heading for a recession (CBS Evening News with Katie Couric, 2008 B;
Special Report with Brit Hume, 2001), though in neither case was a recession official. The National Bureau of Economic Research pointed to March as the official starting date of the 2001 recession, (Uchitelle, 2001). As for the 2007 – 2008 time frame and whether it was indeed in a recession, that won’t be known until 2010 or 2011; economists wait several years before officially labeling time frames as recessive (Uchitelle, 2001).

This study’s dependent variables have all been defined and outlined. The variable that has not yet been defined is the independent variable. The independent variable will help define what is to be considered a network’s “niche” audience – its “specialized market” (“niche,” def. 2d, Merriam-Webster’s 11th Collegiate Dictionary) of viewers who gravitate toward specific networks based on how they report on people, issues and stories. Some of the previously mentioned studies and polls suggest Fox News serves as an example of a network that appeals to a “niche” audience (Kull, 2003; Della Vigna and Kaplan, 2006; Dimock, 2004). CNN is another example (Iyengar and Morin, 2006). Findings such as these corroborate and justify the use of the Project for Excellence in Journalism’s analysis as an independent variable.

In their study – The Invisible Primary, Invisible No Longer – the PEJ examined how favorable networks were to Democrats and Republicans. How favorable networks were to Republican and Democratic candidates were represented as percentages; the higher the percentage, the more
favorable a network was to that party; the lower the percentage, the less favorable the network was to that party. For instance, when it came to how favorable networks were to Democrats, CBS ranked highest (45.2% favorable), while Fox News was the least favorable to Democrats (24.2% favorable).

For the purposes of this study, a network’s favorability to Republican and Democratic presidential candidates – and in so doing, determining a news network’s “niche” audience – will be established by subtracting the negative favorability percentages from the positive favorability percentages for each party. Subtracting the answers from those numbers will yield each network’s favorability percentage (for example, on CBS, 45.2% of stories were positive toward Democratic candidates, 16.1% of stories were negative toward Democratic candidates. 45.2-16.1=29.1. For Republicans on CBS, 14.3% of stories were positive, 42.9% were negative. 14.3-42.9=-28.6. 29.1- -28.6=57.7→CBS’ favorability percentage). The higher the percentage, the more favorable a network was to Democrats. Conversely, the lower the percentage, the more favorable a network was to Republicans. As the table indicates (see Table 3), CBS was the most favorable to Democrats; while Fox News was the least favorable to Democrats. On the flip side, Fox News was the most favorable toward Republicans; while CBS was the least favorable to Republicans. The most neutral network was NBC.
Table 3 - News Networks’ Favorability Toward Democratic and Republican Presidential Candidates  
(High % = Favorable to Dems; Low % = Favorable to GOP)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NTWK</th>
<th>(% of Positive Stories - % of Negative Stories for Each Party) = DEM% - GOP% = Network Favorability %</th>
<th>NTWK %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CBS</td>
<td>(DEM→ 45.2-16.1 = 29.1, GOP→ 14.3-42.9 = -28.6) 29.1 - -28.6 = 57.7 57.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>(DEM→ 40.9-18.2 = 22.7, GOP→ 16.7-33.3 = -16.6) 22.7 - -33.3 = 39.3 39.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNN</td>
<td>(DEM→ 27.7-23.2 = 4.5, GOP→ 13.5-40.5 = -27.0) 4.5 - -27.0 = 31.5 31.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NBC</td>
<td>(DEM→ 30.4-17.4 = 13.0, GOP→ 23.5-35.3 = -11.8) 13.0 - -11.8 = 24.8 24.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSNBC</td>
<td>(DEM→ 47.2-18.7 = 28.5, GOP→ 37.8-29.6 = 8.2) 28.5 - 8.2 = 20.3 20.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBS</td>
<td>(DEM→ 8.3-25.0 = 16.7, GOP→ 0.0-22.2 = -22.2) -16.7 - -22.2 = 5.5 5.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FNC</td>
<td>(DEM→ 24.2-36.8 = 12.6, GOP→ 32.0-21.3 = 10.7) -12.6 - 10.7 = -23.3 -23.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from PEJ’s *The Invisible Primary, Invisible No Longer, 2008*

The Project for Excellence in Journalism’s analysis of news networks’ favorability toward Democrats and Republicans in the 2008 presidential campaign serves as a good independent variable in determining the extent of content manipulation among networks because the numbers reflect how favorable or unfavorable networks were to presidential candidates; more specifically, they reflect how favorable networks were to candidates’ political parties. And since news audiences are becoming increasingly divided among Republicans and Democrats (Dimock, 2004; Kull, 2003, et al), the PEJ’s analysis can serve as a reflection of news networks’ base of watchers – those that watch the network that best represent his or her own political viewpoints (Greenblatt, 2004: 5).

The cases used in this study are largely determined by its independent variable. The Project for Excellence in Journalism
determined networks’ favorability to Republicans and Democrats, in part, by observing the nightly news broadcasts on seven different networks: CBS, ABC, NBC, MSNBC, Fox News, CNN and PBS. This study will therefore use some of the same news programs as its case studies: CBS Evening News, ABC World News, NBC Nightly News, Hardball with Chris Matthews on MSNBC, Special Report with Brit Hume on Fox News, The Situation Room with Wolf Blitzer on CNN and The News Hour with Jim Lehrer on PBS. Like the time frames used, accurately answering this study’s research question requires as close to an equal sampling of cases for study as possible.

ABC World News, CBS Evening News, and NBC Nightly News seem to fit that bill because they all have similar news broadcasts – they air at the same time (6:30 pm); they have similar news reporting styles (straight reporting intermingled with investigative and feature stories); and they garner a larger share of viewers than their morning news counterparts (NBC Nightly News attracts 2.3 million more viewers than the Today show, ABC World News garners 3.5 million more viewers than Good Morning America, and CBS Evening News draws 2.7 million more viewers than The Early Show) (TV Newser, 2008 B; 2008 C). The remaining news networks’ evening broadcasts – The Situation Room, Special Report and Hardball – also present similar broadcast news formats relative to each other. While these news programs air at three different times and vary in length (The Situation Room airs from 4 pm to 7 pm, Hardball airs from 7 pm to 8 pm,
and Special Report airs from 6 pm to 7 pm), all of the network programs' stories are political in nature and feature segments where political analysts discuss and debate a variety of topics. Further, their contemporaries (Larry King Live at CNN, Countdown with Keith Olbermann at MSNBC and The O’Reilly Factor at Fox News) are news programs with content that is highly tinged with the host's opinion or with content that revolves around its guests (Carter, 2006; Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2006). Though it can be argued that this study's selection of news programs have hosts that inject personal opinion throughout a broadcast – unlike the network news programs, for the most part – it is done to a lesser extent than their contemporaries. For example, according to the Project for Excellence in Journalism and their findings, Special Report with Brit Hume on Fox News presented news "in a manner closer to that of traditional broadcast news" than the other broadcasts analyzed. These broadcasts included MSNBC’s Countdown, whose content was "filtered through [host Keith Olbermann’s] own 'take;'" CNN’s Larry King Live, “where most of the focus was on his guests rather than viewpoints;” and Fox News’ The O’Reilly Factor, “which was mostly about [Bill] O’Reilly (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2006).

The sole exception to observing these news programs is with CNN in 2000 and 2001. At that time, The Situation Room had yet to air (August 5, 2005 was the first airing of The Situation Room). The nearest equivalent to
a CNN evening news broadcast in the 2000 – 2001 time frame was The
Money Line News Hour, which aired at 6:30 weekdays on CNN. Thus, The
Money Line News Hour will be observed in place of The Situation Room in
the 2000 – 2001 time frame.
CHAPTER IV

PREDICTING THE OUTCOME

Statement of Hypotheses

This chapter will address what this study expects to find with regards to how changes in the independent variable will affect the dependent variables. To be more specific, this section will hypothesize about how changes in a network's "niche" audience (as represented by the Project for Excellence in Journalism's findings) will affect the way in which news content is reported.

H1. The Project for Excellence in Journalism ranks how favorably networks are towards Republicans and Democrats. Their analysis indicates Fox News to be the most favorable network toward Republicans and CBS to be the most favorable network toward Democrats, followed by ABC, CNN, NBC, MSNBC and PBS. In short, its analysis finds that networks, on the whole, are more favorable in tone toward Democrats than Republicans, as the favorability percentages indicate. Therefore, this study believes Fox News will be the most favorable network toward the Bush administration in its coverage of unemployment. The other networks will be more favorable toward the Clinton administration in tone.
H1. There will be no difference in tone of unemployment reports among
the networks observed in either the Bush administration or the Clinton
administration.

H2. During the Bush administration, when the tone of story is “favorable”
or “very favorable,” GOP-favoring networks will have reports that are long
in length (greater than 25 seconds), prominently featured (a top story),
and mentioned the day the unemployment figures are released by the
Labor Department. When the tone is “unfavorable” or “very
unfavorable,” reports will be short (less than 25 seconds), less prominently
featured (a middle or end story), and reported later than the day the
unemployment figures are released by the Labor Department.
Democratic-favoring networks will do just the opposite. When the tone of
story is “favorable” or “very favorable,” reports will be short, less
prominently featured and reported later than the day the unemployment
figures are released by the Labor Department. When the tone of story is
“unfavorable” or “very unfavorable,” reports will be long, more
prominently featured, and reported the day the unemployment figures
are released by the Labor Department.

H2a. During the Bush administration, there will be no difference among
networks in the length of stories, prominence of stories or the day that
unemployment is reported.
H3. During the Clinton administration, when the tone of story is "favorable or "very favorable," Democratic-favoring networks will have reports that are long in length (greater than 25 seconds), prominently featured (a top story), and mentioned the day the unemployment figures are released by the Labor Department. When the tone is "unfavorable" or "very unfavorable," reports will be short (less than 25 seconds), less prominently featured (a middle or end story) and reported later than the day the unemployment figures are released by the Labor Department. GOP-favoring networks will do just the opposite. When the tone of coverage is "unfavorable" or "very unfavorable," reports will be long, prominently featured and reported the day the unemployment figures are released by the Labor Department. When the tone is "favorable" or "very favorable," reports will be short, less prominently featured and reported later than the day the unemployment figures are released by the Labor Department.

H30. During the Clinton administration, there will be no difference among networks in the length of stories, prominence of stories or the day that unemployment is reported.
CHAPTER V

ANALYSIS

This study is attempting to discover whether news outlets manipulate news content to suit their “niche” audience; in other words, do news networks essentially skew unemployment reports in a manner that corresponds to the viewpoints of their target audience (In CBS’ audience case, that the economy is struggling under a Republican president; in Fox News’ audience case, that the economy is struggling under a Democratic president). Based on the analysis, the tone of coverage among networks seems to follow in a fashion similar to the Project for Excellence in Journalism’s findings regarding networks’ favorability toward Democrats and Republicans.¹

The tone of coverage under both administrations leans more “unfavorable” than “favorable.” As Figure 4 indicates, though there were some instances where there was “very favorable” (NBC) coverage, the coverage leans more “unfavorable” than “favorable.” Fox News, which the PEJ predicted would be the most negative network toward the Clinton administration, cannot be accurately determined as there was

¹ Due to the small sample size of this study, no statistical tests were conducted to determine the statistical significance of this study’s findings. This and other findings are therefore limited by the fact that they may be due to chance or error.
only one instance in which they reported on unemployment. CBS, while they did report "unfavorably" during this time period, were more "neutral" than anything, reporting "very unfavorably" only once in January. The network most different from the Project for Excellence in Journalism's findings was ABC – a network believed to be more "favorable" toward Democrats than Republicans, according to the PEJ's analysis. Their unemployment reports were consistently "very unfavorable" throughout the Clinton administration, a Democratic president. On the other hand, what did seem to follow the PEJ's analysis of tone were the networks NBC, CNN and CBS. The unemployment rate jumped three tenths of a percent between December 2000 and January 2001 (the unemployment report
for the previous month comes out the following month), and all three networks did not report "unfavorably" on the unemployment rate in February 2001. PBS – a network that leans more favorably toward Republicans, according to the PEJ’s analysis – were "very unfavorable" in their coverage of unemployment in February 2001.

During the Bush administration, the networks, on the whole, were more "unfavorable" in their coverage. Fox News, as predicted, was the most "favorable" network in tone during the Bush administration; there were more instances where the tone of coverage was "favorable" or "very favorable" compared to the other networks. These findings support the Project for Excellence in Journalism’s finding – that Fox News will be more "favorable" in coverage during the Bush administration than the others.

Throughout the six months of coverage, ABC, NBC and CBS all followed very similar paths of coverage, starting off by reporting favorably and reporting more unfavorably with each passing month. CNN reported most unfavorably, never giving a report that was either "favorable" or "very favorable" in the six-month period. Thus, this study’s results are similar to the Project for Excellence in Journalism’s favorability percentages, in that the majority of the networks were more "favorable" in their coverage of the Clinton administration than the Bush administration.
A clearer picture of this trend can be seen in Figures 6 and 7, which describe how the majority of the networks trend more unfavorably in 2007-2008 than in 2000-2001. The favorability scores of each network were attained by calculating the mean score of each network's tone of coverage in the months observed. In Figure 6, with the exception of Fox News and ABC, all the networks trend more negatively over time. Fox News remained consistent in its reporting, though the lack of unemployment reports during the Clinton administration somewhat limits the reliability of this finding.
Figure 6 - Declining Tone in Coverage among Networks between 2000-2001; 2007-2008

Tone of Reporting by Network: Most Liberal to Most Conservative (Pew)

ABC reported more favorably over time, which goes contrary to the PEJ's findings (the potential reasons for this are discussed in greater detail in the next chapter).

Figure 7 shows how the unexpected tone of coverage in ABC's case – and the lack of coverage in Fox News' case - affected what was expected to be the tone of coverage among networks with the observed tone of coverage. The bottom of Figure 7 lists the networks in the order that the PEJ coded as networks leaning more Democratic or more Republican; CBS leaning the most to the left (liberal), Fox News leaning the most to the right (conservative). The red line, which represents the
tone of reports during the Bush administration, ought to become progressively favorable from left to right, trending upward at each interval (see "expected" dash lines). True to form, during the Bush administration, this study resembles the expected tone of coverage among networks according to the PEJ's analysis. The same cannot be said for the dark blue line, which represents the tone of reports during the Clinton administration. If the PEJ's analysis were to be a truly accurate indicator, the dark blue line ought to become progressively unfavorable, trending downward at each interval. In reality, it starts high but drops sharply with ABC; their coverage remained "unfavorable" throughout the observed time period. It also finishes high with Fox News, the opposite of what was to be expected based on PEJ's analysis. But again, due to the fact that there was only one occasion in which Fox News reported on unemployment, a report that this study coded as "neutral," it is difficult to tell with any real accuracy whether or not Fox News' reportage would have trended favorably or unfavorably over time.
Another particularly noteworthy finding was the length of segments and the correlation they had to tone. During both administrations, the networks' segments on unemployment were longer when the tone of the segment was negative, independent of the favorability percentages each network had toward Republicans (Bush) and Democrats (Clinton), as this study hypothesized. After performing a cross-tabulation of the data, during the Clinton administration, 67 percent of the stories that were 25 seconds or longer in length were “unfavorable” in tone, as opposed to...
just 7 percent of the stories 25 seconds or longer that were “favorable” in
tone.

The dichotomy is even more pronounced under the Bush administration. In the 2007-2008 time frame, 82 percent of the stories that were 25 seconds or longer were “unfavorable,” and none of the “favorable” reports were 25 seconds or longer. This trend supports the Project for Excellence in Journalism’s finding that news networks are, on the whole, more favorable toward Democrats than Republicans, in that there were fewer instances of “very unfavorable” coverage during the Clinton administration than during the Bush administration.
The news media's preference for the negative is also demonstrated in the placement of news stories in broadcasts. Under both administrations, "unfavorable" stories were top stories more often than "favorable" stories were. This time, however, there were more "unfavorable" top stories under the Clinton administration than under the Bush administration.

As Figure 10 shows, 67 percent of the reports considered "unfavorable" were top stories and the few stories that were coded as "favorable" came either in the middle or at the end of the broadcast. The "favorable" unemployment reports during the Bush administration, meanwhile, did get some top-story attention (14 percent), but here, too,
the lion’s share of the top stories were “unfavorable” (59 percent) (see Figure 11).

Based on this study’s analysis, the one truly reliable indicator in determining the way in which content is “manipulated” is how negative or “unfavorable” its tone is. With very few exceptions, the more “unfavorable” an unemployment report was, the longer and more prominently placed it was, which demonstrates what Niven found in his study – “bad times seem to merit more attention than good times” (Niven, 2001: 31). This being the case, this study added an additional variable to better identify the manner in which unemployment reports were reported.

Figure 10 – Correlation between Placement and Tone of Reports, 2000-2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tone of Story by Placement of Story 2000-2001 (Clinton)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Tone of Story Graph" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Favorable
- Neutral
- Unfavorable
given the fact that each unemployment report released by the Labor Department is composed of two central parts: (1) how many jobs were added or lost to the economy and (2) whether or not the unemployment rate increased or decreased.

To see where the focus of each report was – whether the focus was primarily on the jobs or the unemployment rate – and how the focus correlated to tone, the researcher of this study went back over the transcripts and coded each report with a number of 1 through 5. The number “1” signified that the report focused entirely on jobs (No mention of the unemployment rate), a “3” signified the report focused on jobs and
the unemployment rate equally and a "5" signified the report focused entirely on the unemployment rate (no mention of the jobs added or lost to the economy). As Table 4 indicates, under both administrations, the focus tended to be on the jobs added or lost, not the unemployment rate, which remained constant throughout most of each of the time frames observed. This supports what James Stimson had to say about the news media and what the news media considers news in his book, Public Opinion in America (1999): "Change is news; stability isn't" (Quoted in Nadeau et al., 1999: 118). And once again, what also appears to be news is negativity. Under the Clinton administration, when the focus was on jobs, 67 percent of the stories were "unfavorable," highlighting the loss of jobs overall, in individual sectors, or the small number of jobs created within those sectors. The number of "unfavorable" stories that focused on jobs was even more pronounced during the Bush administration – 79 percent of the reports were "unfavorable." There was a fair number of reports that focused on the unemployment rate, but when the unemployment rate was reported, they were mostly "neutral" ("neutral" reports were those where the unemployment rate was mentioned without any editorial comments going along with it). Under the Clinton administration, only two of the 24 unemployment reports were "favorable" when the focus was on the unemployment rate. Under the Bush administration, there was only one report of the 36 where the focus was
on the unemployment rate, and that one occasion was coded as "neutral" in tone.

Table 4. Percentage of Stories that Focused on Jobs or Unemployment Rate and their Correlation to Tone

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2000-2001 (Clinton)</th>
<th>2007-2008 (Bush)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Focus on Jobs</td>
<td>Eventy Split</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favorable</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>22% (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>33% (2)</td>
<td>44% (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfavorable</td>
<td>67% (4)</td>
<td>33% (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100% (6)</td>
<td>100% (9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|                  | Focus on Jobs | Eventy Split | Focus on Rate | Total |
| Favorable        | 16% (3)       | 19% (3)      | 0% (0)        | 17% (6) |
| Neutral          | 5% (1)        | 56% (9)      | 100% (1)      | 31% (11) |
| Unfavorable      | 79% (15)      | 25% (4)      | 0% (0)        | 53% (19) |
| Total            | 100% (19)     | 100% (16)    | 100% (1)      | 100% (36) |
One might expect a tendency to report more frequently and with more attention on the negative if there were more jobs lost than jobs gained. But in reality, under both administrations, there were more instances of jobs being added to the economy than jobs being lost. For instance, there were eight occasions in which jobs were added to the economy under Presidents Bush and Clinton – generally an indication of a strong economy. Likewise, there were eight instances where the unemployment report was reported favorably when adding up all the “favorable” reports among the networks observed. But as Table 4 and Figure 12 demonstrate, there were 29 instances where the unemployment report was reported unfavorably, despite only four occasions in which jobs were lost.

Figure 12 – How Favorably or Unfavorably News Outlets Report on Employment Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Labor Dept. Report</th>
<th>News Outlet Report</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jobs Added</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobs Lost</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Favorable&quot; Jobs Reports</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Unfavorable&quot; Jobs Reports</td>
<td></td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A review of several transcripts in both the Clinton and Bush administrations reveals examples of reports that were "unfavorable," even when jobs were added to the economy. For instance, on the October 6, 2000 broadcast of ABC World News with Peter Jennings, the report focused on the economic slowdown in the technology sector - even though the unemployment rate dropped two tenths of a percent and 250,000 jobs were added to the economy:

"Stocks continued their slide today, following news that the unemployment rate had dropped...the anxiety level on Wall Street ratcheted up another notch this week as the marquis technology companies investors have counted on join the ranks of those disappointing the Street instead. This week the bad news was from Dell, Xerox and Apple - all warning that sales are slowing and future growth is uncertain" (ABC World News Tonight with Peter Jennings, 2000).

On the January 4, 2008 broadcast of CBS Evening News with Katie Couric, while the unemployment rate did increase three tenths of a percent, 18,000 jobs were added to the economy. Nevertheless, the report focused on the negative aspects of the unemployment report:

"Tonight, there are more signs of a looming recession. Unemployment edged up to five percent last month, the highest rate in two years...and there's real concern the economy has stopped creating jobs...the economy added a meager 18,000 jobs, its worst showing in more than four years...‘Anytime the economy slows down the way it has, you’re at a much higher risk that something else will come out of left field and knock you over the edge’ (quoting an economic expert) (CBS Evening News with Katie Couric, 2008 B).
As these and other transcripts indicate, news reports seem to give greater attention to the negative aspects of unemployment reports than the positive aspects.

The one variable that showed no real difference in the time frames or among the networks observed was the day in which unemployment was reported. In the 60 occasions in which unemployment was reported among the networks, the unemployment report was mentioned the day of its release by the Labor Department 56 times.

In summary, regarding the first hypothesis, there is some evidence supporting this study's first working hypothesis: that news networks, on the whole, are more favorable in tone toward Democrats than Republicans, the exception being Fox News, as hypothesized. What differed from the hypothesis and the PEJ's analysis was ABC, which was more "unfavorable" during the Clinton administration than expected. Again, some plausible reasons why this may have happened are discussed in the next chapter.

Regarding the remaining hypotheses, we fail to reject the null hypotheses and reject the working hypotheses. Based on this study's analysis, there is essentially no difference among the networks observed in the length of unemployment stories or their prominence in their respective broadcasts based on how favorable or unfavorable the networks are considered to be toward Democrats and Republicans during the Bush or
Clinton administration. The only reliable indicator in determining how long or prominently placed the reports were was how “unfavorable” they were in tone. The more “unfavorable” an unemployment report was, the longer it was and the more likely it was a top story rather than a story that came at the end or in the middle of a broadcast. While all the networks trended more “unfavorable” than “favorable” in their coverage of unemployment reports during both administrations, the reports were more “unfavorable” during the Bush administration than during the Clinton administration. In that respect, it supports this study’s first hypothesis, in that networks are more “favorable” toward Democrats than Republicans. Regarding Fox News, again, it is hard to determine with any reliability how “unfavorable” Fox News was during the Clinton administration due to the lack of unemployment reports in 2000-2001. But during the Bush administration, Fox News reported more favorably than the other networks.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Through content analysis, this study has examined whether news networks manipulate news content in a manner that reflects what its "niche" audience believes. While this may seem a meaningless exercise, its potential impact is anything but meaningless. News audiences' perceptions of reality are shaped by the things the media present. If news outlets reflect what its viewers desire to see – or if they emphasize an issue more than one would expect (Goidel and Langley, 1995: 313) – it has the potential of impacting how people vote and how one will participate in a democracy (Lee, Morretti and Butler, 2004; Hetherington, 1996; Ramsden, 1996). This study has used polls and studies to demonstrate that Democrats and Republicans gravitate toward specific networks (Dimock, 2004; Kull, 2003) and that these audiences often have decidedly different opinions on the effectiveness or vitality of something such as the economy (Kohut, 2006). As the previously cited polls and studies suggest, these differing viewpoints are often determined by which party holds the office of president.

To gauge how, or if, networks manipulate content in a manner that reflect its audiences viewpoints, this study used analysis from the
Project for Excellence in Journalism, which analyzed how “favorable” networks were to Republicans and Democrats. It adopted the PEJ’s analysis as its independent variable, assuming that the more “favorable” a network was to the Republican or Democratic Party, the more likely it was that partisan news audiences would gravitate toward that network (Republicans toward Fox News; Democrats toward CBS). This study also assumed that the more “favorable” a network was to a Democratic or Republican candidate, the more likely it was that its coverage of economic news (in the form of unemployment data) would be reported favorably or unfavorably, depending on the network’s “niche” audience and which party held the presidency during the observed time period. As the analysis portion of this study discovered, the assumption of tone among networks largely held true, with one particularly notable exception: ABC.

The differentiation of ABC’s tone for this study compared to the PEJ’s may have had something to do with the change in anchors over the two time periods: from Peter Jennings to Charles Gibson. Perhaps with the change in anchors came a news policy change in what would and would not be reported, what would and would not be emphasized. The same reasoning cannot be applied to MSNBC’s or Fox News’ lack of unemployment reports, as both Brit Hume and Chris Matthews were the anchors of Special Report and Hardball, respectively, in 2000-2001.
However, it can at the very least be theorized that both *Special Report* and *Hardball* eventually decided to incorporate reports on the employment rate into their news broadcasts as a new way to add to their reporting repertoire or as a way to appeal to their own "niche" (Based on the content analysis of transcripts from MSNBC's *Hardball* during 2007-2008, discussion or reporting on the unemployment rate came in the middle of the broadcast during their "Market Wrap" segment; there was no such segment in 2000-2001). In the case of Fox News, as previously cited polls and reports indicate, it is a network popular with Republicans, a "niche" that seems to have developed after the Clinton years, as far as ratings go (Fox News Channel had the highest news ratings for both the 2004 and 2008 Republican National Conventions) (Svetkey, 2004; Shea, 2008). Perhaps that knowledge influenced editorial policy to start introducing more news commentary and content that tended to favor Republicans, as this study's and the PEJ's content analysis indicates.

Editorial policy is another potential explanation for ABC's more favorable coverage than expected in the 2007-2008 time frame and the less favorable coverage than expected in the 2000-2001 time frame. According to Politico's Michael Calderone, Jessica Yellin, a former ABC News and MSNBC reporter, was pushed by news executives not to do hard-hitting news pieces on the Bush administration. The original assumption was that this pressure came from ABC News executives, but
Yellin later clarified that this pressure was from CNN executives, not ABC News (Calderone, 2008). When this study’s researcher contacted ABC News, it was made apparent that the current news director, Eric Siegel, has been the news director at ABC News for 10 years, and no editorial changes had been made in that time. When asked to clarify what might explain why this study’s analysis of tone veered from the PEJ’s analysis of tone so significantly, Siegel dismissed the idea that ABC News had a “niche” audience and that assessing tone (content manipulation) is more a function of the researcher’s “hidden biases” than biases from news organizations themselves (Siegel, 2008).

Whether that’s the case or not, the tone among networks largely held true to the PEJ’s analysis, but the remainder of this study’s hypotheses (correlation between tone and length, placement and day of reporting among networks) were not borne out.

Due to the paucity of supported hypotheses, does this nullify the notion that news networks manipulate content to suit their “niche” audience? Not necessarily. There are a number of things that could have been done differently to better determine the accuracy of its thesis, if it had the ability to go back in time or had unlimited resources in which to work with. One of them would be by using an independent variable more representative of this study’s hypotheses.
This study theorized that Fox News would be more positive in reporting on the economy under the Bush administration than under the Clinton administration, largely based on the Project for Excellence in Journalism's analysis of how favorably networks covered Democratic and Republican presidential candidates. In the PEJ's analysis, Fox News was a favorable network toward Republican candidates. While this study's findings indicated this to be largely true during the Bush administration, the lack of coverage during the Clinton administration leaves the reliability of its finding somewhat lacking. A perhaps more representative analysis to use – and one that would have no doubt had better coverage – would be one that examined how favorably networks like Fox News covered the Bush and Clinton administrations themselves. Though this study justified the use of the Project for Excellence in Journalism's analysis based on the fact it examined Republican and Democratic presidential candidates – something Bush and Clinton were at one time, thus applicable to their presidencies – one wonders if an analysis of the coverage of the Bush/Clinton administrations themselves might have yielded different results. These results could then be applied as a new independent variable.

Another potential change worth considering for future study is the use of a different metric in how the media gauge the state of the economy. While employment is one indicator in gauging the state of the
economy, there are several other economic indicators, including real GDP, aggregate hours of work, real personal income, interest rates, new home sales, the stock market and consumer confidence sentiment (Hall et al., 2001). While assessing the country's employment situation may be the "single most reliable indicator" (Hall et al., 2001) of the state of the economy – particularly whether or not it is headed for a recession – the observed media outlets may frame the state of the economy differently using different indices. Future studies on this topic would be wise to consider using a different metric.

Something else future studies might consider is using a larger time frame sample for analysis. This study used the narrow time frame it did because of limited resources and because it represented as close to similar rates of unemployment respective to each other. A more representative sample would be a larger time frame, perhaps a year of economic coverage in each respective presidency, and be years that were either close to an election or far removed from an election. In this study's two time frames, while similar economically, they were not similar politically (as made mention to this study's researcher by UNH Political Science professor Dante Scala) (Scala, 2008); this may have skewed the results and the manner in which the media focused on the economy. For example, one time frame was a year away from a presidential election (Bush time frame); the other was in the immediate run-up to a presidential
election (Clinton time frame). The level of attention paid to the economy by the media often differs in such time frames, as the public often considers the economy chief among their concerns in election years (Kohut, 2008). However, this reasoning doesn't explain why so many news stations chose not to report on the unemployment level in the Clinton time frame this study observed (during a presidential election). It may have something to do with the news at the time. In this study's interview of ABC's news director, Siegel said that the placement and determination of whether or not certain stories are reported is largely determined by what other news is happening in the world at that time (Siegel, 2008). It is the decision of many different news directors as to what is and is not worth reporting to its audience. What specific factors are considered in what is and is not reported is beyond the scope of this study, but certainly worthy of further inquiry.

Perhaps the most effective way in which to gauge content manipulation (if any) and what effect it had on its audience would be through compiling one's own sample of viewers. This, of course, would take a substantial amount of resources to accomplish, but one would better be able to identify: (1) how, for instance, Fox News and CBS news audiences view the state of the economy and (2) whether their opinion of the economy changed or remained the same after watching Fox News or CBS for an extended period of time. The problem here, though, is the
participants would have to participate in time frames far removed from each other (2000-2001; 2007-2008) and there’s the possibility that one’s political perspective changes in those intervening years. Further, the reliability of the results would likely be minimal due to the Hawthorne effect, or the impact the observer has on the observed. In short, the observed might alter his or her true opinion about the state of the economy if the observed knows he or she is being observed. This is why Geddes says one must be careful when choosing cases for study as they can often affect the reliability of the answer (Geddes, 2003).

No test, no study is perfect, including this one. Despite this study’s shortcomings, its findings are nevertheless relevant to anyone that consumes the news. While this study did not find that news outlets manipulate content to “niche” audiences in as precise a manner as it originally theorized, it did find that news outlets put much more emphasis on the negative. With little exception, an unemployment report coded unfavorably was a top news story and had more time devoted to it than if the unemployment report was coded favorably. Previous studies suggest that broadcasting bad news, scandal and controversy generate large audiences (Robinson, 1983); good news for news outlets’ bottom line, but bad news for democracy. News outlets’ decisions to emphasize or ignore news, such as the employment level, affect consumers’ views by defining the nature of a good story or bad story (Hewitt, 1996). Because news
outlets control the nature and manner in which information is released, news consumers pay more attention to the issues “bathed in media glare” (Ramsden, 1996) rather than issues given only a glimmer’s worth of attention. The media’s “bathing” in poor economic news may explain why 66 percent of the public believed the economy was headed for a recession in 2007 – despite 70 percent feeling comfortable with their own economic situation (Reuters, 2007) – and why 80 percent of the public believe the economy is headed for a recession in 2008 (Kohut, 2008). Even though the Commerce Department released data in April 2008 indicating the economy’s GDP grew 0.6 percent in the first quarter of 2008, that workers’ compensation grew 0.7 percent, and the civilian labor force hit a new all-time high with 154 million people employed, the data was couched in a negative light, using words like “only” 0.6 percent growth, that the economy “limped” ahead, that the economy is “bruised” and “weak” and that businesses and people are being forced to “hunker down” because the economy is “stuck in a rut” (Aversa, 2008).

Though the ideal is news consumers are already knowledgeable about the state of the economy and don’t need to rely on media reports to tell them how the economy is functioning, the reality is that news consumers are likely to have this kind of information only if the media provide it. To take the economy as an example, if media organizations put too much focus on economic indicators that don’t necessarily reflect
the economy's condition - through unemployment reports, for instance - consumers may make voting decisions based on imperfect criteria (Ramsden, 1996: 66). Hetherington and other scholars found this to be the case in examining how the media presented the economy during the 1992 election - the observed networks' portrayal of the economy got worse as the economy improved (Patterson, 1993: 113). Goidel and Langley came to similar conclusions in their analysis of news content in 1992, but in their own independent analysis of news content over a longer period, from 1981-1992, found the media's portrayal of the economy reflected real economic conditions more often than not (Goidel and Langley, 1995: 321). Despite the media's general accuracy in describing the state of the economy, Goidel and Langley found that the latitude with which the media can describe the economy's function (unemployment data, consumer sentiment, GDP) focused "disproportionately" on bad economic news (Goidel and Langley, 1995: 320). And because consumers tend to have more of a focus on future economic conditions than past economic conditions, focusing disproportionately on negative economic news can impact consumers' future impressions of the economy, and will take those impressions into account on Election Day. As MacKuen and Kull found in their 1992 study, expectations of how the economy will function, rather than how it did function, is the best determinant of who is best fit to be president or what
the approval ratings are for the sitting president (Goidel and Langley, 1995: 314). But as appears to have been the case in 1992, a misinformed citizen can lead to a misinformed vote – compromising the role of the media in U.S. elections (Dautrich and Hartley, 1999: 112).

As previous studies have demonstrated, what news outlets stress as important issues, news consumers also stress as important. If news outlets don’t consider economic issues to be of much importance, that often translates to voters not taking into consideration a presidential candidate’s economic prowess (Campbell, 2001; Dimock, 2004). After all, what is portrayed by news outlets as reality is often perceived of as reality (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Patterson, 1994). Citizens' reactions to “reality,” thus, depend on how reality is framed (Farnsworth and Lichter, 2007).

This is not to suggest that the media portray a false reality. For example, with regards to the economy, with little exception (as in 1992), the media reflect real economic conditions, as Goidel and Langley determined. But almost without exception, media organizations don’t pay as much attention to positive economic indicators as negative economic indicators. Why? As Barbara Headrick and David Lanoue explain in their 1991 study, consumers of the news media pay more attention to economic downturns than to economic booms (Headrick and Lanoue, 1991: 70). But it is difficult to know whether this increased attention results from viewers' preference for the negative or if the
increased attention is really that of the news media's and the subsequent imbalance of coverage they present – more negative news segments about the economy than positive news segments. After all, how much time the news media dedicates to the economy is never static (Goidel and Langley, 1995: 325). As Siegel noted, the news that happens on any given day is always changing, and that fact often determines what news stories are given the most time, where stories are discussed in a broadcast or if they will even be discussed at all. To borrow a metaphor from a previous study on the topic (McCubbins and Schwartz, 1984), the media's focus on the economy is similar to that of a firefighter's focus while on the job: dedicating more time, haste and attention to something when an alarm sounds – such as when the unemployment rate goes up – compared to when things are calm and without incident – such as when the unemployment rate remains unchanged.

It might be an interesting exercise to observe the public's perceptions of the economy when the amount of jobs added to the economy are given more attention than the jobs lost. In each of the unemployment reports this study observed, there was always at least one sector that created jobs. Could that create a chain reaction, where the next month's unemployment report showed even greater gains in employment and a decrease in the unemployment level? This is not to suggest that the news media should lie about the unemployment report.
After all, as Siegel notes, the role of the media is to "report fairly and honestly and accurately" (Siegel, 2008). But if the news media were to be truly accurate, they might consider giving the same amount of attention to positive economic indicators as negative ones, both in times of economic booms and economic busts. In short, they might want to reconsider the definition of news, if in fact its definition resembles Siegel's definition: "It's only what can kill you" (Siegel, 2008). Until that time, news organizations will likely continue to operate under the assumption that there's no news quite like bad news, or as the age old refrain goes, "If it bleeds, it leads."


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