

Group 16 (2 People)

Communication Studies 162

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The Expression of Network Bias: Presidential Candidates and Their Campaign Ads

Research Question

Is there a difference in the networks' (KCBS, KNBC, KABC, KTTV-FOX, Comedy Central, Fox News, CNN, MSNBC) treatment of campaign ads in their programs depending on the party affiliation of the ads?

Introduction

Candidates try to disseminate their campaign messages through advertisements in order to better control their image. Although a candidate can control the messages within their ads, they cannot control the ways in which the ads are interpreted and analyzed through the news and entertainment media. This raises the question of network bias and different campaigns receiving differential treatment across news networks based on the political affiliation of their candidate. Through our research we will examine the coverage that networks give to political ads during the campaign, and determine if the networks give preferential treatment to certain campaigns. Our research will attempt to answer the question; do networks (KCBS, KNBC, KABC, KTTV-FOX, Comedy Central, Fox News, CNN, MSNBC), give Barack Obama and John McCain differential treatment when broadcasting their campaign ads?

Methodology

We analyzed eight networks: four broadcast networks, KCBS, KNBC, KABC, KTTV-Fox; and four cable networks, Fox News, CNN, Comedy Central, and MSNBC. This gave us a broad sample of broadcast and cable. Furthermore, KCBS, KNBC, KABC, KTTV and CNN have a more neutral reputation while, Fox News tends to lean right, and MSNBC and Comedy Central tend to lean left. This sample gave us a chance to test these reputed biases and see if candidates' campaign ad coverage follows the given trends. We utilized the websites, Museum of Moving Images, <http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/2008>, and the Stanford Communication Lab, <http://pcl.stanford.edu/campaigns/2008/>, to prescreen and select the commercials that would be used for our analysis. In addition, we pulled from popular web videos from Obama and McCain supporters. The Museum of Moving Images and the Stanford Communications Lab websites allowed us to choose 2008 presidential campaign ads by party affiliation and also provided the full transcripts of the commercials. In screening the original commercials we noted the key phrases that focused on the themes of the commercials. We then used these phrases, and/or the name of the commercial to search the UCLA CS Archive database, <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/csa/search/>; we searched within the time period of January 1, 2008 and election day, November 4, 2008.

We searched the database and compiled a list of TV show transcripts that contained the commercial. Then, each TV transcript was reviewed and analyzed for the content pertaining to the campaign ad. Each group member was responsible for searching fifteen campaign ads. The treatments of these fifteen McCain ads and fifteen Obama ads were analyzed. Our hypothesis is that the campaign ad coverage will follow the alleged biases of the networks. Fox News will favor McCain and give him more positive coverage than they would give Obama; MSNBC and

Comedy Central will favor Obama and give him more positive coverage than they would McCain.

Workload Note

When we designed our workload conversion from the newspaper stories to television segments we said that one newspaper story is an average of six paragraphs (Base conversion provided to us in office hours by Professor Groeling). We calculated that two, ten second segments are equal to one paragraph. Therefore, twenty seconds of television equals one paragraph. One newspaper story then is equal to 120 television seconds. 120 television seconds multiplied by 250 stories is equal to 30,000 television seconds that we would have to review to be the equivalent of a newspaper group member's workload standard. To get to the 30,000 television seconds we averaged that each segment we watched was five minutes, or 300 seconds. To get to 30,000 television seconds we would each have to view 100 segments. We each reviewed 100 segments to get to our minimum "newspaper group standard," but in addition to this standard we actually reviewed more television seconds because we each watched twenty campaign commercials in advance with an average time of one minute each (equal to reading ten newspaper stories). We also read through the transcript of each commercial to get our main search terms. It is also worth noting that when we reviewed the 100 segments of television we read before and after the segment spoke about the commercial to understand the context. We calculate that this was an additional four paragraphs per segment (equal to reading another 66 newspaper stories). In total our group members each did the equivalent of reading 316 newspaper stories.

Coding and Variables

In reading the television transcripts we coded for the tone of the ad, either negative commercial ads attacking the candidate's opponent or positive commercial ads supporting themselves, and in some cases, contrast ads. In addition, we coded for the tone of the broadcast reporter's narrative surrounding the presentation of the ad, and/or the discussion and commentary following the ad. As we examined each ad we recorded the party affiliation of the group that generated the ad, Democrat or Republican.

- A Democratic commercial is one generated from the Democratic candidate or supporters.
- A Republican commercial is one generated by the Republican candidate or supporters.

In classifying the tone of the commercial advertisement, we will label the ad as either being a positive or negative. This will be defined in the following way:

- Positive Ad: An ad from a candidate or supporters endorsing their candidate and giving examples as to why they should be elected. In a positive ad the candidate and supporters will only endorse themselves without mention of the opposing candidate's faults. For example, in Barack Obama's *Country I love*, campaign ad, he says when talking about his parents, "We didn't have much money, but they taught me values straight from the Kansas Heartland where they grew up. Accountability and self-reliance. Love of country." In this ad Obama highlights his All-American values without any mention of John McCain, which makes this a classic example of a positive ad.
- Negative Ad: An ad in which the candidate or their supporters attack the opposing candidate in the ad. An example of a negative ad, is Barack Obama's *Maverick No More*, commercial in which his supporters criticize McCain's ties to Bush. In this ad, Biden, an Obama supporter says, "Stylistically and substantively, there's no daylight between

George Bush and John McCain. They are joined at the hip.” Having Obama supporters attack McCain classifies this as a negative ad.

- Contrast Ad: An ad in which one candidate is directly showcasing the differences between himself (herself), and the opposing candidate. An example of this type of commercial advertisement is Obama’s *Delighted*; this ad contrasts Obama’s endorsements from Warren Buffett and Colin Powell, against George Bush and Dick Cheney’s endorsement of John McCain. The commercial is an attempt to link McCain to the unpopular policies of the Bush administration.

Secondly, when analyzing the treatment that the commercial ad received by the news broadcaster, coverage treatment will be broken into three variable categories: positive treatment, negative treatment, and neutral treatment.

- Positive treatment entails the news reporter praising the ad’s validity or effectiveness to convey either a positive or negative message. For example positive treatment was given for Obama’s *Fundamentals ad*, on CNN The Situation Room, September 16, 2008. In this case, the reporter agrees with Obama’s negative ad that McCain is out of touch with the American economy because he maintains that the “fundamentals of our economy are strong” on a day of a large economic downturn.
- Negative treatment is defined by the news reporter ridiculing the ad as being false, ineffective, and/ or unsubstantial. An example of negative treatment of an ad is Keith Olbermann’s reaction to McCain’s ad, *Disrespectful*, on September 12, 2008. This ad accused Obama of being condescending towards Palin; after showing the ad, Olbermann says that the ad is hypocritical and the claims are false, “the McCain campaign knows they are lying, his supporters know that he is lying.”

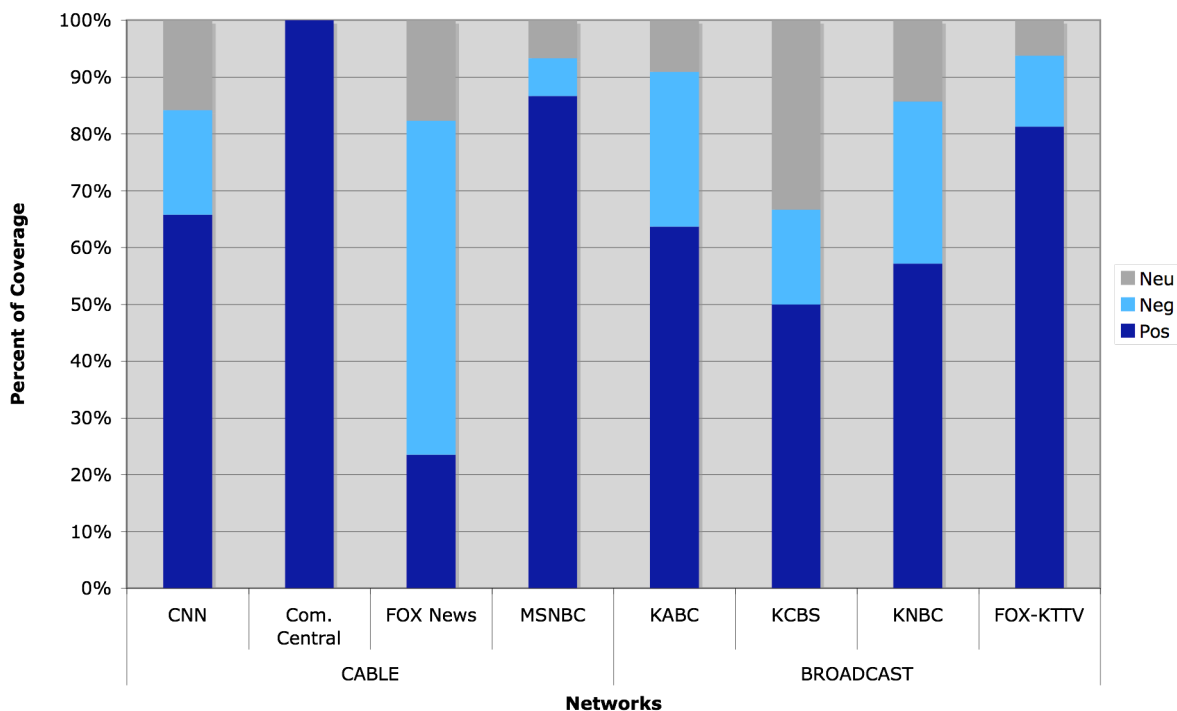
- Neutral treatment is defined as the news broadcaster presenting the ad only in factual context, with little to no editorial commentary. A commercial is also neutral if the ad is given balanced coverage. An example of this would be *The McCain Original Maverick*, on Fox News, Special Report with Brit Hume, September 8, 2008, the news broadcaster presents the McCain ad, and follows it with the Obama response, *Maverick No More*.

After coding the TV transcripts of the programs for instances of their campaign ad coverage, we compared the treatment that each campaign received. Through this analysis we determined what particular networks tend to favor one campaign over the other in their coverage. This analysis will allow us to examine the validity of the reputed biases of the networks.

Results

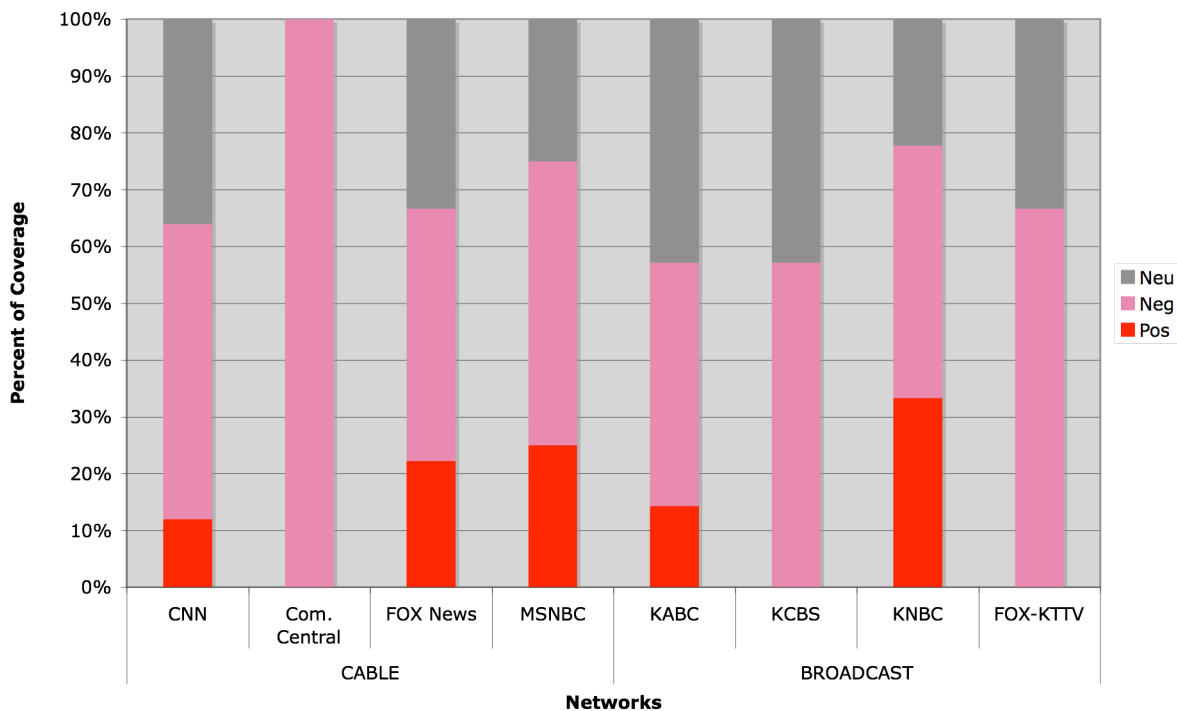
Overall, we found that Obama received more positive treatment of his campaign ads than McCain did. With the exception of Fox News Network, all networks treated Obama's campaign ads more positively than negatively in their network programs (See Figure 1).

Treatment of Obama Ads by Network -Figure 1



The complete opposite was true of McCain's ad treatment on news and entertainment programming. McCain's campaign ads were treated negatively a majority of the time by news reporters and other commentators on all networks (See Figure 2).

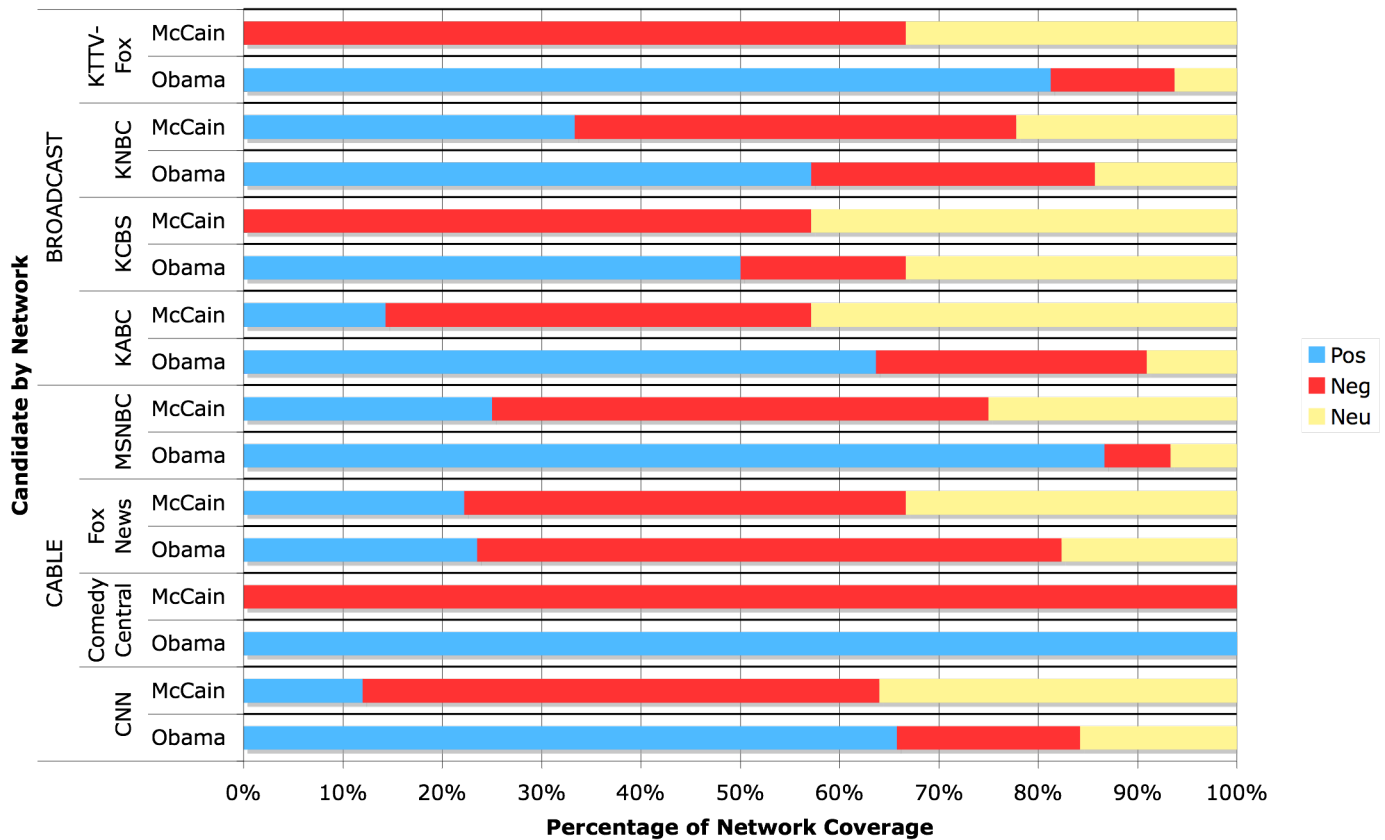
Treatment of McCain Ads by Network-Figure 2



When Obama and McCain's ad treatment is compared side-by-side by network one can see that most networks cover Obama's ads completely different than McCain's ads (See Figure 3 on following page). The cable news networks, (CNN, Comedy Central, Fox News, and MSNBC) also seem to be the least neutral networks. In Figure 3, CNN displays positive treatment for Obama's commercials almost 70% of the time, and displays negative treatment of Obama's commercials almost 20% of the time; however, McCain's data is almost the complete opposite. Less than 20% of McCain's ads receive positive treatment on CNN, and about 50% of his ads receive negative treatment. The MSNBC news network also heavily favors Obama in ad

treatment. MSNBC gave Obama's campaign ads positive treatment over 85% of the time, while McCain's ads received positive treatment only about 25% of the time. Comedy Central's entertainment programs came across as the most biased with McCain's ads receiving 100% negative treatment, and Obama's ads receiving 100% positive treatment.

Network Treatment of Ads: Obama vs. McCain- Figure 3



While the broadcast networks did seem to be a little more neutral than the cable networks, they still favored Obama to McCain in their campaign ad coverage. As can be seen in Figure 3, both KABC and KCBS gave McCain the most instances of neutral coverage, but the rest of their coverage for McCain was still more negative than positive. KNBC also showed attempts at balanced coverage. In Figure 3, one can see that KNBC gives McCain the most

positive treatment of his campaign ads when compared to the other networks. Yet, even KNBC still gives Obama more favorable coverage than McCain in the treatment of his campaign ads. KTTV-Fox is the most unbalanced broadcast network giving McCain no positive coverage in his campaign ads, and giving Obama very little negative treatment of his campaign ads. There were some noteworthy trends in the tone of the ads that were aired. In the beginning of the campaign Obama aired more positive ads than McCain. We also found it noteworthy that both candidates increased their negative ads at the end of the campaign.

Discussion

Our hypothesis was partially correct. MSNBC and Comedy Central were left-leaning networks; the majority of their positive treatment of campaign ads went towards Obama. Part of the reason we believe Comedy Central's results were so biased is because as an entertainment network they are not bound to journalistic standards of balanced coverage. As expected, Fox News did give Obama more negative coverage in discussing the campaign ads. Contrary to our hypothesis, even Fox gave McCain more negative coverage than positive coverage. In addition, the other networks were not as neutral as was expected. CNN was just as left-leaning as MSNBC. The broadcast news networks, KNBC, KCBS, KABC, and KTTV-Fox, favored Obama. We found that overall there was an observable bias in favor of Obama. There seems to be a few explanations for this result. One possible reason for the disproportionate positive coverage for Obama is that there actually exists a universal left-leaning media bias. The second explanation for the disparity in coverage is that McCain did not run an effective campaign and the lack of positive material made it difficult for the media to give him positive coverage. The evidence for the second claim seems to lie in the fact that not even Fox News found a way to

give McCain predominant positive coverage. Fox was open about their disapproval of McCain as the republican candidate for president. It was apparent in Fox News' coverage of McCain that he was not necessarily their ideal candidate, but that they would stay within party lines and support him.

The tone of the campaign ads also had some noteworthy trends. Obama ran more positive ads in the beginning of the campaign as he tried to establish who he was as a candidate. During this early period in the campaign, McCain ran many negative ads to try and define Obama early on to voters who were unsure of where he stood. Obama gained popularity throughout the campaign, and many of McCain's negative ads were targeted at mocking his popularity. One example is the *Celebrity ad* that compares Obama to Paris Hilton and Britney Spears, and most networks criticized him for making such "unsubstantial" claims. Towards the end of the campaign Obama increased his negative attack ads against McCain, even running them in traditionally Republican states. The tone of the campaign ads followed the typical campaign strategies of the unknown candidate, in this case Obama, trying to positively establish himself and the established candidate, McCain, trying to define his opponent in a negative tone.

We could not determine the exact cause of the observed bias because of a possible limitation to our research design. We only observed McCain and Obama so we cannot say for certain if the biases would have been similar for other Republican or Democratic candidates. It is possible that our results were simply the product of the media's feelings and predispositions towards these specific candidates. Despite this, there was still an observable bias regarding the treatment of these two candidates in the way they were represented in the news and entertainment media.