Hype Versus Substance in Network Television Coverage of Presidential Election Campaigns

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Content analysis of broadcast television networks’ weekday nightly newscasts during the final weeks of the 1988, 1992, 1996, and 2000 presidential election campaigns found an emphasis on hype rather than substantive coverage of the campaigns. Examination of audio and video messages separately showed this to be true for both. Further, even when the audio was substantive, the accompanying visuals often were not. The results are discussed in terms of media reliance, journalistic responsibility, and cognitive processing of mediated messages.

From the earliest days of our country’s origins, it has been a commonly held belief that democracy requires active and informed citizens capable of making political decisions.\(^1\) According to CBS journalist Edward R. Murrow, this was the premise upon which our political system was founded.\(^2\) The assumption, which still holds today, is that citizens will seek out and acquire political knowledge in a thoughtful manner to make rational political decisions.\(^3\)

Most citizens seek out political information from the media.\(^4\) For decades, television has been the primary source of presidential election information for most Americans, and for much of this time broadcast network television news has been the dominant television news source.\(^5\) However, in 2000, while television remained the dominant campaign news source, more people reported relying primarily on cable news (36%) than network news (22%).\(^6\) No doubt increased reliance on cable is related to the convenience of having television news available round the clock. However, the broadcast networks’ nightly newscasts still have greater numbers of viewers than the audience for any particular cable news program.\(^7\) Thus, it is important to examine the quality of political information provided in television news campaign coverage, and it remains particularly important to examine the coverage of the broadcast networks’ nightly newscasts. This study examines the broadcast television networks’ nightly news coverage of presidential election campaigns from the 1980s, the 1990s, and 2000, specifically examining the emphasis on hype versus substance in the audio and video mes-

**Literature Review**

**Timing of Voting Decisions.** It is particularly important to examine the content of television news coverage during the final weeks of an election campaign. Voters making up their minds at the end of a campaign tend to be less partisan and more likely to use—and to be influenced by—media messages in making their decisions.  

A significant number of voters in the past few decades—more than enough to swing the results of an election—have made up their minds in the final weeks of election campaigns. In 1988, 15% of voters said they made up their minds during the final week of the campaign. In both 1988 and 1996, more than 10% of those surveyed said they made up their minds during the final days of the campaign, either over the last weekend (2%), the day before (3%), or the day of the election (6%).

Chaffee and Rimal found between 21% and 36% of voters polled in 1992 to be what they called last-minute deciders—making their voting choice in the final three weeks of the campaign. In another poll in 1992, 25% said they made their decision in the final week of the campaign, with 17% reporting they made up their minds in the final days of the campaign—4% percent over the last weekend, 4% percent the day before the election, and 9% on election day. On the Friday before the 1992 presidential election, ABC News reported 5% of likely voters were still undecided.

Similarly, in 1996, an average of 5% of those surveyed in twenty-six different national polls during the final two weeks of the campaign had not yet committed to Clinton, Dole, or Perot. A survey taken in the days following the 1996 campaign indicates the number of late deciders was even larger, as 17% of the respondents reported making up their minds definitely to vote for the candidate of their choice in the final week of the campaign.

In 2000, a national poll of likely voters during the final full week of campaigning found more than 5% of those surveyed had not yet determined which candidate would receive their votes. As late as the weekend before election day, a national poll of likely voters found 3% of those surveyed still undecided. Although that percentage had narrowed to just 1% by the day before the election, even a margin that small is enough to swing an election, as evidenced by the final vote counts in 2000 in Iowa, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Oregon, Wisconsin, and, of course, Florida.

Furthermore, polling conducted just after the 2000 election again indicated the number of undecided voters was greater than indicated by polls taken prior to election day. A survey conducted 10-12 November found 5% of those surveyed said they made up their minds to definitely vote for the candidate of their choice on election day, 2% did so the day before election day, 2% decided over the last weekend, and 5% made a decision in the last week of the campaign. Exit polls conducted on election day in 2000 also found more last-minute deciders than polls leading into election day had suggested. On NBC Nightly News with Tom Brokaw
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election night, Katie Couric reported 17% of voters in exit polls said they made up their minds in the last week.20 As there are clearly more than enough media-reliant late deciders to swing the results of an election, an examination of the final weeks of campaign coverage is warranted.

Network News Campaign Coverage. Given the importance of broadcast network television news as a source of presidential election information, many content analyses have examined network campaign coverage during the past three decades. A robust and much-criticized finding of these studies has been an emphasis on the “horserace” aspects of the campaign rather than on more substantial coverage of campaign issues.21 Researchers have also long criticized network emphasis on the hoopla surrounding political campaigns. “ABC, CBS, and NBC devote most of their election coverage to the trivia of election campaigning that make for flashy pictures. Hecklers, crowds, motorcades, balloons, rallies and gossip—these are the regular subjects of the network campaign stories.”22

Many of these studies of television election coverage have used the news story as the unit of analysis.23 Such an approach, however, assumes that each story covers only one topic. Others have examined the number of mentions or references given to various topics related to the presidential election campaign in television network news coverage.24 While this approach accounts for stories that address more than one topic, it still assumes a unified message within both audio and video information presented in the news stories.

Audio and Video Campaign Messages. Television news is presented in story units that combine both audio and video. There is evidence that television news is processed in a single code fashion, with audio and video messages processed as one informational unit, when the audio and video messages are redundant.25 However, there is also evidence that viewers process the audio and video messages separately when those messages are dissonant.26 These differences in message processing may occur while integrating the information in the hippocampus, a polymodal system where information about events is initially stored as synaptic changes.27 Dissonant audio and video may be processed as two separate unimodal events in the hippocampus, while redundant video and audio messages may receive deeper, bimodal processing as one event. Dual coding of verbal and visual messages results in better memory performance than unimodal encoding.28 Similarly, memory researchers have found that the deeper or more elaborately information is encoded, the better it will be remembered.29

In addition, the amount of cognitive resources needed to process television messages varies with the degree of redundancy between the audio and video.30 In a meta-analysis using the limited capacity model of mediated message processing, Lang argued that television news messages with dissonant audio and video require more resources to process than messages with greater redundancy and are therefore more likely to overload processing capacity, resulting in poorer memory performance.31 Furthermore, recent research has found that when overload occurs, audio message processing suffers, while video process-
ing is not impaired.\textsuperscript{32} Given these processing differences, content analyses of television news should distinguish between audio and video messages.

A few content analyses of television network news’ presidential campaign coverage have compared the tone of audio and video messages in the stories.\textsuperscript{33} Graber found verbal news messages about candidates tended to be negative, whereas accompanying visuals were often considerably more favorable, a treatment she referred to as kind pictures and harsh words.\textsuperscript{34} Similarly, in what they referred to as tough talk and pretty pictures, Crigler and colleagues found candidates were presented more favorably in video than audio messages.\textsuperscript{35} These differences were considered to be the result of dual control over television campaign news stories, with reporters shaping verbal messages while campaigns controlled visual images through carefully orchestrated campaign events.\textsuperscript{36}

Given the emphasis found in previous studies on horserace rather than issues, it might be predicted that analyzing the audio and video separately would yield an emphasis on hype rather than substance in both the audio and the video messages. However, the evidence of differing tones in audio and video messages found in previous studies suggests that audio and video coverage may differ in other respects as well.\textsuperscript{37} Specifically, the dual control over audio and video in campaign messages discussed in those studies could render varying emphases in topics addressed in video and audio messages. For example, a reporter’s verbal script may address an important campaign issue, but the accompanying visuals, rather than illustrating the audio, may instead be of staged campaign activities, thus rendering dissonant audio and video messages. If so, even if the audio emphasis is more hype than substance, as previous horserace studies suggest, there may still be more substance in the audio than in the video. If this is the case, then even when the audio coverage is substantive the accompanying visuals may emphasize hype rather than substance.

\textbf{Hypotheses}

Given previous studies, a study distinguishing between audio and video messages in election campaign stories should find the emphasis in the video messages to be on hype, rather than substance. Thus, this study predicts:

\textbf{H1:} The visual emphasis will be on hype rather than substance.

However, it is not clear whether the same will hold true when examining only the audio messages. Thus, this study poses the following research question:

\textbf{RQ1:} Will the audio emphasis be on substance or hype?

Finally, given the dual control over audio and video of television news campaign stories, this study predicts:
H2: There will be more substance in the audio than the video messages, and

H3: Audio substance will be positively correlated with video hype.

Concept Operationalization. Substantive coverage is defined as coverage about campaign issues and candidate qualifications, while hype is defined as coverage emphasizing campaign hoopla and “the horserace.” “The horserace” is indicated by images of or references to the actual campaign contest such as polls, strategies, tactics, and endorsements. Hoopla is indicated by images of or references to activities and items related to campaign events such as rallies, photo opportunities, hand shaking, ball throwing, flag waving, baby kissing, balloons, motorcades, crowds, and celebrities. Candidate qualifications are indicated by images of or references to candidates’ experience in terms of previous political accomplishments and positions held. Campaign issues are indicated by images of or references to issues in the party platforms such as the environment, the economy, education, crime, health care, foreign affairs, and defense.

Sampling. Similar to other studies, this study utilized saturation samples, examining all newscasts from ABC’s World News Tonight with Peter Jennings, CBS’s Evening News with Dan Rather, and NBC’s The Nightly News with Tom Brokaw during the final two weeks of the campaigns. For 1988, this included 26, 27, 28, 31 October and 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8 November. For 1992, the dates included 21, 22, 23, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30 October and 2, 3 November. For 1996, the dates included 23, 24, 25, 28, 29, 30, 31 October and 1, 4, 5 November. For 2000, the dates included 25, 26, 27, 30, 31 October and 1, 2, 3, 6 and 7 November.

Coding. Coded stories were either read by the anchors or packages by reporters preceded by anchor lead-ins. The length of each story in seconds was recorded. For presidential election stories, the amount of time in both the audio and the video messages devoted to hype, using the categories of horserace and hoopla, and substance, using the categories of campaign issues and candidate qualifications, was also coded. Coders were provided directions, category and concept definitions and examples, and sample completed coding sheets for a newscast. Following Patterson and McClure’s example using multiple coders, coders were assigned newscasts from alternate nights and from each of the three networks. The coding instrument was pretested with a group of three communication students from a large Eastern university who first coded and then discussed their coding of a sample newscast with the primary researcher to determine if there was agreement on the study concepts and operationalizations. The instrument and coder instructions were revised slightly following that discussion.

Reliability. According to Riffe, Lacy, and Fico, Pearson’s correlation coefficient ($r$) is used to measure the degree to which coders vary together in their observations when coding interval or ratio-level data,
such as the number of seconds of network evening news coverage devoted to a topic. Correlations of .84 or better are considered indications of good coder reliability for ratio-level measurement.41

This study examines coder reliability using Pearson $r$ coefficients from SPSS’s distances correlations, which measure similarities or dissimilarities between pairs of cases based on particular variables of interest. In this instance, pairs of coders were measured for similarities in their codings of audio horserace, audio hoopla, video horserace, video hoopla, audio substance, audio qualifications, video substance, and video qualifications. An advantage of this correlation is that it renders one statistic ($r$) indicating the amount of similarity between the two coders on all of these variables, rather than having to run correlations for all coders on each variable individually. Yet, comparing pairs of coders with distances correlations still offers detailed information about where reliability problems might be occurring among the various coders when more than two coders are used. In this regard, distances correlations give both a complete and a parsimonious picture of coder reliability.

Correlation coefficients indicated that the 1988 data coders had high intercoder reliability (coefficients ranged from to $r = .951$ to $r = .999$) and intracoder reliability (coefficients ranged from to $r = .975$ to $r = .999$). For the 1996 data, three of the four study coders had perfect intracoder reliability ($r = 1.000$), while the fourth coder also had high intracoder reliability ($r = .984$); for intercoder reliability, coefficients ranged from $r = .857$ to $r = .977$. There was only one coder for the 1992 and 2000 data; that coder was tested for reliability in using the coding scheme by comparing his coding of a subsample of the 1996 data to the 1996 data coders’ results. Correlation coefficients for intercoder reliability ranged from $r = .811$ to $r = .93$, and for coder intra-reliability $r = 1.0$.

Prior to analyzing the data, an analysis of variance was run using network as an independent variable to see if the networks varied significantly in their coverage of the coding categories. No significant differences were found.

There were 170 news stories about the presidential election campaign during the final weeks of the 1988 campaign, representing 41% of the networks’ total news stories during that two-week period. In 1992, there were 181 presidential election stories, representing 42% of the total news stories. In 1996, there were 98 stories, or 26% of the total news stories. In 2000, there were 156 stories, accounting for 37% of all news stories. The proportion of stories devoted to the presidential election was significantly less in 1996 than in 1988 ($t = 4.52$, d.f. = 789; $p$[two-tailed] < .001), 1992 ($t = 5.10$, d.f. = 796; $p$[two-tailed] < .001), and 2000 ($t = 3.60$, d.f. = 787; $p$[two-tailed] < .001). In addition, the average length of stories was shorter in 1996 than in the other years (see Table 1).

**H1:** This hypothesis predicted there would be more hype than substance in the video messages. As shown in Table 1, there was more than four times more hype ($M = 40.26$) than substance ($M = 8.95$) in the visual messages in 1988 ($t = 8.01$, d.f. = 169; $p$[two-tailed] < .001). In 1992, there
was almost ten times as much hype as substance in the video messages 
\( (t = 12.83, \text{d.f.} = 180; p[\text{two-tailed}] < .001) \). In 1996, there was twice as much hype as substance in the visual messages \( (t = 3.29, \text{df} = 94; p[\text{two-tailed}] = .001) \). In 2000, there was ten times more hype than substance in the audio messages \( (t = 10.79, \text{d.f.} = 155; p[\text{two-tailed}] < .001) \). **H1** was supported.

**RQ1:** This research question asked if the audio emphasis would be on substance or hype. In 1988, there was more than twice as much hype \( (M=60.63) \) as there was substance \( (M=21.13) \) in the audio messages \( (t = 7.30, \text{d.f.} = 169; p[\text{two-tailed}] < .001) \). In 1992, there was more than three times as much hype as there was substance in the audio messages \( (t = 9.80, \text{d.f.} = 180; p[\text{two-tailed}] < .001) \). In 1996, however, the difference between the amount of hype and substance in the audio messages was not statistically significant. In 2000, there was, once again, more than three times more hype than substance in the audio messages \( (t = 10.44, \text{d.f.} = 155; p[\text{two-tailed}] < .001) \).

**H2:** This hypothesis predicted that there would be more substance in the audio than in the video messages. In 1988, there was almost three times more substance in the audio messages than in the video messages \( (t = 4.85, \text{d.f.} = 169; p[\text{two-tailed}] < .001) \). In 1992, there was four times as
much substance in the audio messages as there was in the video messages ($t = 6.77$, d.f. = 180; $p$[two-tailed] < .001). In 1996, there was twice as much substance in the audio messages than in the video messages ($t = 4.72$, d.f. = 94; $p$[two-tailed] < .001). In 2000, there was three times more substance in the audio messages than in the video messages ($t = 5.07$, d.f. = 155; $p$[two-tailed] < .001). H2 was supported.

H3: This hypothesis predicted that audio substance would be positively correlated with video hype. There was a statistically significant positive correlation between audio substance and video hype in 1992 ($r = .21$, $N = 181$, $p < .01$) and in 2000 ($r = .34$, $N = 156$, $p < .001$). H3 is partially supported.

Discussion

With the exception of 1996, there has been an upward trend in both audio and video hype, mostly due to the upward trends in audio and video horserace coverage. Also with the exception of 1996, substantive coverage remained fairly constant, and was considerably less than the hype coverage. Although there was more audio substance per story in 1996 than in the other years, there were significantly fewer stories about the election in 1996 than the other years. Furthermore, the increase in audio substance per story in 1996 was an anomaly. By 2000, the networks devoted as much discussion to describing campaign hoopla and four times as much discussion to the horserace as they did to discussing campaign issues. Discussion of candidate qualifications was all but nonexistent in the final weeks of all four of the campaigns examined.

Despite the dual control of the audio and video messages by reporters and campaign handlers, this study found both the audio and video emphasis to be on hype rather than substance. These results are in keeping with previous studies of campaign coverage that found an emphasis on horserace rather than more substantive issues.

Given the presumed importance of an informed citizenry to a successful democracy, and the heavy reliance of voters on television news for campaign information, these results are obviously cause for concern, particularly given the heavier media reliance of late deciders. During the final weeks of a campaign a substantial number of voters—often enough to swing an election—have not yet made up their minds as to which candidate they will select. These voters are looking to television news for information to help make informed choices. But the information broadcast to the public in the final weeks of the campaigns emphasized hype rather than substance.

Furthermore, post-hoc analysis of story placement within the newscast found hype messages more likely to come earlier in the newscast than substantive messages. When analyzing data for all stories (presidential and other) from all four years combined, there were small but significant negative correlations between story order and audio substance ($r = -.09$, $N = 1,128$, $p = .003$) and between story order and video substance ($r = -.07$, $N = 1,128$, $p = .023$). However, there were considerably larger and more significant negative correlations between story order and audio hype ($r = -.29$, $N = 1,128$, $p < .001$) and between story order and
video hype ($r = -0.31, N = 1,128, p < .001$). This may be an indication that hype messages are considered of greater importance by the broadcast network news gatekeepers and are more likely to be heard and seen by viewers than substantive messages aired later in the newscasts.

Finally, even when the audio coverage was substantive, the accompanying visuals often emphasized hype rather than substance. Yet, as previously noted, when audio and video messages are dissonant viewers may overload their limited available cognitive resources while processing the messages; when this happens, it is audio processing, not video, that suffers. Therefore, substantive audio messages in television campaign stories may be wasted effort if dissonant visuals are remembered but the audio is not. While content analyses do not, of course, examine viewer processing, results such as those found in this study should be considered in light of what is known about how viewers process television messages.

Thus, in addition to providing more substantive coverage overall, reporters who want to provide more substance in their coverage should take care to match substantive audio messages with similarly substantive visuals to enhance the encoding of information in the audio messages. It might be argued that hype video shots are almost unavoidable on the campaign trail, given the political parties’ control over photo opportunities. But reporters can still create substantive and interesting computerized graphics and/or use related file footage for their stories. For example, a reporter discussing candidate George Bush’s proposal to drill for oil in the Alaskan wilderness could show file footage of Alaskan wilderness to accompany the audio, rather than footage of Bush at a campaign appearance. Otherwise, visually interesting hype messages may compete for and ultimately usurp viewers’ message processing resources at the expense of the more important, and precious, substantive audio information.

NOTES


5. John E. Craft, Frederic A. Leigh, and Donald G. Godfrey, Electronic Media (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2001);


