

The More Things Change, the More they Stay the Same: A Comparison of Traditional and Post-Broadcast News Agendas*

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Abstract

There is a belief that post-broadcast media (e.g., cable news, online news sites and blogs) have spurred a distinct era of news coverage, particularly as it applies to coverage of presidential politics. Although the theory of a profit-driven news media appears to support this claim, we have only anecdotal evidence of its veracity. We intend to further our understanding of post-broadcast media and the daily news agenda by arguing that the same predominant theoretical frame (media as profit-seeker) that predicts newer media will appeal to niche audiences and offer distinct political coverage also restricts wider variation in the types of news stories prioritized by divergent media. Thus, we expect to find that although there are important descriptive differences across traditional and post-broadcast media, their coverage of the news agenda will be similar. To explore this topic, we have catalogued and compared similarities in daily news reports on Foxnews.com, Huffingtonpost.com, NBC Nightly News, and AP wire reports. Our database covers 60 days and over 2,000 stories and shows many similarities between traditional and post-broadcast news coverage with the greatest deviation from the news agenda being a function of the reporting style of each news source.

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Who dictates the news agenda in the post-broadcast media age: traditional news or post-broadcast media? Do post-broadcast media cover different news stories than traditional media? There is a growing belief that the propagation of post-broadcast media, such as cable television and internet news sources, have altered news coverage, the news industry, and media effects (Bennett 2009; Prior 2005). At base, with the rise of post-broadcast media has come a proliferation in the number of news sources. With more options, viewers fragment into distinct audiences reducing the number of viewers and readers of traditional news. This has led to increased competition for consumers of news, forcing news organizations to generate a fresh product to attract viewers and readers. In turn, a competitive environment may compel news sources to offer a distinct agenda or lose an uninterested audience.

The fragmentation of news audiences correlates with the availability of a wider array of specialized news programs. Instead of appealing to the large middle, for example, Rush Limbaugh appeals to a “niche” audience with a talk radio show that expresses the views of conservative voters. Fox News Channel follows a similar audience-driven model by targeting primarily conservative and Republican voters (Morris 2005). The end result may be millions fewer viewers than television networks’ nightly news audiences, but a sizeable and loyal audience in a marketplace that requires offering a targeted product to attract viewers, maintain these audiences, and generate profits (see Gentzkow & Shapiro 2006). Since post-broadcast media—meaning non-traditional forms of news, or news not presented through newspapers, news wires, or network television broadcasts¹—appeal to smaller and more ideological homogenous audiences than broadcast news had and because news programming should respond to audience preferences, it is reasonable to speculate that traditional and post-broadcast media will offer different news agendas.

Despite this possibility, scholarship has been slow to study the characteristics and effects of post-broadcast media (see Bennett and Iyengar 2008). Thus, we simply do not know whether their news agenda is topically distinct from traditional news coverage. What is more, there is reason to believe that the profit theory of news predicts not only that newer media will appeal to niche audiences and offer distinct political coverage, but also that there will be less variation in the types of news stories prioritized by divergent media. This may, in turn, create less diversity in the news agenda, even when research shows significant variation in media by several factors including partisan slant (Baum and Groeling 2008), the impact of different media on an audience’s perception of political reality (Bennett,

¹ Whereas new media has been defined as electronic interactive media, like the internet and other postindustrial forms of telecommunication (New Media 2012), old media is considered to be media in existence before the arrival of the internet, such as newspapers, books, television, and cinema. There are multiple problems with this distinction, not the least of which is that much of what may be considered to be traditional news may now be viewed online. Moreover, social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, are reported on cable and broadcast television stations. Some restrict new media to include only that which is generated online, such as blogs or social media (Haynes and Pitts 2009). The Pew Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism categorizes traditional media as all media except social media, such that new media includes Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and when coded, YouTube. I make yet another distinction that I think it most accurate given the significant and measureable intervention that cable news has had on American politics (Baum and Groeling 1998; Young and Perkins 2003): the difference between traditional media (that which existed before the rise of cable news and the internet) and post-broadcast media (that which came after the “golden age” of presidential television).

Lawrence, and Livingston 2007), and tone (Pew Research Center 2012).² Presidents and other newsmakers, in turn, have altered the ways by which they communicate to the public, through different forms of traditional and new media (Kumar 2007). There exists circumstantial evidence, as well, that presidential communication has changed at least stylistically (e.g. Obama's appearance on *The View*) with technological advances in media (Hendricks and Denton 2010; Kurtz and Tumulty 2010).

As media have evolved from three broadcast television giants and newspapers to cable news and internet blogs, have news agendas also become fragmented and more diverse? We intend to answer this question by first uncovering the patterned interrelationships between traditional and new media sources. Do the news wires—the traditional source of the news agenda—dictate stories to other media? Or do post-broadcast media offer distinct daily news agendas? Second, we explore whether traditional and post-broadcast media differ in their coverage of politics, particularly presidential politics. The conventional wisdom holds that post-broadcast media have altered the political landscape in significant ways. Yet, we simply do not know whether this has made any substantive difference in the post-broadcast media agenda. We expect to find that although there are important descriptive differences across media, the content of their agendas will be similar. We have catalogued and compared similarities in daily news reports on Foxnews.com, Huffingtonpost.com (our two sources of post-broadcast media), NBC Nightly News, and AP wire reports (our two sources of traditional media). Our database covers 60 days and over 2,000 stories and shows many similarities between traditional and post-broadcast news coverage with the greatest deviation from the news agenda being a function of the reporting style of each news source.

This paper makes four significant contributions to the literatures of media and presidential politics. First, it adds theoretically by expanding the market-based model used to explain traditional media agenda-setting and applies it to post-broadcast media. To date, we are certain that newer media are different but have yet to unify around a theory to explain these differences and their impact on American politics, which this paper begins to do. Second, it provides an important look at the interrelationships among traditional and post-broadcast media by offering a dataset with which to explore this question. It is understandable that research has lagged behind changes wrought by the development of new media given the enormous data collection required to explore this topic. Yet the size of the task should not be a deterrent to answering important questions about the role of post-broadcast media in the American democracy given that information is the “fuel of democracy” (Berkman and Kitch 1986, 311) and news media are the primary purveyors of this information. Third, this project matters to presidential politics. If the news wires drive most stories across all media, then presidents may best maximize their time by engaging in traditional strategies of media outreach, rather than attempting to target fragmented audiences at significant cost. Finally, although a good deal of recent research on post-broadcast media has focused on ideological slant, studying agenda-setting is still an important topic in new media research. Even if news sources are covering topics from a different point of view, if they are reporting on the same topic, then the national agenda is not as fragmented as some might speculate. However, the development of a greater diversity of daily news agendas may have significant ramifications for what people find important and what policymakers choose to address. Foxnews.com, as many would guess and as some have demonstrated, presents a

² An additional limitation to this research is the lack of communication, shall we say, between political scientists and those in the communications field. A recent special issue of social media influences, primarily throughout North Africa and the “Arab Spring” in the *Journal of Communication* tends not to engage political science research related to this topic, including the democratization literature, which appears to be most relevant to the theme of this special issue (see Howard and Parks 2012).

more conservative view of the world.³ What is also interesting from an agenda-setting perspective is how often it mirrors the national news agenda and when it deviates from it.

Traditional and Post-Broadcast Media in American Politics

Research on post-broadcast media in American politics has proliferated in the last decade. Post-broadcast media, whether the Internet, cable news (or its online companion), or soft news and comedy news programs, are likely to have had important effects on how Americans perceive electoral campaigns and governing institutions. Indeed, much of what we know concerning these media and American politics concerns their influence over public opinion and their overall impact on measures of democracy, not agenda-setting.

Effects of Post-Broadcast Media in American Politics

There is a general expectation that newer media can have profound effects on public opinion. And although their impact on American politics proves to be substantive, effects vary widely by information source. First, although internet use is positively correlated with political engagement, Boulianne (2009, 205) concludes that the Internet produces positive but unsubstantial effects on political engagement.⁴ Nevertheless, exposure to online news increases political interest (Boulianne 2011) just as access to internet news sites and government webpages produced higher levels of participation and political efficacy among college students during the 2008 presidential election (Kushin and Yamamoto 2010).

Second, partisan news sources are influential. Jamieson and Cappella (2008) demonstrate that Fox News Channel and other walls of the conservative media “echo chamber” help conservative viewers make sense of complex issues by offering a coherent, ideological presentation of political news and critique of the opposition. With vote choices simplified, consumers of conservative news are also more likely to vote. These effects are not without drawbacks. Conservative media’s preference for ridicule over reason contributes to the polarization of the electorate (see Morris 2005) which may undermine sensible deliberation on issues of national concern.

Third, soft news effects are significant and positive. Baum (2003) reasons that additional soft news options make it less costly for some viewers, who already watch these programs, to learn about politics, so long as these programs cover salient foreign policy issues. In his study of the Persian Gulf War, for example, Baum illustrates how viewers who would not have chosen to watch a hard news report on the war still learned about it through soft news programs that they would

³ For example, from a more recent and out of sample date, January 24, 2013, foxnews.com bannered Diane Feinstein’s “War on Guns” for most of the afternoon. Yet, the AP did not list any story on gun control either in its headline or U.S. politics top 10 listings. They included a 10th place piece on Joe Biden and guns on its politics page, but nothing having to do with Feinstein or, naturally, a war on guns.

⁴ An issue with this meta-analysis is interpretation. Nisbet, Stoycheff and Pearce (2012, 253), for example, emphasize the positive relationships between internet use and political engagement but do not consider the qualifications to these positive findings that Boulianne raises in the discussion section of her article. In particular, the research is not conclusive as to the causality of the relationship between internet use and political engagement and most positive effects wash out once political interest is controlled for.

have watched anyway. Thus, soft news programs, which appeal to different audience demographics, actually expand access to foreign policy news.

Fourth, beyond Fox News Channel and mainstream soft news programs, several studies explore the impact of faux news and late night entertainment programs on voters' perceptions of American politics. One recurring impact is one of increasing viewer cynicism. Baumgartner and Morris' (2005) seminal study of *The Daily Show with John Stewart* speaks to the conflicting impact of new media on perceptions of American politics. Exposure to *The Daily Show*, which is surprisingly substantive in content, increases internal political efficacy or a viewer's confidence over what he thinks he knows about politics. This coincides with an increase in political cynicism, however, a reduction in trust in the news media, and diminished faith in the electoral system. Baumgartner, Morris, and Walth (2012) find that young Republicans and Independents became less likely to support the 2008 Republican presidential ticket after watching Tina Fey's impression of Sarah Palin on SNL. Morris (2009) finds a similar impact, that *The Daily Show's* coverage of the 2004 party conventions depressed support for the Republican but not Democratic ticket.

Concerning late night television, Parkin (2010) illustrates that a presidential candidate's appearance on these programs prime viewers to evaluate them on substantive policy issues, not personality traits. Moreover, late-night television makes candidates more likeable, which increases the chances that otherwise uninterested voters cross party lines to vote for president (Baum 2005). Entertainment television has the added benefit of maintaining viewers' attention, which contributes to learning and recall of policy information (Parkin 2010).

Finally, the effects of social media are less known, given only a handful of systematic studies that have explored social media effects, particularly on political learning and engagement (see Edgerly et al. 2013 for a review of some of this research). One important study, by Kushin and Yamamoto (2010), reveals that increased exposure to social media, such as blogs or Facebook, did not produce greater participation in the 2008 presidential election, for example.

The mixed effects of the Internet, cable news, soft news, and social media have encouraged many of these scholars to reflect on the benefits of post-broadcast media for democracy. Baum and Groeling (2008), like Jamieson and Cappela (2008) for example, raise concerns about how more partisan media may decrease deliberation and lead to poorer decisions among American citizens. If online news media discourage consideration of myriad perspectives of politics and policy, Baum and Groeling observe that this could be a negative development for democracy. Although Baumgartner and Morris (2005) side with this view, Baum's (2003) research shows that soft news benefits viewers of non-traditional news sources. Moreover, Baum and Groeling (2008, 360) conclude that regular users of partisan, online blogs are more likely to talk about, or be engaged in, political discourse.

Prior (2005) shows that post-broadcast media have had mixed effects, as well; but his overall conclusion is that they have been more negative than positive for American democracy. During the 1970s, when viewers had limited options on television, they were more likely to accidentally watch the news, which contributed to accidental learning by voters. The expansion of cable television into the homes of Americans, along with more viewing alternatives, reduced the chances that one would accidentally turn on the network news, keep watching, and learn about the day's news. This development has not only led to a suppression of viewers for presidential addresses (Baum and Kernell 1998), it has also increased the information disparities between those who consume news

and those who are not interested in doing so, creating informational inequalities between voters and non-voters in American politics (Prior 2005).

Media Agenda-setting in Traditional and Post-Broadcast News

Our understanding of media agenda-setting in traditional sources of news is extensive. The news agenda is representative of the systemic agenda (Cobb and Elder 1983) in American public policymaking, meaning that it represents the dominant issues under consideration by policymakers in a public forum. Agenda-setting effects are also substantial. Media tend to drive institutional agendas on many issues, including a range of domestic (Baumgartner and Jones 1993) and foreign policies (Edwards and Wood 1999) and the economy (Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2005). Perhaps most importantly the news agenda affects the public's agenda (Iyengar and Kinder 1987), even buffering presidential leadership of the public's agenda (Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2011).

Given only a handful of traditional media for much of the last half century, there were fewer interrelationships between media to explore, and scholars found few differences, too. Much research concluded not only that the mass media were an institutional monolith (Gans 1979; Sigal 1973), but also that prestige media—like the *New York Times*—dictated the daily news agenda (Crouse 1973). The tendency for most news organizations to prefer negative stories on the presidency (Farnsworth and Lichter 2006; Groeling and Kernell 1998) or horse race coverage of campaigns (Dunaway 2008), further cemented the perception that interrelationships between different types of traditional media would be highly predictable. Although they find important differences in terms of the favorability of campaign news coverage in 1992, Shaw and Sparrow (1999) demonstrate that prestige newspapers' agendas correlated highly with other newspapers' daily agendas, with the wire services having a significant impact on the campaign news agenda.

Research that examines the interrelationships between traditional and post-broadcast news agendas is much more limited. One such article examines the relationship between newspapers (a traditional medium) and YouTube. Sayre et al. (2010) show how the interrelationship between traditional and newer media changes based on the timing of a major news event. On the one hand, traditional news media drove new media coverage of the same-sex marriage and Proposition 8 *before* the 2008 election during which Californians voted on Proposition 8. On the other hand, however, whereas traditional media moved on to other issues, blogs maintained attention to this issue after the election, and may have even dictated newspaper coverage of it.

The increased diversity of news sources might undermine the agenda-setting dominance of traditional news sources, generating a new era of minimal effects. Whereas Bennett and Iyengar (2008) raise this possibility, Shehata and Stromback (2013) actually test it. They demonstrate that although agenda-setting effects are weaker with the diversity of news sources, they conclude that a new era of minimal effects, if even a possibility, is certainly not eminent. Specifically, exposure to traditional news sources still drive issue salience, although partisan considerations are more likely on low-salience issues and exposure to more online news sources weakens the agenda-setting effect of traditional news.

Although their primary purpose is to explain partisan slant, not the agendas of traditional and internet-based media, Baum and Groeling (2008) examine whether different news outlets covered or did not cover a selection of news topics. They sample news stories from the AP and Reuters wires, Foxnews.com and two partisan internet blogs: the liberal-leaning Daily Kos and conservative Free Republic. They show how different media vary in the types of stories that they

select to report. For example, every one of their outlets, except the Daily Kos sees presidential news as more significant than nonpresidential news. They also show topical partisan variation in the amount of good and bad news reported by each media outlet. Even so, this study does not cover the topic that we are interested in: the interrelationship between traditional and post-broadcast media agendas.

Theory

Theoretically, the profit incentive of news producers drives the content of political news coverage. As a business, news media will appeal to their customers, whether readers of newspapers or viewers of television news (Dunaway 2008; Hamilton 2004; Leighley 2004). Traditional mainstream media, with access to broad national audiences, have had clear incentives to appeal to the ideological middle which represents the largest segment of the population (see Sutter 2001). By appealing to the largest swathe of society, national news organizations could attract the largest audiences and, thus, the largest profits. One way to optimize the number of viewers is to cover extensively the president, a particularly newsworthy politician (Cohen 2010; Graber 2006).

The logic follows from both the spending and revenue sides of the profit equation. Audience preferences appeal to the revenue side in that larger audiences allow news sources to charge more for advertising. Thus, media are in the business of creating content that appeals to audience preferences to generate viewer interest and higher ratings. This, in turn, generates more advertising dollars and higher profit-margins. The spending side of the equation refers to the level of resources needed to create the news, including the number of employees on a news team. To decrease spending (and increase profit) news organizations have cut staff, decreasing the number of reporters available to cover the same number of potential stories of interest to viewers. To compensate for fewer reporters, news organizations will rely increasingly on easily accessible news stories (Bennett 2009), such as those provided by the AP wire services, *New York Times*, or national broadcast media, that reduce the costs to news production (Eshbaugh-Soha 2010). Therefore, the profit incentive may mean that traditional news sources drive the daily news agenda across different news media, despite the myriad changes that have occurred in the production and diversification of news content and audience preference for niche news programs.

The decision as to what is newsworthy is more than what is profitable, but also involves that which appeals to journalistic norms (Cohen 2010, 84; Eshbaugh-Soha 2013; Graber 2006). Thus, what is considered to be newsworthy may trump the decision to be profitable. On the one hand, networks may be reluctant to grant the president airtime to deliver a national address in primetime, for example, because this eliminates the revenue a network may receive from the many commercials to be aired during a regularly-scheduled prime time show. On the other hand, the network should grant the president air time to broadcast a legitimate action by the president, such as to announce a use of force or other action that concerns national security. Therefore, that which is considered to be newsworthy may still make the news even if it may temporarily conflict with a network's profit incentive to forego covering a presidential speech.

This profit-incentive argument produces conflicting expectations concerning how post-broadcast media should differ from traditional media in the topics they cover and how they present them. Fragmented news audiences should increase the diversity of stories across media as news organizations appeal to niche audiences. Yet, the evisceration of news staff may simultaneously increase the same news organization's reliance on readily available, AP wire reports in its reporting and allow this

traditional first-mover in the news agenda to dictate their daily news coverage. Journalistic professionalism also encourages reliance on traditional sources of news, even though post-broadcast media may be wedded much less to these norms of news-story selection than traditional news.

Of course, the professional norms of journalism may only apply to traditional news sources. After all, post-broadcast journalism, especially that found on social media sites, is by definition independent of organizational and institutional influences. This independence, among other things, increases the negativity of campaign commentary and posts (Pew Research Center: Project for Excellence in Journalism 2012).

The non-impact of professional norms on newer media is less of an issue if two conditions are met. First, if traditional news drives post-broadcast news coverage (as we expect), then post-broadcast coverage should mirror much of what is presented by traditional news sources, those that are created according to journalistic and professional norms. Second, if traditional and post-broadcast news sources complement rather than compete with each other, then this, too, should promote similarities in coverage. There is evidence of complementarity of traditional and new media consumption, that the two sources work together and reinforce each other (Dutta-Bergman 2004).

All in all, the profit incentive theory of news coverage suggests two simultaneous and distinct expectations. First, traditional media, which appeal to different and broader audiences than post-broadcast media, should offer different news agendas than post-broadcast media, whose news agenda should reflect their niche audience preferences. Second, the incentive to cut the cost of news production should produce similar stories between traditional and post-broadcast media as news organizations have fewer staff to report on distinct stories that are of particular interest to their niche audiences.⁵ This should carry over to news stories in general and those specifically covering the president.

The task of this paper is to determine which news sites are more likely than others to follow the news agenda of the traditional news agenda-setter, the Associated Press. Given their different blend of journalistic professionalism and niche audience preferences, we hypothesize that the following sources will be more likely—in this order—to adopt a daily news agenda that is consistent with the Associated Press: NBC Nightly News, Foxnews.com, and the Huffington Post. Regardless of some subtle differences, we expect a high deal of agenda congruence across each news source, indicative of not a fragmented daily news agenda, but a topically-similar national agenda.

Data

Following the work of Baum and Groeling (2008), we have collected a database of news stories from daily list of top-10 AP wire stories and collect each story's abstract. We examined roughly 60 week days, from January 18, 2012 through April 13, 2012. Along the way, we tracked daily reporting by three others sources of news—Foxnews.com, Huffingtonpost.com, and *NBC Nightly News*. The coders selected stories from the AP and other websites regularly, in the early afternoon, central time.⁶ For

⁵ It is possible that our theory of traditional and post-broadcast similarity will not extent to the more individual and potentially more independent nature of social media, such as Facebook and Twitter.

⁶ We recognize that this strategy missed some stories. If we had the resources, for example, to check the updated top-10 list throughout the day, we would likely find more matches. Thus, although this

Foxnews.com, we catalogued stories based on its presentation at the top of the main webpage. We saved the main banner story and any related stories immediately beneath the banner, the three second tier headline stories, their related stories, and the bold headlines in the “latest news” section. Thus, the number of stories collected per day from Foxnews.com varied, although the locations for collection did not.⁷ We collected the top ten Huffingtonpost.com stories each day, determined to be the banner story and the headlines in the main (center-right) column of the website.⁸ We collected all *NBC Nightly News* stories broadcast on television that were listed, daily, on the nbcnews.com webpage. We did not analyze web-only stories, and were able to confirm the content of each television broadcast by later collecting individual story transcripts provided by Lexis-Nexis Academic.⁹

Once we collected these stories, we catalogued them according to the date retrieved, whether the story an AP report, whether the AP contributed to the story, and whether the issue addressed by the story was consistent with any of the top 10 AP stories collected that day, but did not explicitly reference the AP in its byline. We also created an additive category that indicates whether or not the story was attributed fully to the AP, borrowed from the AP, or was simply the story topic covered by the AP but using a different byline.¹⁰ Next, we determined whether or not these stories matched with stories reported by other news sources, i.e., whether on a given day Foxnews.com and Huffingtonpost.com covered the same story, and so on for the other sources. We also created a series of topical categories, such as President Obama, legislation, or the 2012 presidential election, and matched stories according to these topical areas.¹¹ It is within these categories that we make our

is suboptimal, we think that this errs on the side of not finding a match or a relationship and, thus, our numbers probably underestimate the similarity between AP news wires and new media sources.

⁷ We differ slightly in terms of collecting data on foxnews.com. Whereas Baum and Groeling, understandably, collected news stories for the RSS foxnews feed, we chose to select stories based on the foregoing selection method. The two approaches do not differ much at all, as the RSS feed represented roughly the same picture of top news stories on foxnews.com. Still, we preferred selecting stories based on their presentation on the webpage, with the idea that these stories are what viewers are most likely to see (being unlikely to check the RSS feed specifically).

⁸ Collecting stories from non-traditional sources required clear decision rules. For Huffingtonpost.com, we were careful not to code advertisements that related to the main stories on the webpage. We also did not collect data on stories that linked to different stories with different parts of the main headline. In all cases, only the main story (linked from the picture itself) was collected. Baum and Groeling (2008, fn 11) also note the difficulty of determining top stories on daily blogs, given the nonconventional display of these webpages. Indeed, we did not select either of these internet sites for this simple reason: we could not settle on a clear decision rule to deduce what the top stories for these pages were.

⁹ Some stories from the television broadcast were omitted by NBC when posting the videos and transcripts on their own website. These omissions have been retained in the data set for the purpose of consistency and to accurately compare the online presence of traditional media to post-broadcast media.

¹⁰ Since an NBC story could not cite an AP byline in its report, we can only compare NBC with AP if the story topics were similar. In fact, NBC only cited the associated press in four stories in our sample, according to the NBC transcripts we downloaded from Lexis-Nexis.

¹¹ Although we aggregated to broad topical categories, our intent in matching stories was more precise, as we attempted to match the overall thrust of the story. If there is a story about a decrease in US oil production in the AP and a story about Iran's increased oil production in another source,

comparisons, with the presidential category being our primary area of interest. We also determined whether the president made a speech that day, noting the topic of that speech, according to the *Public Papers of the Presidents* archived at americanpresidencyproject.org.

As Baum and Groeling (2008) have written one of the few articles that we found that examines different types of news media, it is upon this article that our contribution builds primarily. We adopt a modified version of their research design using similar data sources and analysis. We differ from them in several ways, nevertheless. First, our focus is more upon agenda-setting and topic similarity, rather than bias or partisan slant, which is their focus.

Second, we do not concur with Baum and Groeling (2010, 346) that AP and Reuters top stories represent the “full population of potential news stories.” After all, in the age of new media, if Glenn Beck wants to, for example, vilify Van Jones, he can (and did) do so independent of whether the AP ran a story on this. This report, not an AP news wire, could cause news programs on Fox News Channel (or other news sources) to make this a news story. Our evidence points to this very fact, as well, given that not all AP wire stories predict the story topic on other outlets. Our intent in raising this last point is not to challenge Baum and Groeling’s (2008) contribution, but to recognize that they have uttered but the first word on this topic. Rather than assume whether the AP is the source of all potential news stories found on the Internet, we test whether this is so.

Third, we also differ from them in that they appear to focus on the top “political stories” (footnote 10), whereas we are interested in variation across all stories, whether political or not. This, we think, is appropriate for our study. Whereas they are interested in partisan slant, we are interested in the effects and variation in the news agenda. We think that the relationships between traditional and post-broadcast news on even non-political subjects are relevant to understanding media agenda-setting in the post-broadcast age and how this might impinge upon the president’s ability to influence the news agenda.

Findings

Our task is to explore the relationships between traditional news wires and three different media: a conservative online news site associated with a cable news channel, a liberal online news site unaffiliated with any other medium, and a traditional television news broadcast. We first present descriptive comparisons of each news source with AP wires, each other, and according to a few topical areas. Next, we model the likelihood that news will reflect the AP’s daily agenda in total and for each individual news source in our sample.

Descriptive Comparisons

Considering all stories in our sample, Figure 1 reveals that Associated Press wire reports made a sizeable imprint on all media that in our sample. Surprising to some, perhaps, Foxnews.com reports roughly 52 percent of its stories either from AP directly or on topics that the AP covers each day. Still, only 27.7 percent of these stories take AP stories in full with 14 percent of all stories using some AP material in the story. In total, whether in full or in part, 42 percent of Foxnews.com stories use material from the AP. Table 1 also reveals that Huffington Post and NBC Nightly News cover 33.7 and 31

for example, we would not match these stories simply because they both cover the broad topic of energy or oil.

percent of AP stories, respectively. Of these, Huffington Post used complete AP wire reports in about 18 percent of their stories.¹²

[Figure 1 About Here]

In addition, we offer a brief comparison across news sources. Out of 880 total stories on Foxnews.com, the Huffington Post covers roughly the same topic 168 times, or 19.2 percent. All but 31 of these stories were also AP headlines for the day. NBC covers the same topic as Foxnews.com in 226 stories or 25.8 percent, with most of these (182) also AP stories. In addition Huffington Post and *NBC Nightly News* shared 152 similar stories, amounting to 23 percent of our sample of Huffington Post stories. Of these, 101 were also AP stories. By and large, the stories shared between different media sources are also stories frequently shared with the AP newswire.”

Figure 2 shows the number of stories on which each news source reported for scandals, the election, tragedy stories (like shootings, kidnappings, and natural disasters), legislation before Congress, and the Middle East. It would be expected that election-related stories would dominate during an election year, and that they indeed drive much of the news agenda. Yet, much of this is due to the Huffington Post, which dedicated over 28 percent of its daily news agenda to election stories, far more than the AP (9 percent), NBC News (10 percent) or Foxnews.com (16 percent). The top count of stories involves tragedy, with the Huffington Post offering the lowest percentage of these stories, at 11 percent of its total reporting. Scandals occupy the fewest number of stories, with the tightest variation, too. Aside from stories about the Middle East, NBC and AP offer roughly the same number and percentage of stories on all of these topical areas.

[Figure 2 About Here]

A primary subject of interest is when the president makes the news, and whether or not this news is related to a presidential speech. Over our 60-day sample, the number of stories referencing a presidential speech are nearly identical, with 26 (AP), 25 (FOX), 22 (HP), and 23 (NBC). The distribution of stories differs when we convert these numbers into the percentage of speech-related stories as a function of all stories on the president. The AP had 44 total stories on the president, Foxnews.com had 105, Huffingtonpost.com reported 78 stories, and NBC broadcast 43. Here, we find something of a bimodal distribution. Around 54 percent of AP and NBC stories on the president specifically covered a presidential speech, whereas Foxnews.com and Huffington Post specifically covered the president’s speech in approximately a quarter of their stories on the president.

Part of the percentage differences in news coverage is a function of the websites being able to cover a wider range of stories on the president. That is, whereas these websites might use an AP story or a presidential speech as the foundation for their news agendas, their nontraditional formats allowed them more space to dedicate additional and supplemental stories to the president. Foxnews.com, in particular, tended to survey the president in greater depth. Whereas the Associated Press reported on February 9 about the Obama administration’s “revamping” of its birth control policy as it concerned health care reform, Foxnews.com offered 2 stories on the administration’s birth control policy that day, along with 5 more stories that month. Huffintonpost.com also offered a range of perspectives in its coverage of the president by providing more video clips (which some may not consider news). These included links to a Rachel Maddow fact check “rant” after the State of the Union, and a clip of *The Daily Show with John Stewart* that mocked the annual address to Congress. When NBC offered multiple stories

¹² It so happens that the Huffington Post prefers Reuters as its news source. Had we coded this, the percentage of similarity between the Huffington Post and a traditional news wire would be higher. This revelation also means that our measure of topical similarity is the most reliable measure across news sources.

on the president, it typically broadcast hard news and policy stories at the frontend of the broadcast, with softer and light-hearted contributions toward the end, including a clip of Obama launching marshmallows at a science fair in February. Whether or not these perspectives are conservative, liberal, or balanced, online news sites are better equipped to offer more stories on one subject than more traditional news sources.

The Likelihood of Borrowing from AP News Wires

What predicts the relationship between the AP news wires and other news sources? Our first analysis examines what affects whether or not all news stories match with AP wire reports. To this end, we control for the dominant topical areas that we coded for each story, as well as matches for each of the other news sources. Since Foxnews.com appeared in our descriptive analysis to mirror the AP most often, we model it as the reference category. Because NBC cannot post AP wire stories directly, our dependent variable in Table 1 is whether or not each news story matched the topic of a top-10 AP news story for that day.

The results in Table 1 reveal several important findings. First, the Huffington Post and *NBC Nightly News*, perhaps not unexpectedly given our presentation of Figure 1, are both less likely than Foxnews.com to borrow their news agenda from the Associated Press wires. Second, there is substantial topical variation, as well, with all news sources more likely to report the AP daily news agenda on virtually all policy areas except stories on specific politicians, human interest, and consumer protection. Most pronounced, all sources are more likely to match the AP's news agenda on international relative to domestic policy stories, state and local government, and stories concerning President Obama. This provides clear support for our expectation that traditional news topics are most likely to permeate all news sources. Moreover, relying especially on the AP to dictate the international news agenda fits with the lack of resources most news organizations devote to international affairs.

[Table 1 About Here]

Next, we examine each news source separately and report them in comparison with each other. One important observation is that the individual source matches are highly significant in the models. This means that the presence of a source match with AP increases the likelihood that a single news source will match with the AP. That there is substantial agreement as to what the daily news agenda is indicates daily news agenda concentration, and a clearly defined national policy agenda. This is especially true with international stories, as each news source is consistently more likely to follow AP wire reports on international in comparison with national stories. It is also true for stories related to the economy.

Interestingly, Foxnews.com was less likely to follow AP wires concerning political scandal and tended to generate its own stories about the president, the GOP nomination, and the 2012 election. Huffington Post followed Foxnews.com's tendencies in many respects except that it was more likely to follow AP reporting on scandal than Foxnews.com. Overall, NBC is least likely to borrow from AP wires than the other news sources, especially on human interest stories; nightly news broadcasts typically devote most of the last third of their broadcasts to sappy personal stories. Still, NBC's daily agenda is highly congruent with the AP wire's, mainly on stories concerning the economy, crime, and, like the other sources, international issues.

Explaining Presidential News Coverage

Our final inquiry concerns the president, a primary agenda-setter in American politics. Of any political actor in the American political system, it is the president who is most likely to dominate the news (Graber 2006). Although we know much about the interrelationship between the president and

traditional news media (Edwards and Wood 1999; Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2011), we know very little about how the president interacts with post-broadcast media. To explore this question, we offer two analyses of the president's speeches. The first examines whether or not the president's speech delivered that day made the news. The second examines whether the president was a topic of a daily story, regardless of whether his speech was covered.

We present two cross-sectional analyses of the president's propensity to make the news, both Poisson distributed with the dependent variable being the number of stories on the president, per news source, per weekday.¹³ First, several factors predict the tendency for there to be more news stories about the president in a day, generally. There is much variation, at first, by news source, which also necessitates a random effects model. Whereas both the Huffington Post and NBC Nightly News report significantly fewer daily stories on the president than the AP wire service, Foxnews.com reports significantly more stories about the president than the AP. Moreover, days on which the president holds fundraisers lead to less news coverage¹⁴ and the more speeches the president delivers in a day leads to more coverage. There exists a statistically insignificant inverse relationship between approval ratings and daily stories about the president; but it regains significance if either approval change or the total number of remarks is eliminated from the model.

[Table 2 About Here]

Second, similar factors affect whether or not our daily news sources cover the topic of the president's speech. This fixed effects model illustrates, of course, no variation by network; but a continued inverse relationship between daily approval ratings and news stories that reference the president's speeches. Simply, the president is less newsworthy when he is more popular, although this relationship, too, is only significant absent approval change or the total number of daily speeches. Although all speeches increase news coverage and fundraisers continue to have a negative impact on news stories, the president's solo press conference on March 6 increased the amount of news coverage that day, but not at conventional levels of statistical significance.¹⁵

Conclusion

This paper has undertaken a systematic examination of the daily news agendas of traditional and post-broadcast news sources. We argued that although there is a tendency for post-broadcast news sources to target fragmented niche audiences, these same sources have a profit incentive to rely on traditional news wires for their daily reporting. We find, indeed, that much of the daily news agenda on Foxnews.com, Huffingtonpost.com, and NBC Nightly News follow the agenda of the traditional news agenda-setter: the Associated Press. All in all, these findings provide important evidence that no matter how much news reporting has changed, it still relies predominantly on those sources that the news agenda has always relied upon to decide what is newsworthy.

¹³ We also ran these as logits, with the dependent variable being whether or not a story on the president made the news that day. The results are comparable, although slightly less statistically significant. Since there is more variation with using a count model, we report these results. In all models, presidential approval ratings are Gallup's daily tracking poll numbers. We coded the number and type of speeches from the *Public Papers of the Presidents*.

¹⁴ It is possible that this result may be because President Obama held most of his fundraisers on Fridays. Controlling for Friday in the model produces an insignificant result, however, and one that does not alter the fundraiser variable's impact.

¹⁵ Like Cohen (2010, 117), we also look at the number of daily speeches squared. Although the relationship is negative, it is far from statistically significant.

This paper has important implications for our understanding of how different forms of media interact in the post-broadcast age. First, the dominance of the AP on other news sources provides evidence that the old way of news proliferation still occurs in the post-broadcast age. We cannot demonstrate causality yet, of course, but these findings are strongly suggestive of the continuation of traditional agenda-setting norms with the advance of new media technology and the decline in traditional news source dominance. Second, the daily news agenda congruence among a variety of news sources—whether traditional or new, conservative or liberal—supports our contention of a still prominent national news agenda. Although post-broadcast media may have fragmented audiences by ideological slant, they are still being exposed to similar topics of national concern.

One of the important difficulties with the data in this study and with similar media comparisons is the nature of what constitutes the baseline news agenda for the day. In this study, we build upon the AP wires as the traditional news agenda and then see, among other things, whether AP material shows up in other news sources. Despite its conservative leaning and use of secondary opinion stories on a dominant policy topic, Foxnews.com follows more traditional reporting by reproducing AP stories or building their own by using contributions for the AP. Although the Huffington Post could (and does) also do this, it relies on other media, such as videos and clips, more often; whereas *NBC Nightly News* is precluded from attaching an AP byline to its television reports, save for the rare instance where they cite the AP on air. Given the media that we chose, therefore, it makes sense that Foxnews.com reports a higher percentage of AP stories than other sources; but this does not, in itself, mean that other internet news sites will.

The problem becomes more difficult when searching even newer media sources, such as YouTube, internet blogs, or social media sites such as Facebook or Twitter. Thus, future research may be limited in how it can answer the who influences whom question. One option is to collect daily data on a specific topic to most precisely determine which medium influences another in the post-broadcast media age. This is very much what Sayre et al. (2010) have done, tracking and testing the causal relationships between different kinds of media. Doing this on a broad scale, with even more news media may be cost prohibitive, especially as newer and social media are included in the analysis. Beyond data difficulties, it is also possible that our theory and expectations would not extend to social media, a particular kind of post-broadcast media.

Even within our collection of stories, we intend to examine further the issue of tone of coverage. After all, even if Foxnews.com follows the daily agenda of the AP wires, our traditional news source, it is highly likely, given various studies (Baum and Groeling 2008; Jameison and Capella 2008), that Foxnews.com may be more likely to report AP stories that they may be able to modify to fit the conservative point of view that they promulgate. In fact, looking at headlines alone may illustrate that Foxnews.com, the Huffington Post, or even *NBC Nightly News*, has a tendency to sensationalize the banner headline of a story, even when the actual story is quite balanced. For instance, moments after the president's first post-reelection press conference (November 14, 2012), the headline on Foxnews.com screamed: "Still Blaming Bush", drawn from the president's statement that "Right now our economy is still recovering from a deep and damaging crisis." Since many internet users are grazers of news, it may be the headline that is most descriptive of any partisan leaning or deviation from the traditional news story.

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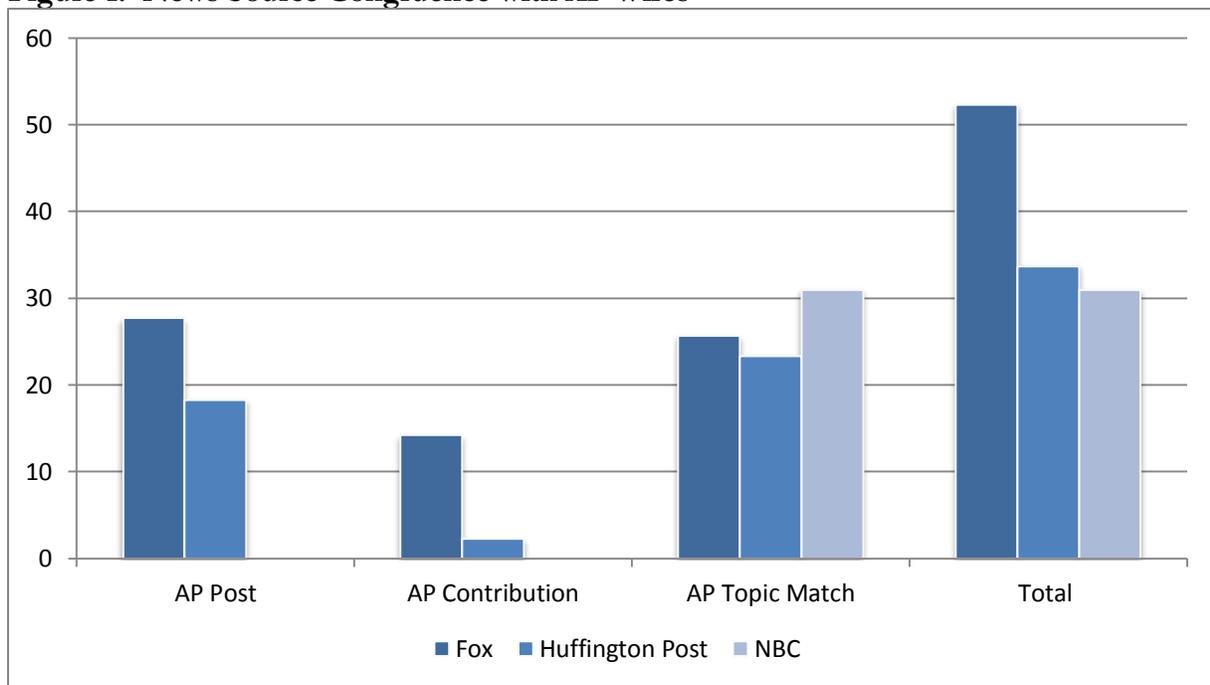
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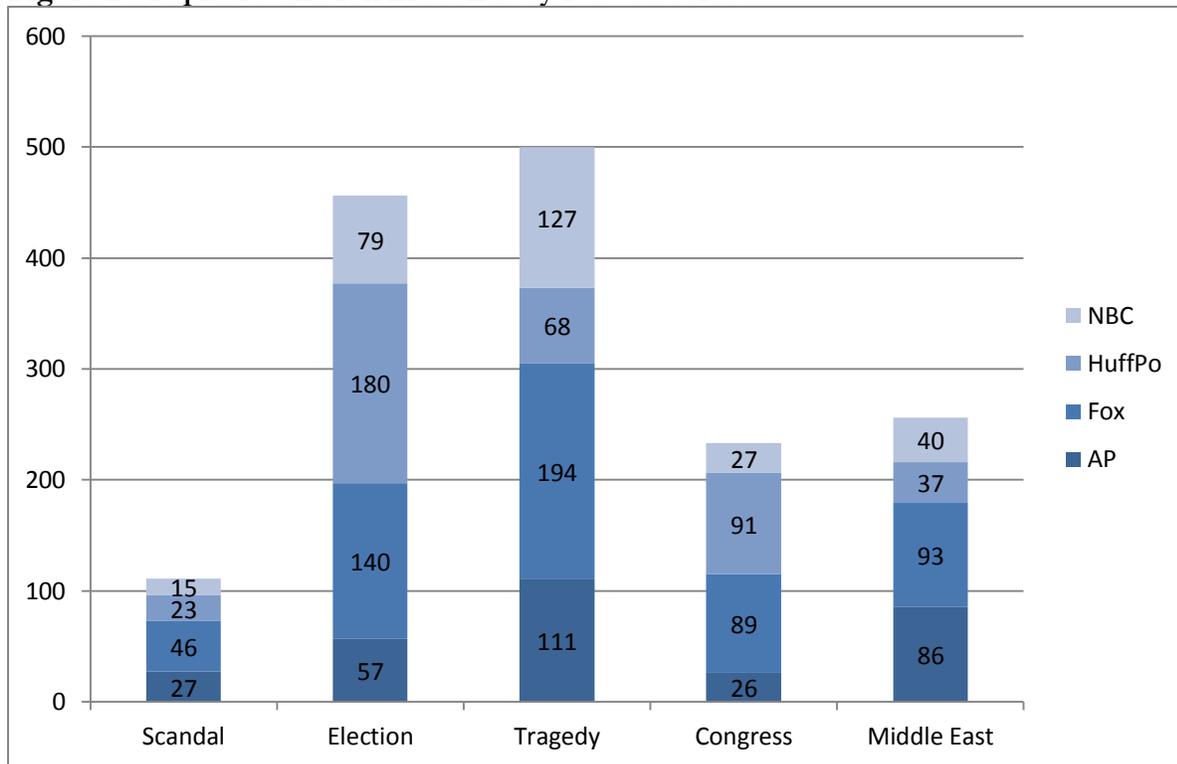
Appendix. News Topics Defined

Topic	Description
International	Stories that references international or non-domestic events or issues
State/regional	State, regional, or local news stories
Politics	Signifies any story that involves politics, policy, or government
Obama	Any story related to the president, whether politics or personal
Other politicians	A story that mentions any politician besides Obama
GOP Nomination	Mentions the GOP nomination contests
Election 2012	Mentions the GOP nomination or Obama in an electoral context
Scandal	Political scandal, Sky News hacking
Courts/Law	Decisions before the Court, legal issues
Crime	Crime-related stories
Economy	Economy-related stories
Human Interest	Stories of poverty and hardship, inspirational stories, bus crashes
Consumer Protection	Safety recalls, food safety, consumer fraud
Terrorism	Terrorism-related stories
Weather	Weather-related stories

Figure 1. News Source Congruence with AP Wires

Note: AP Post refers to a story that was identical to the original AP wire report; AP Contribution indicates that the reported story included information from the AP wire report; AP Topic Match notes a match with topical thrust of the AP story.

Figure 2. Topical Variation in Stories by News Source



Note: The total number of stories in our sample are 628 (AP); 875 (Foxnews.com); 647 (Huffington Post); 729 (NBC Nightly News)

Table 1. Predictors of AP Story Congruence

	All Stories	Foxnews.com	Huffington Post	<i>NBC Nightly News</i>
Fox Match			1.14 (0.15)*	1.21 (0.14)*
Huff Match	-0.44 (0.08)*	0.78 (0.14)*		0.85 (0.15)*
NBC Match	-0.55 (0.07)*	0.89 (0.13)*	0.74 (0.15)*	
International	0.69 (0.08)*	0.69 (0.13)*	0.52 (0.17)*	0.72 (0.14)*
State/regional	0.20 (0.08)*	0.33 (0.14)*	0.50 (0.20)*	0.06 (0.19)
Politics	0.11 (0.08)	-0.14 (0.13)	-0.25 (0.14)*	-0.06 (0.19)
Obama	0.32 (0.13)*	0.07 (0.24)	0.20 (0.24)	0.25 (0.34)
Other Politicians	-0.19 (0.10)*	-0.001 (0.19)	-0.04 (0.18)	-0.28 (0.28)
GOP Nomination	0.29 (0.10)*	-0.07 (0.19)	-0.23 (0.20)	0.38 (0.30)
Election 2012	-0.22 (0.16)	-0.21 (0.27)	-0.26 (0.27)	0.09 (0.46)
Scandal	-0.21 (0.16)	-0.53 (0.25)*	0.85 (0.29)*	-0.07 (0.41)
Courts/Law	0.25 (0.11)*	0.002 (0.16)	0.23 (0.23)	0.24 (0.28)
Crime	0.43 (0.10)*	0.34 (0.16)*	0.22 (0.24)	0.44 (0.21)*
Economy	0.50 (0.19)*	0.59 (0.36)	0.54 (0.33)	1.01 (0.29)*
Human Interest	-0.18 (0.10)*	0.14 (0.17)	0.30 (0.27)	-0.37 (0.18)*
Consumer Issues	-0.75 (0.28)*	-1.53 (0.49)	-0.32 (0.38)	
Terrorism	0.43 (0.19)*	0.60 (0.29)*	0.13 (0.40)	0.09 (0.38)
Weather	0.11 (0.15)	0.32 (0.34)	-0.46 (0.41)	-0.23 (0.23)
February	-0.04 (0.09)			
March	-0.16 (0.09)*			
April	-0.09 (0.10)			
Constant	-0.16 (0.09)*	-0.51 (0.11)*	-0.94 (0.12)*	-1.27 (0.11)*
Pseudo R-squared	.09	.18	.25	.30
Wald Chi-2	240.50*	197.49*	158.86*	207.14*
N	2262	875	647	729

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses.

* $p > .05$

Table 2. News Coverage of the President

	Speech Coverage	President Coverage
Approval	-0.15 (0.08)*	-0.08 (0.05)
Approval Δ	0.05 (0.07)	0.01 (0.05)
Total Speeches	0.25 (0.10)*	0.25 (0.07)*
Fundraisers	-1.27 (0.42)*	-1.14 (0.28)*
Solo Press	0.72 (0.62)	-0.14 (0.59)
Joint Press	-0.87 (0.73)	-0.58 (0.46)
Fox		0.90 (0.18)*
Huffington Post		-0.72 (0.27)*
NBC		-0.63 (0.26)*
Constant		2.89 (2.38)
Wald χ^2	15.31*	104.84*
N	252	252

Note: Speech coverage is a fixed effects Poisson regression. President coverage is a random effects Poisson regression. Likelihood ratio test that $\alpha = 0$ is statistically insignificant in both models. Standard errors in parentheses. AP news wires is the reference category in the President coverage model.

* $p < .05$