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Unbalanced media coverage and the 2004 Presidential Election: The New York Times vs. The Washington Times

Jimmie E. Cummings, Jr.

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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UNBALANCED MEDIA COVERAGE AND THE 2004 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION:
THE NEW YORK TIMES VS. THE WASHINGTON TIMES

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Mass Communication

in

The Manship School of Mass Communication

by
Jimmie E. Cummings, Jr.
B.A., University of Alabama, 1993
May, 2006

For my loving family,
Kathleen, Will, and Nate.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to find out if either *The New York Times* or *The Washington Times* participated in unbalanced media coverage during the last two weeks of the 2004 Presidential Election. Through content analysis paragraph tone was used to evaluate news stories, columns, and editorials as positive, negative or neutral from a composite week sample.

Scholars, politicians, the public as well as journalists have long argued about the existence or not of media bias and whether it is in support of liberal or conservative politics. This study was not an attempt to pick a side in that confrontation. Instead, a goal of this research was to provide additional data along with testing methodology, in the hope that it would contribute to the work that has already been accomplished in moving toward evaluation criteria for identifying media bias.

The findings from this study provided evidence of unbalanced media coverage from both news organizations during the particular period of study. The biggest surprise was that *The Washington Times* was more unbalanced than *The New York Times*, 64.9% to 56.3%.

Data from this study supports the previous research that claims a presence of liberal bias as well as a possible attempt by conservative elites to create and support a perception of media bias. The evidence uncovered also supports agenda setting and priming as well as some agenda setting effects.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Negative opinions regarding the news media and suspicion of possible agendas have been present since the mid-1960s (Bennett, Rhine & Flickinger, 2001, p. 163), and according to recent surveys, that mentality toward the press remains present even today.

Much of today's media within the United States have been labeled by some as liberal because of allegedly presenting the news in a slanted manner that seems to support the Democratic Party and oppose the conservative agenda and the Republican Party. Accusations of this liberal media bias in news reporting seem to increase during times of national elections, but especially during the final months leading up to a presidential election. "There is probably not an American today who has not heard charges that 'the media' are 'biased'" (D'Alessio & Allen, 2000, p. 133).

Though this "liberal" label is used more often in reference to the national media, the "conservative" tag is also applied to journalists that seem to slant their coverage in support of the Republican Party's ideology. "A Freedom Forum and Roper Center Poll that found that 89% of Washington, DC, journalists had voted for Clinton in 1992 (Public Perspectives, 1996). These claims of a liberal media bias echoed similar ones by political conservatives in previous presidential campaigns" (Domke, Watts, Shah & Fan, 1999, p. 35).

Even former ABC anchorman, Peter Jennings, acknowledged that there is a liberal bias amongst today's media. Quoted in "Weapons of Mass Distortion: The Coming Meltdown of the Liberal Media" by Brent Bozell III), Jennings, whom the author labels as a liberal, admits:

Historically in the media, it has been more of a liberal persuasion for many years. It has taken us a long time, too long in my view, to have vigorous conservative voices heard as widely in the media as they now are. (Hannaford, 2004, p. 24).

Others who do not claim to be Republicans or support conservative outlooks have also noticed the same pattern from the media. Independents who were surveyed prior to the 2000 Presidential Election also believed that Al Gore, the Democratic nominee, received more favorable coverage than Republican George Bush (Mitchell, 2000, p. 39).

As the evidence continues to build, one must question whether the liberal media are more bias or unbalanced in their political coverage than the conservative media. The liberal press seems to be accused of presenting bias or unbalanced slants within their news coverage more often than their competition on the conservative side. At least that is what some would make it out be. But is this true?

A survey released in June of 2005 by The Pew Research Center found that 60% of Americans view news organizations as politically biased, an increase from 53% two years before. (The Pew Center, 2005). The survey also reported that 72% of the American public believes that the media favor one political party over the other instead of treating all parties equally. This percentage was the largest ever found in Pew trends since the mid-1980s (The Pew Center, 2005).

A poll of 1,956 adults conducted during the first week of September prior to the 2000 Presidential Election revealed that despite a “deadlocked race...among likely voters”, two-thirds believed that Gore had received more favorable news coverage from the press than did Bush (Mitchell, 2000, p. 18).

Domke, Watts, Shah & Fan (1999) highlighted:

Some evidence suggests that these claims of a liberal media have had an effect upon the public. Poll data across the past three presidential elections (1988, 1992, and 1996) reveal a remarkable increase in the number of citizens who believe there is a liberal ideological slant in news content. (Domke, Watts, Shah & Fan, 1999, p. 36)

Randomly surveyed American adults in January 1988 showed that 12% believed that in news coverage there was the presence of media bias in favor of the liberal side and that assessment increased to 43% in September 1996. (Domke, Watts, Shah & Fan, 1999, p. 36)

Is there a truth to all of these accusations and presented evidence that some of the media are supporting liberal agendas and are not conducting a fair and balanced approach in their news reporting efforts? Why is this important? Does it really matter? Is this just part of politics?

This quantitative study will analyze two of the nation's daily national print media organizations through the examination of their news coverage and editorial content during the final two weeks leading up to the Presidential Election of 2004.

Despite the numerous comparisons that could be initiated in such a study, *The New York Times*, which has been labeled in the past as "liberal" and *The Washington Times*, which has been highlighted as a conservative media supporter, will be the prime targets of this analysis.

One of a number of studies, (Groseclose & Milyo, 2004), looked at measuring media bias among the major media outlets and their findings back up these assertions regarding the labels that both of these news organizations receive. (Groseclose & Milyo, 2004, p. 2)

The purpose of this research is to find evidence whether either of these two newspapers published more positive or negative editorials, news stories or columns in favor of a particular presidential candidate or if these organizations were balanced in their overall coverage of the election. This study will not make a claim or provide argument for the existence or not of "media bias," but will investigate whether either of these newspapers was unbalanced in their news coverage toward one candidate over the other.

During the past two presidential elections, starting with the 2000 Presidential Election pitting George W. Bush (Republican) against Al Gore (Democrat) and then the 2004 election

between President George W. Bush and Senator John Kerry, the U.S. media have seemed to become a key weapon of choice in the trenches during the war of politics.

The results of a study by the Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA) at George Mason University released on the day of the 2004 Presidential Election, reported that Senator John Kerry received the most favorable network news coverage than any presidential candidate since 1980 (Center for Media and Public Affairs, 2004). According to the study, Kerry received 58% positive evaluations since Labor Day of that year, while President George Bush received only 36% of the positive evaluations. Kerry got a “record-breaking 77% positive press evaluations” in October alone. The CMPA also reported that the Democratic Party has received “significantly better press” during the past seven presidential elections.

Despite the increased claims regarding a liberal media effect in today’s mass communications and political arenas, which some have originated from within the media itself, along with politicians, political scientists as well as many of the American public, this accusation has been abundant for many years.

Although attention to these claims of media bias has certainly exploded in recent years it is by no means a new source of concern. Dating back to the Roosevelt administration, Rosten showed that Washington reporters were more likely to vote for Democrat FDR in 1936 than was the general public. Indeed, Rosten found 64% support for Roosevelt among reporters, with some of those journalists opposed to Roosevelt (6%) preferring the socialist candidate. Follow-up studies have repeatedly found reporter to be more liberal than the general public. (Niven, 2003, p. 312)

The results of a study released in 2000 show that most Americans believe that news coverage contains political bias, but believe there is no partisan bias. According to this study, Republicans were more likely to claim a liberal bias (34% to 16%) in coverage of presidential elections than a conservative bias. Also, 40% of Republicans view the media as more politically biased than Democrats at 27% (Pew Research Center, 2000).

The media, when it comes to the reporting of politics “generally has become more sensational. As the line between news and entertainment becomes more indistinct, the news media bear the brunt of public dissatisfaction” (Bennett, Rhine, Flickinger, 2001, p. 166).

Some have highlighted Gallup polls from 1985 and 1989 as evidence. Even when the public possessed favorable opinions regarding the media, they did not necessarily believe the political news coverage presented by the media (Bennett, Rhine, Flickinger, 2001, p. 166).

To attempt to answer the question of why this type of study is important to not only the mass communication field, but also the democratic process, one must look at the significance of uncovering any such misrepresentation. This is much more than just identifying an ethical dilemma within the journalism community. More importantly, the issue is whether there has been an attempt by certain individuals or organizations through the use of “smoke and mirrors” to persuade American public opinion. The possibility that the press is presenting false information and/or elaborated details leads to the continuous concern of who is telling the truth and what is the truth?

Some (Sutter, 2001) boldly claim that a bias media is a failure of the “news market.” This adds to the importance of focusing on the national media and these accusations of bias reporting is that “liberal bias in the national news market is of concern since the national media have a greater impact on the political agenda than these other outlets do” (Sutter, 2001, p. 441).

There have been many accusations as well as a number of studies that show today’s media are very powerful in persuading or changing attitudes and opinions of its audiences on matters of policy and politics (see Druckman & Parkin, 2005; Druckman, 2005; Page, 1996; Proress, Cook, Doppelt, Ettema, Gordon, Leff, and Miller, 1991, Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeldt,

1998). Druckman & Parkin (2005) found “compelling evidence that editorial slant influences voters’ decisions” (Druckman & Parkin, 2005, p. 1030).

The evidence that newspaper content can shift public images of the presidential candidate also suggests that the press performs a persuasive role as well as an information function. More than just framing events, the press provides political cues that may significantly influence the opinions of readers. (Dalton, Beck & Huckfeldt, 1998, p. 124)

For this study, slanting is defined as “selecting details that are favorable or unfavorable to the subject being described” (Severin & Tankard, 2001, p. 101). As far as the term “bias”, it is defined as “an inclination, disposition, leaning or prejudice for or against a person, group or thing” (Severin & Tankard, 2001, p. 106). John Merrill (1965) broke down bias into six categories: (1) attribution bias, (2) adjective bias, (3) adverbial bias, (4) outright opinion, (5) contextual bias, and (6) photographic bias. (p. 102)

Bias has also been defined as “systematic, differential treatment of the quoted or paraphrased assertions of election campaign opponents in news stories” (Fico & Cote, 1999, p. 127). Fico & Cote broke down bias into two components: fairness and balance. Fairness is defined as “the presence of quoted or paraphrased assertions by sources supporting both” candidates (Fico & Cote, 1999, p. 127). Balance is determined from three elements: (1) how equally their assertions were treated in terms of total column inches of story space, (2) how equally their assertions were treated in terms of first-paragraph lead position in stories; and (3) how equally their assertions were treated in terms of story position in paragraphs 2 through 5. (Fico & Cote, 1999, p. 128)

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Agenda setting function is defined by Severin & Tankard (2001) as “the media’s capability, through repeated news coverage, of raising the importance of an issue in the public’s mind” (Severin & Tankard, 2001, p. 219). These authors also discuss McCombs & Shaw (1972), which conducted the first systematic study regarding the agenda-setting hypothesis that was called The Chapel Hill Study (Severin & Tankard, 2001, p. 220). Research obtained from undecided voters in Chapel Hill, North Carolina from 100 interviews and content analysis of mass media products (five newspapers, two newsmagazines, and two television network news broadcasts), which served the participants during a presidential campaign. These researchers believed that undecided voters should have been the “most susceptible to agenda-setting effects” (Severin & Tankard, 2001, p. 220). Coders used 15 categories to evaluate the participant’s responses on the major issues of the campaign, as well as 15 categories regarding amount. These were also broken down into “major” and “minor” categories. The agenda-setting effect was supported by the study’s findings. Major issues received a .967 correlation between the media’s emphasis and the voters’ perception, while minor issues scored .979. “Data suggest a very strong relationship between the emphasis placed on different campaign issues by the media and the judgments of voters as to the salience and importance of various campaign topics” (Severin & Tankard, 2001, p. 221).

Earlier descriptions of agenda setting mirrored the findings of McCombs & Shaw. Norton Long (1958) described it as: “In a sense, the newspaper is the prime mover in setting the territorial agenda. It has a great part in determining what most people will be talking about, what

most people will think the facts are, and what most people will regard as the way problems are to be dealt with” (Severin & Tankard, 2001, p. 221).

According to Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder (1982) a process called priming allowed the media to emphasize particular issues while ignoring others. This allowed the media to influence how voters would evaluate presidential candidates. (Severin & Tankard, 2001, p. 226)

Wanta & Roy (1995) discovered that “agenda-setting effects for local newspapers showed up after 8 days but lasted longer, disappearing after 85 days” (Severin & Tankard, 2001, p. 229).

The American public has continued to build negative opinions regarding the news media since the mid-1960s (Bennett, Rhine & Flickinger, 2001). “Polls between 1985 and 1997 show a steep drop in favorable opinions about national television news and small declines in positive views of large national influential and local newspapers” (Bennett, Rhine & Flickinger, 2001, p. 163).

This analysis regarding the opinions of Americans toward the news media’s fairness in covering politics was based mostly on data from the 1996 and 1998 National Elections Studies. “This is a study of the factors that predict Americans’ opinions about the news media’s fairness” (Bennett, Rhine & Flickinger, 2001, p.164).

Along with the National Election Studies, this literature looks at other past studies (D.K. Davis, 1990; Zukin, 1981) as well as dissects the results of a test conducted by the authors in focusing on several variables that were commonly used in the polls.

It concludes that about “...two-thirds of the public express doubts about the news media’s fairness” (Bennett, Rhine & Flickinger, 2001, p.176). This evidence reveals that the

American public believes that the media's news "coverage of politics is biased and unfair" (Bennett, Rhine & Flickinger, 2001, p.176).

Bennett, Rhine & Flickinger looked at polls conducted by Hazel Erskine in 1970-1971, which researched American opinions of the press during the mid-1930s until the late 1960s. She found that most of the public then thought the press was fair, but some did mention partisan bias during the campaigns and election coverage (Bennett, Rhine & Flickinger, 2001, p. 165). "Much of the research on attitudes toward the press has occurred since the 1970s, which coincides with a general decline in support for institutions, including the media" (Bennett, Rhine & Flickinger, 2001, p. 165).

Michael Robinson (1974) discovered that during Watergate, though American views of the press declined, there was an increase in its credibility. This led to Becker, Cobbe & Sobowale (1978) discovering that critical claims against the media became abundant among the Republicans that approved and supported Nixon during Watergate. From these findings, they claimed, "support of the press is dependent in part on the popularity of the national leadership" (Bennett, Rhine & Flickinger, 2001, p. 165).

Robinson & Kohut (1988) researched Gallup polls and found that during the Reagan era, the public believed that the media were more believable than the administration. This study showed that despite a period of the President's highest popularity amongst the American people, the Iran-Contra scandal made both Reagan and the press, post a decline in public opinion. "The researchers asserted that unresolved factual disputes between the press and government diminish the credibility of both the media and the administration" (Bennett, Rhine & Flickinger, 2001, p. 166).

According to Robinson & Petrella (1988) the telecast of the January 25, 1988, disagreement between George Bush and CBS News anchorman Dan Rather, created a decline in approval from the American public of broadcast news and especially of Rather (Bennett, Rhine & Flickinger, 2001, p. 166).

Ornstein & Robinson (1990) argued that the media credibility was decreasing because: (1) Negative reactions to media stories about politicians' personal peccadilloes; (2) Increasing concern about the blurring of news and entertainment; (3) Media's negative reports about government malfeasance have not resulted, except in rare exceptions such as Watergate, in "proof" of official misdemeanors; (4) The public actually approves of the messenger if the news is bad, as long as it is not bad news about our political institutions (Bennett, Rhine & Flickinger, 2001, p. 166).

According to Fico, Richardson & Edwards (2004), most of the research conducted on news media coverage of elections has targeted the balance of coverage during elections. "Much of this scholarly attention has examined newspaper and television network treatment of Republican and Democratic candidates for president" (Fico, Richardson & Edwards, 2004, p. 303). They add much research has been concentrated on the positive and negative coverage presented by the media of each political candidate.

The study conducted by Fico, Richardson & Edwards (2004) analyzed the structure of a conflict story and its effects of balanced and imbalanced in judging bias or credibility of a news organization. The participants evaluated mock newspaper articles regarding capital punishment, flat income tax rate, and drinking age.

Results showed participants perceived imbalanced stories as biased and correctly identified the side favored by the story's imbalance. Participants evaluated newspapers apparently responsible for balanced stories as more credible than newspapers apparently publishing stories imbalanced to favor one side or the other

on the issue. Imbalanced story structure directly led to perceived story bias, and perceived story bias in turn led to negative evaluation of the credibility of the newspaper publishing the imbalanced story. (Fico, Richardson & Edwards, 2004, p. 301)

In comparison research (Domke, Watts, Shah & Fan, 1999), suggest that accusations by “conservative elites” are affecting the perceptions of the American public in its views of a liberal media. This study looked at questions of what may have caused “conservative elites,” during presidential elections of 1988, 1992, and 1996 to make so much noise and claims regarding a liberal media slant in news coverage. The difference in this research compared to others is that the authors focus not on identifying media bias, but instead “exploring factors” that led to the accusations of the liberal media (Domke, Watts, Shah & Fan, 1999, p. 37). One finding from this study was:

Claiming the media are liberally biased perhaps has become a core rhetorical strategy by conservative elites in recent years, and the observed relationships between opinion polls and media bias claims may be due merely to the fact that the Republican candidate won in 1988, but lost in 1992 and 1996. (Domke, Watts, Shah & Fan, 1999, p. 54)

The researchers concluded that the goal of the Republicans in their action of criticizing the media was an attempt to influence the news coverage as well as public opinion due to the fact that journalists rely on the political parties to provide them the news content.

Fico & Cote (1999) examined the newspaper coverage of Michigan’s nine largest dailies during the 1996 Presidential Election from the period beginning with Labor Day an ending on Election Day. This study searched for structural characteristics of news reporting that might affect whether the readers believed the stories were imbalanced. The findings were that “stories were significantly imbalanced structurally. Regardless of the candidate a reader might have supported, chances were nearly even that any encountered story was one sided, but two-sided

stories were likely to be significantly imbalanced as well” (Fico & Cote, 1999, p. 124). They found that coverage of events was the most significant indicator of imbalanced structure.

The biggest difference in this study compared to others is that it did not specifically try to locate and define media bias, but instead Fico & Cote attempted to identify what characteristics in news reporting affected the audience’s belief of the media being unfair or bias (Fico & Cote, 1999, p. 125). Though they were not searching for bias, this study’s findings presented evidence that Republican Bob Dole received more coverage than Democrat Bill Clinton, which they say defied the argument of a liberal bias in this study. These researchers discovered that decisions made in the newsroom were critical in determining the imbalance characteristics. “In particular, page-one story placement and interview or event story sourcing were the most influential on the production of two-sided stories, and event coverage alone was also directly related to story structure factors” (Fico & Cote, 1999, p. 134).

Groseclose & Milyo (2004), searched for an actual measure of media bias. The researchers looked at some of the major news outlets, such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, Fox News, *USA Today*, as well as the three major network news programs. They came up with ADA (Americans for Democratic Action) scores, which was a computation of the number of times that a media outlet uses certain think tanks or policy groups in their news stories only, as this study did not include editorials, book reviews and letters to the editor. That information was then compared to members of Congress regarding how many times that they would mention these same think tanks in their speeches within the House or Senate. One of their findings using the ADA score was that *The New York Times* was more biased than other media outlets.

Although some claim that the liberal bias of the *New York Times* is balanced by the conservative bias of other outlets, such as the *Washington Times* or Fox News’

Special Report, this is not quite true. *The New York Times* is slightly more than twice as far from the center as Special Report. (Groseclose & Milyo, 2004, p. 18)
The researchers highlight the fact that with their method of an ADA score, one does not have to make a subjective evaluation of the degree that a think tank may be liberal or conservative.

D'Alessio & Allen, (2000) researched the perceptions of readers on what classifies media as being biased. After identifying 59 content analyses of presidential campaigns between the years 1948-1996, D'Alessio focused on what the audience considered media bias, which he considered an area that was less researched. (D'Alessio, 2003, p. 282). "Perception of bias is negatively associated with the perceptions of accuracy" was the key result of this study" (D'Alessio, 2003, p.290). According to the author, this type of response from the study's participants, which were college students, reflected the Social Judgment Theory. The study highlighted the fact that when journalists present all sides of a story, readers will mostly concentrate on the parts that they disagree with and in return consider it biased reporting (D'Alessio, 2003, p.292).

A major finding by D'Alessio & Allen in the original 2000 study was that there was a minimal amount of bias for both Republicans and Democrats among individual reporters and some publications, but across the board as a whole, the newspaper industry had "only negligible, if any, net bias in the coverage of presidential campaigns" (D'Alessio & Allen, 2000, p. 148). According to the researchers, "the elements that make bias in electoral campaigns easy to measure – most importantly, the assumption of a 50-50 split as being unbiased-also makes it easy for a medium to police itself" (D'Alessio & Allen, 2000, p. 149).

Eveland & Shah (2003) discovered from data gained in a national survey that suggested "that individuals' political orientations and social networks both play a significant role in shaping perceptions of media bias and also supports the hostile-media phenomena (Eveland &

Shah, 2003, p. 112). Weaknesses in this study included the sample not being a true probability sample and there not being a difference made between the types of media sources as well as specifying the levels of discussion on different topics.

Findings in the literature that do suggest apparent bias are inconsistent regarding the direction or nature of the bias across studies or at least over time. That is, some studies have produced evidence of a liberal bias, whereas others have claimed to find a conservative bias (e.g. Lowry, 1974; Lowry & Shidler, 1998; Smith & Roden, 1988; Stempel & Windhauser, 1989). (Eveland & Shah, 2003, p. 102)

Niven (2003) conducted a news coverage comparison regarding the last four members of Congress to switch political parties prior to January 2003. He used coder's estimated tone of the paragraphs in newspaper coverage from national as well as state publications of each of the four politicians. (Niven, 2003, p. 316).

With a score for each paragraph of each article, a ratio of positive to negative articles (positive articles defined as articles with more positive than negative paragraphs; negative articles defined as articles with more negative than positive paragraphs) and positive to negative paragraphs were calculated. (Niven, 2003, p. 317)

Two comparisons of articles were conducted: (1) Tone of the first five paragraphs. (2) Tone of all paragraphs in the entire article. This study's focus on both major political parties and similar behavior by each candidate resulted in no solid findings to support "pro-liberal or pro-Democratic bias" (Niven, 2003, p. 311). No significant statistically difference was discovered in the analysis of the first five paragraphs or the entire article, resulting in no solid evidence of media bias when politicians switch parties, but to the contrary, media gave both parties similar news coverage.

A point that needs to be introduced in regards to this literature that Niven (2003) highlighted, is that despite all the evidence that points toward a majority of journalists exercising a liberal slant, "the meaning of that information is questionable. In short, demonstrating the

leftward leaning tilt of journalists does not necessarily establish the leftward leaning tilt of journalism” (Niven, 2003, p. 312).

In another study that focused on tone to highlight editorial slant and its effects on the decisions of voters, Druckman & Parkin (2005) conducted content analyses of two competing newspapers in their coverage of a Senate campaign (Minnesota). The researchers looked at the amount of space each publication provided along with its amount of “contrasting tones they use in describing the candidates” (Druckman & Parkin, 2005, p. 1031). Tone was defined as “how the newspapers covered the candidates image traits (i.e., the negative, neutral, or positive slant of image coverage)” (Druckman & Parkin, 2005, p. 1032). Also, expected findings were concluded, that editorial slant does in fact influence voters. This step according to the researchers was not accomplished by studying slant or media bias, but accomplished with an Election Day exit poll that was conducted to evaluate the results of news coverage regarding the campaigns and how voters evaluated each of the political candidates on the main campaign issues.

Additional research by Druckman (2005) discovered that newspapers have greater influence than broadcast news on the public. Newspapers have a “significant, although potentially limited, role” (Druckman, 2005, p. 463) in informing voters. Again, like earlier studies, Druckman focused on a single campaign in a single market. This time though, he conducted a content analysis on four television stations, two major newspapers, and included an exit day poll, as in his earlier experiment, to examine the learning of voters from the news coverage. Also, Druckman found that newspapers did provide more quantity in election coverage than did television and supported his hypothesis that voters learn from newspapers and not from television. (Druckman, 2005, p. 465)

Dalton, Beck & Huckfeldt (1998) research supplements the claims by Druckman (2005) that newspapers have a “significant role in providing cues that influence voters” (Dalton, Beck & Huckfeldt, 1998, p.111). This study presents the case that though the press does not provide clear information to their audiences concerning presidential elections; it instead delivers messages regarding the candidates and their campaigns. The results produce evidence that the “press provides political cues that may significantly influence the opinions of readers” (Dalton, Beck & Huckfeldt, 1998, p.124). Despite that influence, it also maintains the existence of the hostile media hypothesis for the reason most audiences believe that there is media bias, but the problem is determining what direction that bias is pointed (Dalton, Beck & Huckfeldt, 1998, p.124).

Gilens & Hertzman (2000) examined whether corporate ownership within the mass media industry has affected newspaper coverage or become a fuel for biased reporting. This study examined newspaper coverage of the 1996 Telecommunications Act and compared the publications, which some of the owners had something to gain from the passage of the law (Gilens & Hertzman, 2000, p.369). The findings present clear evidence that some media slanted editorials as well as news stories because of financial interests of its owners in regard to the proposed legislation. “This study provides systematic evidence that the financial interests of media owners influence not only newspaper editorials but straight news reporting as well” (Gilens & Hertzman, p. 383). According to the researchers, the conflict that becomes a possibility is when media organizations, which are owned by corporate businessmen, find that the topics that they cover often collide with the financial interests of the company. (Gilens & Hertzman, p. 384)

Page (1996) proposed the idea that media through news coverage indirectly try to “change the beliefs and policy preferences of mass and/or elite audiences” (Page, 1996, p. 20). He introduces the fact that there is evidence that shows some political views in editorials can be identified in news stories. Despite not finding supportive evidence, other than with the *New York Times*, Page as with Gilen & Hertzman (2000), also brought up the possibility that corporate influence could be a source in bias news reporting. He does conclude that there is much evidence to point out that the information that appears in the media does have an impact on their audiences. Page said:

The days of belief in ‘minimal effects’ by the media are over. A large body of evidence now indicates that what appears in print or on the air has a substantial impact upon how citizens think and what they think about. (Page, 1996, p. 23)

He makes the additional claim that what the media present in their publication does have an effect on policymakers and their decisions.

Sutter (2001), in his article, “Can the Media Be So Liberal? The Economics of Media Bias”, takes an indirect approach to identifying a liberal media bias. Unlike other researchers, instead of highlighting the existence of media bias, he attempts to identify “what might generate and sustain a liberal news media” (Sutter, 2001, p.431). The author examines the economical connections to the consumer/viewer of news, along with the journalist and the media owners’ influence in the production of the news product. He concludes that to have a liberal bias in the media, it “must have a source and maintenance of bias requires a news cartel” (Sutter, 2001, p. 439). Sutter maintains that the source of bias remains a mystery, but journalists are the prime targets, while he still questioned the media owners’ responsibility.

“The Limits of Media Bias,” a *National Review* article (O’ Sullivan, 2004), demonstrates much evidence that despite a Republican victory during the presidential election in 2004, George

Bush could have avoided fewer obstacles of media bias and led his party to an even larger margin of votes. The author introduced examples of how the Bush administration failed to rally America patriotism behind the events of September 11, 2001, which he believes would have benefited the Republican Party during the 2004 Election and assisted as a counter to the favoritism of the media toward Senator John Kerry. O’Sullivan shows how the media and the Democratic Party failed to take advantage of President Bush’s mistakes, which could have led to a difference the election outcome.

An Editor & Publisher article, “Does Press Beat Around Bush?” (Mitchell, 2000), discusses alleged bias of newspapers during the 2000 Presidential Election between George Bush and Al Gore, which turned a runaway election victory into one of the closest in the history of the United States. The author also introduces survey results regarding readers’ attitudes of their newspapers’ coverage during the election and how they affected their decisions at the voting booth. The data here supports the conclusion that voters do get the majority of their political news from newspapers, but the slant or endorsements toward particular candidates do not affect the public’s decision-making process on Election Day. (Mitchell, 2000)

Fico & Freedman (2004) found that some studies showed that media gave more coverage to the Democratic challenger in the Michigan governor election in both 1994 and 1998 than to the Republican incumbent (Fico & Freedman, 2004, p. 45). They also discovered that during the 1996 elections for the U.S. Senate and President, the Republican challengers received the majority of the media attention (Fico & Freedman, 2004, p. 45). Additionally, a study by Lowry & Shidler presented evidence that incumbents received more criticism because of the availability of their political track record. “Their data, they concluded, were more consistent with an interpretation of network liberal bias against Republican candidates, whether incumbents or

challengers” (Fico & Freedman, 2004, p. 46). Fico & Freedman conducted a content analysis of the nine largest newspapers in Michigan of the 2002 governor election and compared the results to those of an identical 1998 study of the same race. The 1998 analysis, which pitted an incumbent and a challenger, showed that the newspapers favored the Democrat candidate 51% to 35% in news coverage. The 2002 open race was more balanced at 42% respectively.

Results from this research show that at least for high-visibility elections, challengers are likely to get more attention in stories than incumbents. When an incumbent is not on the ballot in a high-visibility election, stories are more likely to ‘balance out’ in the total attention given candidates, and individual stories are also more likely to present both candidates more equally. (Fico & Freedman, 2004, p. 54)

The researchers also found that when stories were prominent, the editors would apply pressure to their journalists to allow equal coverage to the candidates since these types of stories were more than likely to increase readership. (Fico & Freedman, 2004, p. 54)

The weakness to this study though was that it was limited to just one state and just the largest of the daily newspapers and the researchers believed that it “may not be applicable to broadcast media” (Fico & Freedman, 2004, p. 55).

Background

The New York Times, which began in 1851 as the *New-York Daily Times* and changed its name to its current title in 1857, claims on its home website that it “remains the largest seven-day newspaper in the United States, with circulation at 1.7 million Sunday and 1.1 million on daily” (*The New York Times*, 2005).

Eight years ago, *The New York Times* was available to readers in only 62 markets. Today it can be purchased in 332 national markets (*The New York Times*, 2005).

Its home website also makes the statement that its newspaper gained its reputation “as the newspaper of record throughout the 20th Century” (*The New York Times*, 2005).

The Washington Times, which was founded in 1982, proclaims on its website that it is “America’s Newspaper” and that it is “one of the most-often quoted newspapers in the U.S. It has gained a reputation for hard-hitting investigative reporting through the coverage of politics and policy” (*The Washington Times*, 2005). This newspaper has a daily circulation of over 103,000 (*The Washington Times*, 2005).

Research Question

The issue of international affairs and past political decision-making usually becomes a topic of debate during times of presidential elections. Events that affect the nation close to home such as a war or military operations, but have a global impact, become key issues and receive much exposure during election campaigns. Other topics that bound in the news are stories regarding the character, personal life and decisions made by the candidates throughout their lives and especially during their career as a politician.

During this past presidential election, topics such as the decision to go to war in Iraq became a large portion of the debate among the presidential candidates and received much of the attention from the media. Personal actions and decisions made by both Bush and Kerry during the Vietnam War also became a popular debate topic. The true status of the American economy and the reasons for its change along with the argument of who was responsible were also up for discussion.

One of the main reasons for doing this study was to see if these topics of debate and discussion during the election campaign, which were covered by the American media, especially in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Times*, were presented in a way that could allow the accusations of any possible media bias or unbalanced news coverage.

This was accomplished by looking back in time to evaluate whether the news reporting that was conducted during this past presidential campaign was a fair and balanced product. The research question that guided this study was: Did the political news products from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Times* during this study's time period present unbalanced coverage toward either President George Bush or Senator John Kerry and does the evaluation format and criteria that was executed in the study, assist in determining a clearer and standard definition in identifying media bias?

Hypotheses

To assist answer this question, three hypotheses for this study were developed regarding the issue of unbalanced media coverage leading up to the Presidential Election of 2004:

H1: *The Washington Times* favored President George Bush with more positive and favorable news stories, columns, and editorials regarding him and his campaign leading up to the election during the period of October 15, 2004 to November 1, 2004.

H2: *The New York Times* favored Senator John Kerry with more positive and favorable news stories, columns, and editorials regarding him and his campaign leading up to the election during the period of October 15, 2004 to November 1, 2004.

H3: *The New York Times* was more unbalanced (percentage of published news articles, columns, and editorials) in its election coverage during the period of October 15, 2004, to November 1, 2004, than was *The Washington Times* in its coverage of the presidential election.

CHAPTER 3 METHODS

Despite the importance of this coverage of bias and this belief in bias, scholarly research on this topic has been hamstrung by limitations of method. Those who argue the case for bias largely rely upon surveys of reporters, which are ill suited to demonstrate bias in the actual coverage that emerges. Those who argue the case against bias largely rely upon studies that compare coverage of Democrats and Republicans, often in campaign settings. (Niven, 2003, p. 321)

This quantitative study used content analysis to evaluate news stories, columns (commentaries) and editorials published by both *The New York Times* and *The Washington Times* during the last two weeks of the presidential campaign, October 15, 2004 to November 1, 2004.

A composite week was developed from this two-week period. Each day of a week (Monday through Sunday) was evaluated from both newspapers. The days that were randomly chosen were Friday, October 15, 2004; Sunday, October 17, 2004; Wednesday, October 20, 2004; Saturday, October 23, 2004; Tuesday, October 26, 2004; Thursday, October 28, 2004; and Monday, November 1, 2004. This content analysis attempted to identify media bias and/or unbalanced media reporting during the 2004 Presidential Election.

A composite week sample was chosen over other sampling techniques because Riffe, Aust, and Lacy (1993) “demonstrated that a composite week sampling technique was superior to both a random sample and a consecutive day sample when dealing with newspaper content” (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003, p. 148). “Daily papers vary from day to day during a week because of the advertising cycle, and simple random sampling can over-sample large-news hole Wednesday and Sunday editions and under-sample scanty Saturday editions” (Lacy, Riffe,

Stoddard, Martin & Chang, 2001, p. 837). According to Riffe, Aust, and Lacy (1993) one constructed week was efficient for studying a six-month worth of published newspapers.

Much has been proposed regarding a true and clear definition of the term “media bias.” This has been a subjective assessment for many in the mass communication field for years as numerous studies, as shown in the literature review, have been conducted in an attempt to define bias and to set standards for evaluation of media products.

Critics accusing the media of either a liberal or conservative bias make use of surveys of working journalists, content analysis of stories covered, and anecdotes about stories killed or not pursued to make their case. But a conclusive measure of political bias in the news has been elusive. That the Media Research Center and Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting respectively point to the same news as demonstrating liberal and conservative biases indicates that we lack such a measure. (Sutter, 2001, p.431)

To identify unbalanced news coverage in this study, the focus was on paragraph tone of each news article, column, and editorials during the content analysis for each of the newspapers. This study’s format was similar to one previously conducted (Nivens, 2003) during a study to find objective evidence of media bias during newspaper coverage of Congressional party switchers.

Domke, Watts, Shah & Fan (1999) randomly chose news stories from the 1988, 1992, and 1996 presidential elections, where they researched three types of data, which included valence. They looked for positive or negative news coverage of the presidential candidates. The paragraph was also used as the unit of analysis in this part of the study, looking at valence by using InfoTrend, which is a computer program used to conduct content analysis. The researchers evaluated each paragraph as either “pro or con for the candidates” (Domke, Watts, Shah & Fan, 1999, p.39-40). According to the researchers, using the paragraph as the unit of analysis, “Buchanan (1991) argued, ‘provides a much more accurate reflection of the nature of news

coverage than arbitrarily classifying each story into one and only one category” (Domke, et al, 1999, p.40).

The “50-50 split” of coverage bias and statement bias, introduced by D’Alessio & Allen (2000), will also be used to supplement paragraph tone in this research. According to their study, an equal split in coverage shows an attempt by a media organization to be unbiased, while actions that do not attain close to a 50-50 split in coverage, highlights some amount of media bias. “The area of presidential politics, therefore, is uniquely simplified in terms of the study of media bias. An unbiased medium should cover both sides equally” (D’Alessio & Allen, 2000, p. 138).

Fico, Richardson & Edwards (2004) also pointed out much research concerning perceived news bias has been concentrated on the “amount of space given to each side and whether assertions from issue contenders appear in the story lead, in the next four paragraphs, or in the next five paragraphs following those. A story that gives more space to one side, and in which only that side makes assertions in the lead and in the next nine paragraphs, was considered the most imbalanced” (Fico, Richardson & Edwards, 2004, p. 305).

Identifying an equal amount of coverage, as far as the number of stories or amount of space was not the focus of this research, but it took this issue to a different level, as the concentration examined the amount of positive coverage versus the amount of negative coverage for each presidential candidate. The study evaluated each paragraph for its tone of either positive or negative and then arrived to a total number for both with the greater number defining the type of tone for that particular news article, column, or editorial. If the story evaluation resulted in an even distribution of both positive & negative tone for Bush and Kerry then the story was identified as neutral.

According to Eveland & Shah (2003) to evaluate bias within news coverage, there must be “a standard of what ‘unbiased’ should be. A neutral story in this study mirrors what past researchers have called “unbiased news coverage.”

Although this study’s main goal was not to define, identify and confirm the presence of news bias, this researcher focused on identifying balanced and unbalanced media coverage. Hopefully this study will contribute to the efforts of the mass communication field to set an eventual clear definition and standard for identifying and evaluating media bias.

Druckman & Parkin (2005) also agree that to identify slant or bias there must be an “objective” standard to be used in evaluation. (Druckman & Parkin, 2005, p. 1031)

Just as with Niven (2003), two independent coders were used to evaluate the 173 news stories and editorials from *The New York Times* (96 total articles) and *The Washington Times* (77 total articles) that were identified through the LexisNexis Academic database. The news articles, columns, and editorials were located by searching for the terms: “George Bush, President Bush, George W. Bush, John Kerry, Senator John Kerry, and Senator Kerry”.

Coder Training

The two coders for this study participated in two detailed training sessions on February 10, 2006 and February 17, 2006, which included practice with coding exercises. Two inter-coder reliability tests were conducted. The first pilot test, which was on February 17, 2006, consisted of 16 articles: 8 news stories (4 from *The New York Times* and 4 from *The Washington Times*), 4 columns (2 from *The New York Times* and 2 from *The Washington Times*), and 4 editorials (2 from *The New York Times* and 2 from *The Washington Times*) resulted in a 87% (14 of 16 articles) agreement between coders. The second test, which was distributed on March 3, 2006, consisted of 18 articles, again equally divided between the two newspapers and article type. This

final check of reliability resulted in agreement on 16 of 18 articles for 88% inter-coder reliability. The coders completed all coding in 22 days from February 17, 2006 to March 10, 2006.

The coders analyzed each article for which newspaper it was published and whether it was a news article, editorial, or column (See Appendix A). The placement of the article was then identified either as “front page,” “first section but not front page,” or “other, not first section.” The coders noted the byline of each article, along with the headline.

Coders determined the content of each article as one of 12 issues: (1) War on Terrorism, (2) Bush’s Record, (3) Kerry’s Record, (4) Healthcare, (5) Homeland Security, (6) Economy, (7) Military Service, (8) Tax Cuts, (9) Social Security, (10) Abortion, (11) Religion, or (12) Other.

The tone of each headline was then labeled as either positive toward Bush (BP), positive toward Kerry (KP), negative toward Bush (BN), negative toward Kerry (KN) or Neutral (N). Each individual paragraph was then coded with the same above coding procedure. Computation was then conducted with BP and KP receiving the value of +1, while BN and KN received a -1, and N was given a 0. Once the computation was completed, the tone that received the highest number was the overall tone of the article with BP = KN and KP = BN. The final evaluated rating of the articles was either rated as favoring Bush, Kerry, or Neutral. If a six-paragraph article, for example, received a 3 total for BP and a 3 for KP, then the article would be evaluated as “Neutral.”

Nonparametric statistical procedures were implemented, using the statistical program, Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), to analyze the data obtained from the content analysis of this study. Chi-Square and cross-tabulation were used to test for the goodness of fit of the data obtained.

Operational Definitions

Paragraph Tone was defined as the manner of expressing or providing information or quotes by individuals in either a positive or negative style within each paragraph of a news article, column or editorial.

The basic coding for the content analysis of the news stories was:

Bush Positive or Kerry Positive was defined as statements or quotes referencing George Bush or John Kerry that were evaluated as presenting positive data or information toward them personally or their campaign. This was labeled on the coding sheet (see Appendix B) as either (BP) or (KP).

Bush Negative or Kerry Negative was defined as statement or quotes referencing George Bush or John Kerry that were evaluated as presenting negative data or information toward them personally or their campaign. This was labeled on the coding sheet as either (BN) or (KN).

Bush: The total number of positive, negative, and neutral paragraphs was computed, and the coder determined that the news story, column, or editorial favored George Bush. This was labeled on the coding sheet as (B).

Kerry: The total number of positive, negative and neutral paragraphs was computed, and the coder determined that the news story, column, or editorial favored John Kerry. This was labeled on the coding sheet as (K).

Neutral: The total number of positive, negative, and neutral paragraphs was computed, and the coder determined that the news story, column, or editorial was equal. This was labeled on the coding sheet as (N).

To assist in the understanding of the coding method, the following are selected examples from some of the actual news stories and

editorials that were evaluated during a pilot test using the above-mentioned criteria:

Bush Positive (BP):

Still, Mr. DeLorge said he thought Mr. Bush came across as more human instead of just another politician and had his best performance in this last of the three debates. Seated next to him, Rebecca Y. Bornstein, 19, also a sophomore political science major, praised Mr. Bush for protecting our interests in Iraq, consulting with our allies but not waiting too long to act. (*The New York Times*, October 15, 2004)

Kerry Positive (KP):

Eli N. Savit, 21, a political science major at Kalamazoo College, who spent part of the last academic year studying in Madrid, commented on Mr. Bush's unpopularity in Europe and said he was impressed by Mr. Kerry's insistence that steps must be taken to improve our reputation abroad through close consultation with allies. (*The New York Times*, October 15, 2004)

Bush Negative (BN):

George, is that all you got? Mr. Kerry said. And so, I say to you Mr. President: After four years of lost jobs, after four years of families losing health coverage, after four years of falling incomes, is that all you've got? After four years of rising gas prices, rising health care costs, and squeezed families, is that all you've got? After a campaign filled with excuses to justify your record and a campaign of false attacks on me, is that all you've got? (*The New York Times*, October 15, 2004)

Kerry Negative (KN):

Mr. Bush was equally optimistic. There is no doubt in my mind we will carry Michigan, he said in Saginaw. He suggested that a major reason for his confidence was Mr. Kerry's criticism of U.S. efforts in Iraq after supporting a congressional resolution supporting the war. What does that lack of conviction say to our troops who are risking their lives in a vital cause? Mr. Bush said, drawing applause. What does that lack of conviction signal to our enemies? That if you make things uncomfortable, if you stir up trouble, John Kerry will back off, he added. That's a very dangerous signal to send during this time. (*The Washington Times*, October 29, 2004)

CHAPTER 4 RESULTS

This study evaluated 173 total news articles, columns, and editorials covering the final two weeks prior to the 2004 Presidential Election. *The New York Times* published 96 articles during this time period, while *The Washington Times* published 77 articles. The coders for this researched evaluated 105 news stories, 50 columns, and 18 editorials.

The first hypothesis, which stated that *The Washington Times* favored President George Bush and his campaign with more positive and favorable news stories, columns, and editorials during the period of October 15, 2004 to November 1, 2004, was supported. The study's findings showed that *The Washington Times* published 50 of its 77 total articles (64.9%) with a favorable slant toward George Bush, while 17 articles (22.1%) favored John Kerry and the final 10 articles (13%) were coded as neutral. The results were statistically significant as $p < .001$.

The second hypothesis, which stated that *The New York Times* favored Senator John Kerry and his campaign with more positive and favorable news stories, columns, and editorials regarding him and his campaign leading up to the election during the period of October 15, 2004, to November 1, 2004, was supported. *The New York Times* favored Kerry in 54 of its 96 articles (56.3%), while it tilted toward Bush in 27 articles (28.1%) and 15 (15.6%) were neutral. The findings were statistically significant as $p < .001$.

The third hypothesis, which stated that *The New York Times* was more unbalanced (percentage of published news articles, columns, and editorials) in its election news coverage during the period of October 15, 2004 to November 1, 2004, than was *The Washington Times* in its coverage of the presidential election, was not supported. The research findings actually discovered the opposite. *The Washington Times*, with its 64.9% slant toward Bush was more

unbalanced than *The New York Times*' 56.3% tilt toward positive Kerry news coverage. The findings were statistically significant as $p < .001$.

Table 1
Overall Tone Coding Results

Newspaper	Bush	Kerry	Neutral	Total
<i>The New York Times</i>	27 (28.1%)	54 (56.3%)	15 (15.6%)	96
<i>The Washington Times</i>	50 (64.9%)	17 (22.1%)	10 (13.0%)	77

Both newspapers, as expected, were found to be unbalanced in their media coverage of the presidential candidates. *The Washington Times* topped *The New York Times* in percentage of slant in two of the three article type categories (news articles, columns, and editorials), though by only a 2.8% difference. This was the closest that the two newspapers were statistically in the three article-type categories. *The New York Times* favored Kerry in 56.8% of its news stories (32.1%-Bush, 11.3%-Neutral), while *The Washington Times* tilted toward Bush in 53.8% of its news (30.8%-Kerry, 15.4%-Neutral). These findings were statistically significant as $p = .027$.

Table 2
News Articles Coding Results

Newspaper	Bush	Kerry	Neutral	Newspaper Total
<i>The New York Times</i>	17 (32.1 %)	30 (56.6%)	6 (11.3%)	53
<i>The Washington Times</i>	28 (53.8%)	16 (30.8%)	8 (15.4%)	52
Tone Total	45	46	14	105

Editorial results showed that *The Washington Times* favored Bush in 11 of its 12 editorials (91.7%) during the period of this study with no editorials slanted for Kerry and only

one that was coded neutral. *The New York Times* on the other hand, published 5 of its 6 editorials (83.3%) in support of Kerry with only one in support of Bush and none coded as neutral. These findings were statistically significant as $p = .001$.

Table 3
Editorial Coding Results

Newspaper	Bush	Kerry	Neutral	Newspaper Total
<i>The New York Times</i>	1 (16.7%)	5 (83.3%)	0 (0.0%)	6
<i>The Washington Times</i>	11 (91.7%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (8.3%)	12
Tone Total	12	5	1	18

The biggest difference between the two publications in the article type category was in columns. *The Washington Times* favored Bush with 84.6% of its columns (7.7%-Kerry, 7.7%-Neutral), while *The New York Times* tilted toward Kerry in 51.4% of its published columns (24.3%-Bush, 24.3%-Neutral). These findings were statistically significant as $p = .001$.

Table 4
Column Coding Results

Newspaper	Bush	Kerry	Neutral	Newspaper Total
<i>The New York Times</i>	9 (24.3%)	19 (51.4%)	9 (24.3%)	37
<i>The Washington Times</i>	11 (84.6%)	1 (7.7%)	1 (7.7%)	13
Tone Total	20	20	10	50

When the data is broken down to a daily perspective and the percentage of their slanted coverage is analyzed, *The Washington Times* was more consistent from start to finish during the period of the content analysis (October 15, 2004 – November 1, 2004). The newspaper received

a 70% rating in favor of Bush on October 15, 2004, while its lowest percentage of support toward Bush coming on October 28, 2004, at 60% and its highest being 76.9% on October 26, 2004. *The New York Times* on the other hand, was evaluated as supporting Kerry with 44.4% (also 44.4% toward Bush) on October 15, 2004, while its lowest percentage of support for Kerry was on October 20, 2004 at 38.5% (also 38.5% for Bush) and its highest slant came on October 26, 2004 (same day as for *The Washington Times*) with 68.8%. The day before the election, *The New York Times* was evaluated as supporting Kerry with 58.8% (23.5%-Bush, 17.7%-Neutral) of its articles, while *The Washington Times* was tilted toward Bush with 50% (25%-Kerry, 25%-Neutral).

Table 5
Publication Date Coding Results

Date	NEW	YORK	TIMES	WASH	TIMES	
	Bush	Kerry	Neutral	Bush	Kerry	Neutral
Oct. 15	4	4	1	7	2	1
Friday	(44.4%)	(44.4%)	(11.1%)	(70.0%)	(20.0%)	(10.0%)
Oct. 17	6	13	5	2	0	1
Sunday	(25.0%)	(54.2%)	(20.8%)	(66.7%)	(00.0%)	(33.3%)
Oct. 20	5	5	3	9	2	2
Wednesday	(38.5%)	(38.5%)	(23.0%)	(69.2%)	(15.4%)	(15.4%)
Oct. 23	4	7	0	5	1	1
Saturday	(36.4%)	(63.6%)	(00.0%)	(71.4%)	(14.3%)	(14.3%)
Oct. 26	3	11	2	10	3	0
Tuesday	(18.8%)	(68.7%)	(12.5%)	(76.9%)	(23.1%)	(00.0%)
Oct. 28	1	4	1	9	5	1
Thursday	(16.7%)	(66.7%)	(16.6%)	(60.0%)	(33.3%)	(6.7%)
Nov. 1	4	10	3	8	4	4
Monday	(23.5%)	(58.9%)	(17.6%)	(50.0%)	(25.0%)	(25.0%)

As a secondary study, headlines of all of the articles of both newspapers during the period of study were also evaluated for tone. As far as the tone evaluations of the headlines of each article, the majority of them were found to be neutral. Overall, 127 of the 173 (73.4%) headlines were rated neutral. *The New York Times* was neutral in its headlines 80.2% of the time (13.5%-

Kerry, 6.3%-Bush), while *The Washington Times* was neutral 64.9% (24.7%-Bush, 10.4%-Kerry). These findings were statistically significant as $p = .019$.

The placement of articles in the newspaper compared to the tone revealed that 70% of the stories that *The Washington Times* published on the front page, regarding the presidential election, were in favor of Bush, while 25% supported Kerry, and 5% were coded as neutral. *The New York Times* had 50% of its front-page stories rated in support of Kerry, while 41.7% tilted toward Bush, and 8.3% were neutral. These findings were not found to be statistically significant as $p = .285$.

Table 6
Front Page Placement Coding Results

Newspaper	Bush	Kerry	Neutral	Newspaper Total
<i>The New York Times</i>	5 (41.7%)	6 (50.0%)	1 (8.3%)	12
<i>The Washington Times</i>	14 (70.0%)	5 (25.0%)	1 (5.0%)	20
Tone Total	19	11	2	32

The majority of the stories (106 of the 173) were coded as being published in the first section, but not front-page. Again, *The Washington Times* had a considerable statistical difference compared to *The New York Times*. *The Washington Times* was evaluated as having 64% of its stories in this section in support of Bush, while 22% favored Kerry and 14% were coded as neutral. *The New York Times* was found to be in support of Kerry with 55.4% of those articles, while 30.4% favored Bush, and 14.3% were recorded as neutral. These findings were found to be statistically significant as $p = .001$.

Additional data collected showed that both newspapers were comparable in topic selection during the two weeks of the study. The most covered topic by both newspapers was stories reference the election itself with 121 of the 173 possible articles. *The New York Times*

published stories regarding the election in 64 stories while *The Washington Times* choose this topic for 57 of its articles. The next popular subject was the War on Terrorism, as 12 total articles were published, with *The New York Times* recording 7 stories and *The Washington Times* had 5. The third favorite topic was Kerry's Record with 10 total stories, as both newspapers did five stories each.

Analysis of editorial content from both newspapers showed that the election itself and War on Terrorism were the top two topics. *The Washington Times* discussed the topic of the election itself 8 of the 12 (66.6%) occasions. The next most discussed topic in its editorials was the War on Terrorism (3 for 25%). *The New York Times* on the other hand discussed the election itself less with only 2 of its 6 editorials (33.3%), while the War on Terrorism was the favored topic with one half of its total (3 of 6 for 50%). This researcher found these findings marginally significant as $p = .053$.

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

Scholars, politicians, the public as well as journalists have long argued about the existence or not of media bias and whether it is in support of liberal or conservative politics. This study was not an attempt to pick a side in that confrontation. Instead, this research was to provide additional data along with testing methodology, in the hope that it would contribute to the work that has already been accomplished in moving toward evaluation criteria for identifying media bias.

The overall purpose of this study though, was to find out if either *The New York Times* or *The Washington Times* published more positive or negative editorials, news stories or columns in favor of either presidential candidate or if these organizations were balanced in their overall coverage of the election.

As pointed out in the chapter four, both *The New York Times* and *The Washington Times* were found to be guilty, according to the study data, of favoring one presidential candidate over the other during the critical final two weeks of the Election of 2004. Much of the literature, as discussed in chapter two, had been centered around and supported the presence of a liberal media bias. Fewer studies called out the conservative elites for creating the perception of this bias (Domeke, Watts, Shah & Fan, 1999).

The biggest surprise of this study was discovering that *The Washington Times* was more unbalanced (64.9% to 56.3%) than *The New York Times*. As seen with this study's hypotheses, there was expectation to find both newspapers favoring one candidate over the other in most of its media products. So that finding was not as significant other than to add more documentation toward an overall media bias on both the liberal as well as conservative political sides.

Though it is not a huge statistical difference between the two publications, 8.6% is a big enough margin to possibly provide some support for the argument that the liberal media bias accusations might be a smoke screen, and the source of it may be conservative elites. The argument could be made that the conservative media may be taking advantage of a liberal media bias distraction to promote their own agenda. This could be a new hypothesis to test in future studies on this topic of media bias.

Could the finding of this study be a strategic attempt by conservative media to affect news coverage and public opinion? Some think so.

According to Domke, Watts, Shah & Fan (1999):

There might be several strategies prompting such claims of liberal bias, but one that seems likely is that the criticisms represent an attempt by conservative elites to cast doubt about the credibility of news media in the minds of voters. Research linking claims of liberal bias during presidential campaigns to shifts in public opinion about the ideological leaning of the press suggests such efforts are successful among some citizens. (Domke, et al, 1999, p. 55)

With that point made, just because *The Washington Times* was found to be more unbalanced in this one study does not allow *The New York Times* to get off the hook of responsibility for its actions. This media organization too was found guilty of favoring one political candidate over the other.

As for the research question introduced in chapter two: Did the political news products from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Times* during this study's time period present unbalanced coverage toward either President George Bush or Senator John Kerry and does the evaluation format and criteria that was executed in the study, assist in determining a clearer and standard definition in identifying media bias? Though this researcher confidently believes in the evaluation techniques used, more study may be required to provide additional credibility and support of the attempted format and criteria. But as far as the unbalanced coverage, the evidence

provided in this study directly shows that it is a good possibility that both news organizations did engage in some sort of agenda setting in a possible attempt to affect the outcome of the election, while at the same time attempting to provide their readers with what they believed was the factual information regarding the election and the candidates.

After reviewing the findings of this study and adding it to past research, another perspective that could be taken regarding media bias is to now put the focus on the type of articles that newspapers use to favor a particular candidate over another. *The Washington Times* was evaluated at 91.7% as far as its amount of editorials that were slanted toward Bush, while *The New York Times* tilted in Kerry's direction 83.3% of the time. But was that not expected or was anyone surprised with those results? "Surveys suggest that the reading public expects (and accepts) 'slanted' editorials, but is indignant about perceived biases in straight news reporting" (Gilens & Hertzman, 2000, p. 372.)

This researcher anticipated that both newspapers would receive high percentage scores in editorials as well as with some of their columns. When the "straight-up" news stories were analyzed, both newspapers were almost statistical even with *The New York Times*, being slightly more bias at 56.6% compared to the 53.8% of *The Washington Times*. The argument could be made here that the presence of bias in news stories is more of a critical concern than the slant of the editorials.

Along with this proposal to concentrate on news stories when evaluating media organizations for bias or unbalanced coverage, the study focus may also need to turn to how the media frame the experts, political scientists or spokespersons that are used in these stories. This recommendation also supports finding found in a content analysis study (Brewer & Sigelman, 2002), which looked at "what political scientists have been quoted as saying about campaigns in

stories published in major American newspapers” (Brewer & Sigelman, 2002, p. 24). These researchers discovered that quotes and commentary provided by the political experts “reinforces the dominant frame within media campaign coverage, rather than providing alternative perspectives on campaigns” (Brewer & Sigelman, 2002, p. 23).

The need for a measure of media bias similar to the one that Groseclose & Milyo (2004) developed (ADA scores) may be required to assist a study over a period of an election (or series of elections) to evaluate whether the news media keep returning back to the same political expert or spokesperson to support particular news frames.

Future studies may have to just accept the fact that newspapers will be tilted one way or the other with their editorials and focus more research on the standard news stories, especially when it comes to the media coverage of politics. The argument too could be made that even columns or commentaries will more than likely be favored in one direction much of the time.

The findings of this study support the previous research that claims a liberal bias as well as a possible attempt by conservative elites to create and support a perception of media bias while attempting to affect public opinion.

One example of *The Washington Times* providing Kerry with negative coverage, in an editorial on Thursday, October 28 with a headline stating, “Kerry: ‘Liberal and proud of it,’” discussed Kerry’s ADA score, as introduced by Groseclose & Milyo (2004):

Indeed, Mr. Kerry’s radical liberalism has been so entrenched and long-standing that his 20-year Senate career includes four years (twice in the 1980s, once in the 1990s and last year) during which he has earned the distinction of being the Senate’s most liberal member.

No less than the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), which rightly considers itself to be the arbiter of all things liberal, has given Mr. Kerry a ‘liberal quotient’ of 92 percent, 2 percentage points above Mr. Kennedy’s voting rating. Moreover, a review of the ADA’s 200 most important votes during the 1990s (20 per year) revealed that Mr. Kennedy voted ADA’s way 191 times, while Mr. Kerry did so 190 times.

The conclusions are irrefutable: Mr. Kerry is a virtual clone of Mr. Kennedy; and a vote for Mr. Kerry is a vote for the radical liberal agenda both he and Mr. Kennedy so enthusiastically embrace. (*The Washington Times*, 2004)

One example of *The New York Times* providing negative coverage for Bush and supporting Kerry was published on October 17, 2004 with the headline, “John Kerry for President”:

There is no denying that this race is mainly about Mr. Bush’s disastrous tenure. Nearly four years ago, after the Supreme Court awarded him the presidency, Mr. Bush came into office amid popular expectation that he would acknowledge his lack of a mandate by sticking close to the center. Instead, he turned the government over to the radical right. (*The New York Times*, 2004)

As seen with the data in chapter four and in these examples of newspaper editorials, both newspapers participated in unbalanced coverage and tilted toward one side of the political debate. *The Washington Times*, with its concentration on the topic of the election itself in both editorials and news articles and its strong tilt as shown with the data from chapter four in both categories points at a favoritism toward Bush. The findings regarding *The New York Times*, with its focus being the election in news stories and presenting negative images of Bush in 50% of its editorials during the final two weeks of the election, highlights its support of Kerry.

This analysis also shows potential attempts at priming and agenda-setting as outlined in chapter two, as both publications seem to have tried to highlight what their readers should focus on in deciding whom to vote.

Examples such as the October 17 2004 editorial by *The New York Times* that bluntly supported Kerry for president, supports Wanta & Roy (1995) findings discussed in the literature regarding how agenda-setting effects can show up within 8 days of publication. This analysis is critical since this period of study was during the last two weeks of the election. This researcher

believes since this election was so close toward the end of the campaign, both these newspapers were probably engaged at attempts to sway the public opinion of the undecided voters.

This supports findings by Severin & Tankard (2001):

The agenda-setting hypothesis has been one of the dominant concepts in communication theory since the early 1970s. The hypothesis is important because it suggests a way that the mass media can have an impact on society that is an alternative to attitude change. Furthermore, there are indications that the impact could be a significant one. There is evidence that the media are shaping people's views of the major problems facing society and that the problems emphasized in the media may not be the ones that are dominant in reality. (Severin & Tankard, 2001, p. 239)

Research Weaknesses

As with many past studies of media bias or unbalanced media coverage, one weakness of this study is what Fico, Richardson & Edwards (2004) labeled news organization "anonymity," which they argue "may affect the strength of the link between the judgment of story bias and the judgment of news organizational creditability" (Fico, Richardson & Edwards, 2004, p. 316). The concern is that since a newspaper may already have a perceived "affiliation," especially by the coder, this may affect the judgment of bias in a story evaluation during content analysis. That problem was identified during the first of the two pilot tests of this study prior to the coders beginning their evaluation of the two newspapers. Additional training with coders downgraded this threat and this was found to be less of an issue following the second inter-coder reliability test. Though not to proclaim that perceived "affiliation" was not an issue during the main evaluation period, but it was minimized from the additional coder training.

Although it was a critical period of time when most undecided voters were making their decision on whether to reelect President George Bush or vote for something new in Senator John Kerry, another weakness of this study was that it only covered a two-week period. Though Riffe, Aust & Lacy (1993) showed that a composite week sampling was better than a random

and consecutive day sample method, it would be interesting and beneficial to take this study to the next step and evaluate all of the articles published from the period of the first party primaries to the election and to include as well additional liberal and conservative publications. Also including additional similar politically slanted media would hopefully be able to provide comparison data when it came to making evidence claims of liberal or conservative bias. Another option to strengthen this study, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, would be to just evaluate the news articles and disregard the editorials and columns. This may be a better measure of whether a publication is providing an injustice to the democratic process.

Future Studies

Some possible future research has already been mentioned earlier in this discussion, but the possibilities are unlimited when it comes to this controversial and important topic.

Once unbalanced media coverage was identified, this study did not research deeper to see whether the slant that was found affected the audience or voters. Druckman & Parkin (2005) accomplish this in their research and it ignited many discussions on the issues surrounding the newspapers' coverage of that Senate race, especially since it was found to affect voters. In future studies, it would be beneficial to replicate that study as additional research toward the findings discovered here. This type of additional in-depth research could answer questions concerning unbalanced reporting such as, "So what, every newspaper is bias?" It could present physical data on the outcomes of the media's action on public opinion and bring up serious ethical questions for those organizations.

Conclusion

Most media today advertise and promote the fact that their organizations are fair and balanced in their news coverage and that they are always searching for the truth. But is this

indeed the truth? Many Americans, along with their politicians as well as some media do not agree with that perception. Some believe the news media do have a preplanned agenda or slant in their task of providing the daily news.

As this study showed, along with many past research of this topic, unbalanced news reporting does exist on both sides of the political arena. Such actions show that agenda setting is visible in today's media operations. Some publications support liberal ideas more often while others do the same with the conservative agenda. What is required now is for an across-the-board standard to be set in judging whether a news organization is practicing unbalanced media coverage and more importantly, decide if those actions influence public opinion. If the media's actions affect public opinion and it is not viewed as fair and truthful, then some sort of action needs to be taken to ensure that particular news organization takes responsibility for its actions and the democratic process is not tainted.

What this research attempted to do was to contribute to the past research within the mass communication field in identifying and testing a comparable value that could eventually be used to evaluate potential unbalanced news reporting or media bias. This researcher believes that was accomplished here. Evaluating news products by analyzing its tone can be beneficial to identifying unbalanced and slanted news coverage. It is not easy to train coders or develop a system that has zero defects in its evaluating criteria, but additional studies built upon this framework should assist in arriving to the ultimate goal of one undisputed standard.

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APPENDIX A CODING INSTRUCTIONS

Code Sheet Instructions

1. Name of newspaper being coded. Circle the name of the newspaper which the news-article, editorial, or column was published.
2. Identify as (circle) a news-article, editorial, or column.
3. Date of news article, editorial, column. Print the date (day, month – EX: 15 Nov) that the news-article or editorial was published in the newspaper.
4. What section and page did the article appear? Print the section and page (EX: A1) that the news-article, editorial, column appeared in the newspaper.
5. What is the headline of the news article, editorial, column? Print the headline as it appears in the newspaper.
6. Headline of news article or editorial. Print the entire headline of the news-article or editorial. Circle word(s) that identify Bush, Kerry or their political party.
7. What is the topic of the news article, editorial, column? Print the number that corresponds with the topic. If it is reference another topic not listed, then print topic in the space provided.
8. Evaluate the headline as positive toward Bush (**BP**), positive toward Kerry (**KP**), negative toward Bush (**BN**), negative toward Kerry (**KN**) or Neutral (**N**). Print appropriate code in the space provided. This is a separate evaluation and should not be included in assessment toward paragraph tone.
9. Evaluate each paragraph as positive toward Bush (**BP**), positive toward Kerry (**KP**), negative toward Bush (**BN**), negative toward Kerry (**KN**) or Neutral (**N**). Evaluate the tone of each paragraph for positive, negative or neutral statements regarding the presidential candidates and/or their political party. Print appropriate code under each numbered-identified paragraph.
 - a. Positive tone is defined as good or supportive descriptions or quotes regarding either candidate or his political party. Positive tone in the paragraph is wording that describes the candidate or his political party in a good light or frame.
 - b. Negative tone is defined as bad or non-supportive descriptions or quotes regarding either candidate or his political party. Negative tone in the paragraph is wording that describes the candidate or his political party in a bad light or frame.

- c. Neutral tone is defined as descriptions or quotes that are neither positive nor negative toward either candidate or his party. Neutral tone can also be the result of descriptions or quotes in paragraph that do not describe or have any relation to either candidate or his political party.
10. Totals. Calculate each of the types of paragraph tone and print in total column.
11. The news article, editorial, column is evaluated as: Determine which kind of paragraph tone has a higher ratio than the others. If the positive tone paragraph totals equal that of the negative tone paragraph totals, the result is that the article is neutral. Circle the appropriate code to identify result of the evaluation regarding paragraph tone.

**APPENDIX B
CODING SHEET**

**Coding Sheet for unbalanced news coverage of the 2004 Presidential Election
*The New York Times & The Washington Times***

Q1. Name of Newspaper being coded: *The New York Times /The Washington Times*

Q2. It is a: **News Article** **Editorial** **Column**

Q3. Date of news article, editorial, column: _____ (Ex: 15 NOV)

Q4. What page did the news article, editorial column appear? _____ (Ex: A1)

Q5. Byline of news article, editorial, column:

Q6. Headline of news article, editorial, column:

Q7. What is the topic of the news article, editorial, column: _____

- | | | | |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|
| 1-War on Terrorism | 2-Bush's Record | 3-Kerry's Record | |
| 4-Healthcare | 5-Homeland Security | 6-Economy | 7- |
| Military Service | 8-Tax Cuts | 9-Social Security | 10-Abortion |
| 11-Religion | | | |
| 12-Other: | _____ | | |

Q8. Evaluate the headline as positive toward Bush (**BP**), positive toward Kerry (**KP**), negative toward Bush (**BN**), negative toward Kerry (**KN**) or Neutral (**N**):

Q9. Evaluate each paragraph as positive toward Bush (**BP**), positive toward Kerry (**KP**), negative toward Bush (**BN**), negative toward Kerry (**KN**) or Neutral (**N**):

- Paragraph 1: _____
- Paragraph 2: _____
- Paragraph 3: _____
- Paragraph 4: _____
- Paragraph 5: _____
- Paragraph 6: _____
- Paragraph 7: _____
- Paragraph 8: _____
- Paragraph 9: _____
- Paragraph 10: _____
- Paragraph 11: _____
- Paragraph 12: _____
- Paragraph 13: _____
- Paragraph 14: _____
- Paragraph 15: _____
- Paragraph 16: _____
- Paragraph 17: _____
- Paragraph 18: _____
- Paragraph 19: _____
- Paragraph 20: _____

Additional Paragraphs (if needed):

Paragraph: _____

Q10. Totals:

BP _____

BN _____

KP _____

KN _____

N _____

Q11. The news article, editorial, column is evaluated as:

BUSH

KERRY

NEUTRAL

VITA

Jimmie E. Cummings, Jr. was born March 27, 1970, in Mobile, Alabama. He received his Bachelor of Arts degree in mass communication with a concentration in magazine journalism from the University of Alabama in May of 1993. He is currently a Major in the United States Army, where he is a Public Affairs Officer. He has completed combat tours in both Afghanistan and Iraq. After an eleven-year absence from academics, Jimmie Cummings entered Louisiana State University's Manship School of Communication in August of 2004 and he is currently a candidate for the degree of Master of Mass Communication for the Commencement of May 2006.