

- 62 See, for instance, Iyengar and Kinder, *News that Matters*; Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*.
- 63 Regula Hänggli, "Key Factors in Frame Building: How Strategic Political Actors Shape News Media Coverage," *American Behavioral Scientist* 56 (2012): 300–317; Regula Hänggli and Hanspeter Kriesi, "Frame Construction and Frame Promotion (Strategic Framing Choices)," *American Behavioral Scientist* 56 (2012): 260–278.
- 64 Robert M. Entman, *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
- 65 It may be important to ask whether this is a new process or simply a return to an older political equilibrium. As alluded to, the partisanship of the media has waxed and waned over time. This suggests the possibility that the elite-media-public chain may have been different in nature prior to the formulation of objective journalistic norms and that we are currently shifting back to something resembling that state of the world rather than something wholly unique. Meanwhile, work by Hans Noel, "The Coalition Merchants: The Ideological Roots of the Civil Rights Realignment," *The Journal of Politics* 74 (2012): 156–173, suggests that members of the public intellectual class, including the media, have long played a role in influencing party ideology and, through this mechanism, the frames party elites have chosen to use (although Noel does not pitch his work as about framing). The process identified by Noel, however, was of a lagged nature, with the construction of ideology by non-party authors only followed by party adoption a few decades later as young party activists matured and came to institutional power. What may have changed, however, is the speed of this process, with the ideology construction and transmission process occurring not over twenty-five years, say, but over five due to the increased rapidity that our modern media environment allows.
- 66 See Lisa Disch, "The Impurity of Representation and the Vitality of Democracy," *Cultural Studies* 26 (2012): 207–222.
- 67 For a critique of this model see James H. Kuklinski and Gary M. Segura, "Endogeneity, Exogeneity, Time, and Space in Political Representation," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 20 (1995): 3–21; Patricia Hurley and Kim Quaile Hill, "Beyond the Demand Input Model: A Theory of Representation Linkages," *The Journal of Politics* 65 (2003): 304–326.
- 68 Schattschneider, *The Semi-Sovereign People*.

## Chapter 13

# The News Anew?

## Political Coverage in a Transformed Media Age

Danny Hayes

In mid-February 2012, CBS News and the *New York Times* released the results of a survey showing that 67 percent of Americans believed that, in an effort to shrink the federal budget deficit, households that earn more than \$1 million a year should pay higher taxes. A month earlier, the Kaiser Family Foundation had conducted a poll on health care. Nearly two years after the passage of the Obama Administration's massive reform bill, 40 percent of Americans wanted either to replace the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act with a Republican alternative or to scrap health care reform altogether.

Surveys late in 2011 tapped Americans' attitudes toward two foreign policy issues. In a November CBS News poll, 58 percent of the public wanted to reduce the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan. And in December, as the Iranian government's nuclear program received growing attention during the GOP presidential debates, an NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* survey asked respondents whether they supported military action "if Iran continues with its nuclear research and is close to developing a nuclear weapon." Fifty-four percent said they did.

The vast majority of survey respondents were willing to offer an opinion on these matters. And many of the respondents no doubt held their opinions strongly. But where did these attitudes come from? What did Americans know about the implications of tax policy, health reform, or U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East? What information were respondents basing their responses on?

While the sources of public opinion are numerous, the media are among the key influences on what Americans know and think about politics. The vast majority of us never experience politics directly—everything we know about tax policy, the health care debate, or the military's struggles and successes in Afghanistan comes to us through news outlets. Even when we glean bits of political information from family or friends (Facebook or actual), it is likely that news originated from some television, print, or online outlet. In short, while the media do not dictate our opinions, they do determine the basic information we have at our disposal as we make those judgments.

As the public's main source of political information, the media bear significant responsibilities in the operation of democracy. This raises weighty

questions about an institution that receives special First Amendment protections because of its essential role in the democratic process. Do the media provide the public with enough information to make informed political judgments? Does the news contain the kind of information citizens need to arrive at good decisions about government actions? Are citizens exposed to a sufficient diversity of viewpoints to allow them to judge whether the politicians, parties, and candidates are acting in the public's interest?

These questions are central to evaluating the news landscape of the early 21st century. And with the dramatic and ongoing transformation of the media environment, these issues have become especially pressing: Has the dizzying proliferation of new media outlets given citizens access to better information than they had when the news business was monopolized by three broadcast networks and a few national and local newspapers? Is the quality of public affairs information improving? Or is the public simply getting the same kind of news in a different form—old wine in new bottles, as the old saying goes? Or is the news getting worse?

This chapter provides an overview of how scholars have assessed the media's democratic performance in contemporary American politics and considers whether new media are providing citizens with a news diet that is any different than their mainstream predecessors. I then turn to an analysis of media coverage of the debate over U.S. involvement in the 2011 Libyan civil war, using a case study to examine the similarities and differences in the way policy debates are covered in the traditional and new media.

Both the existing literature and the analysis of the Libya debate indicate that the similarities in the coverage of politics in the new and "old" media are much greater than the differences. The information that Americans rely on to judge proposed tax increases, the Obama health care reform, and American military action overseas still is not especially substantive, and not particularly diverse. The information that appears in the new media seems unlikely to help citizens make "better" choices—choices that reflect a range of substantive considerations from a diversity of political actors from inside and out of the government.

### The Democratic Responsibilities of the Media

The quality of information that citizens receive from the media is a perennial concern in the practice of democratic politics. Because the media serve as the public's window into the political world, the opinions that citizens hold and the choices they make are strongly influenced by the information that flows to them through the media. A common argument, since the time of the Founding, has been that a responsible, educated media apparatus is a key to producing a responsible, educated electorate. "The press is the best instrument for enlightening the mind of man and improving him as a rational, moral, and social being," Thomas Jefferson is quoted as saying.

### Substantive Coverage

But how might we judge whether the media are carrying out their duties? While hallmarks of a well-functioning press are many, two criteria have been used routinely to judge the quality of the information that the press provides to its citizens. First, the media are expected to provide information that helps citizens carry out their basic democratic responsibility of passing judgment on elected officials—and collectively, the government—in regular elections. In order to do this effectively, the argument is, citizens need information about the implications of the policies and positions staked out by candidates and parties. Otherwise, citizens' choices will not be based on an understanding of the actions that politicians have taken or will take while in office, which is the essence of governing.

Research has not graded the U.S. media highly on this count. A common finding in the political communication literature is that the media are far too focused on political gamesmanship and insufficiently concerned with the substance of policy debates.<sup>1</sup> Instead of focusing on the substance of candidate discourse and public policy debates, the media are more inclined to emphasize politicians' strategic considerations, the electoral implications, or the legislative process. As a result, the public is left with an inadequate dose of policy information to judge the actions of their elected officials and the politicians proposing to replace them. For instance, much of the coverage surrounding Barack Obama's sudden announcement in May 2012 that he believes same-sex couples should be able to get married focused not on the possible policy consequences of the president's position, but on the ramifications for his fall reelection bid.

Other examples abound. Studies of one of the major policy episodes of the late 20th century—the 1995–96 debate over the overhaul of the U.S. welfare system—have shown that media coverage was more heavily focused on legislative maneuvering and the political implications of the debate rather than the substance of the law.<sup>2</sup> The new law put time limits on how long Americans could receive welfare benefits from the federal government and imposed conditions for receiving them, changes with significant implications for the social safety net provided by the federal government. Debate over the proposed changes was lengthy and wide-ranging. But coverage was not very substantive.

For instance, a front-page story in *The Los Angeles Times* the day after the landmark bill was signed led with an emphasis on President Clinton's bid for re-election as the main storyline, not the significant changes for America's poor that the law would effect. One study found that about 40 percent of network TV news stories focused on strategy and other "process" frames.<sup>3</sup> Relatively little of the news would have helped news consumers figure out what the bill's passage meant for their lives, the distribution of resources by the government, or the broader implications of the evolution of American social policy. Similarly, 49 percent of Associated Press reports and network television news stories about President Ronald Reagan's 1981 economic plan were framed in terms of political strategy, not policy substance.<sup>4</sup>

The media's tendency to focus on strategy and the political "game" stems in part from the fact that journalists are constantly looking for new developments. Strategy and legislative maneuvering regularly change, but policy positions and the substance of different policy proposals are more static. That means that focusing on what is often referred to as "process" as opposed to policy gives the media convenient new storylines to develop on a regular basis. "That's why they call it 'news,' not olds" is one corny way of emphasizing the centrality of novelty in the production of news. Ultimately, the desire for new developments leads the media to deemphasize substance in favor of process, even if the latter may not be all that useful to citizens who, according to conventional readings of democratic theory, need to determine whether the government is making decisions that represent their interests.

Writing about the game of politics also makes it easier for journalists to maintain objectivity—treating both sides in a policy debate without favor. Stories about policy often raise nettlesome questions about whether the policies will or will not be effective. And on the whole, journalists are uncomfortable making those assessments, for fear of being targeted as biased or unfair. Stories about process tend to be easier to write in a way that avoids controversial policy evaluations.

### **Independence from Government**

A second criterion typically used to assess news quality is the extent to which media coverage is independent from government. That is, rather than serving a conduit for propaganda from elected officials who may have an incentive to mislead the public, the press should provide citizens with a diverse range of perspectives about political issues. Critically, this range of voices should include those that originate outside of government itself. "True democracies," writes Gadi Wolfsfeld, "must have a genuinely independent press who present a wide range of viewpoints for us to consider."<sup>5</sup>

But scholars have concluded that the viewpoints available in mainstream news content tend to be "indexed" to the range of debate occurring within mainstream government circles.<sup>6</sup> This means that coverage often reflects the content of debate within the government itself. But it routinely ignores or marginalizes alternative views from interest groups, citizen protests, or other less powerful actors, such as the recent Occupy Wall Street movement.<sup>7</sup>

This tendency to pay disproportionate attention to government officials stems in part from the professional socialized routines of "beat reporting." Journalists develop relationships with sources, often within the government, who give them information about developing events.<sup>8</sup> That information and the sources' perspectives are valuable to journalists, and they become the material the media rely on in their reporting. Since most political news emanates from within the Beltway, and the halls of Congress, the White House, and the agencies that make up the federal bureaucracy, government officials become major actors in developing news stories.

For instance, network television coverage during debate over Reagan's 1981 tax and budget plan was dominated by officials within the administration and their congressional allies and opponents. More than 88 percent of the source statements aired on network television news programs and in Associated Press reports were attributed to government officials. Just 6.5 percent were attributed to non-governmental groups or social movements. In the debate over welfare reform, 83 percent of sources in *USA Today* and network TV news coverage came from the government.<sup>9</sup> The same dynamic exists in foreign policy as well. Studies of the debates over the U.S.–Libya episode of the mid-1980s and the lead-up to the Iraq War in 2003 found that government sources comprised 80 percent or more of the voices in mainstream news coverage.<sup>10</sup>

To be sure, different government officials have different perspectives about how to solve different policy problems, and these divisions often fall along partisan lines. So the tendency of sources to "index" coverage to the debate occurring within the government itself does not mean that citizens are exposed to a single viewpoint. But it does mean that news coverage itself is heavily influenced by elite divisions or consensus within the government. When elites divide, news coverage reflects the opposing viewpoints.<sup>11</sup> But when there is consensus—for instance, in the U.S. decision to invade Afghanistan following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001—news coverage that relies on "official" voices is unlikely to provide citizens with a diversity of viewpoints. Far from being independent of government, media coverage often reflects the perspectives of its inhabitants.

The prominence of government officials in the news isn't all about beat reporting, however. Journalists rely heavily on government sources also because they are highly attuned to power and influence. The media are interested in "shedding light on future developments,"<sup>12</sup> which encourages them to pay disproportionate attention to institutionally influential actors—people like the president and party leaders in Congress.<sup>13</sup> For instance, during the 2002–2003 debate over the Bush Administration's proposal to launch a military invasion of Iraq, White House officials, including President George W. Bush, accounted for 28 percent of all of the statements on broadcast news. This was largely because journalists saw Bush as the key to the resolution of the impasse. Similarly, journalists turned heavily to foreign sources and officials from the United Nations later in the debate when it became clear that the U.N.'s weapons inspections program would be a central issue in how the war debate would end.<sup>14</sup>

In summary, the conclusion of political scientists and communication scholars is that mainstream news coverage rarely lives up to the expectations that many observers set out for it. The content of political news tends to be too heavily focused on non-substantive themes, like political strategy and legislative maneuvering, leaving citizens without access to potentially useful information about the substance of public policy debates. In addition, the media tend to reflect the views inside of government and ignore those outside of it. As a result, a common argument is that the public is not as well-informed as it could be if the media was more substantive and open to a wider diversity of sources.

## Perspectives on the New Media

But are these criticisms still applicable? After all, these critiques of the media took root before the new media revolution of the last two decades. The proliferation of cable news outlets and Internet news sites has raised the possibility that the old patterns of media coverage may be less common today.<sup>15</sup> With more political information available to news consumers than ever before, new media outlets may not be driven by the same journalistic conventions and routines that have produced these well-established patterns of coverage. With so many news outlets, there are more opportunities (not to mention space and air time) to devote to policy substance. And because of the Internet's more open environment, it may be the site of more diverse viewpoints. Indeed, pronouncements about the possibilities of the internet's ability to revolutionize political news have been common.<sup>16</sup> "With greater opportunities for individuals to gain access to political information, be it from the internet or 24-hour cable newscasts, the potential is considerable for a well-informed citizenry," write Max McCombs, R. Lance Holbert, Spiro Kiousis, and Wayne Wanta.<sup>17</sup>

Although research that has directly compared the content of news in the traditional and new media is sparse, one fact is clear: the news has grown more ideological and partisan as the number of outlets has expanded.<sup>18</sup> This has made it easier for citizens to seek out information from channels and websites that confirm their existing political beliefs, and has given those outlets an incentive to continue to shape their coverage to cater to their increasingly ideologically motivated audiences. MSNBC and the Daily Kos, for instance, draw audiences made up mostly of liberals and Democrats. On the other side, Fox News and Hot Air, for example, have audiences disproportionately comprised of conservatives and Republicans. If one of the media's main democratic responsibilities is to provide citizens with a diversity of viewpoints that will lead them to political judgments that reflect a relatively comprehensive consideration of different perspectives, then the rise of opinionated and ideological media does not augur well for the fulfillment of this goal. To be sure, citizens could encounter a wide variety of news sources by attending to a number of different news sources. But to the extent that people's news consumption habits tend to reflect their political preferences,<sup>19</sup> they will not benefit from the ideological diversity available in the wider information environment. Instead, whether citizens are exposed to a diversity of views depends on whether any individual outlet (or a few outlets) that they watch or read provides those perspectives.

But while cable and online news is more partisan than its older counterpart, there is much less evidence about whether it is more or less likely than traditional media to focus on the substance of political debates rather than political process. And there has been almost no consideration of how much attention new outlets devote to "official" versus "non-official" sources in their reporting of public policy. If we are to judge the quality of news in the new media environment, these aspects of coverage need attention.

## Why the New Media Might Make for Better News

It is possible to imagine several reasons that new media coverage of politics might be more issue-focused and less inclined to marginalize non-traditional sources, thus demonstrating more independence from government. First, differences in the production and dissemination of news in the new and traditional media might lead to differences in content. One of the reasons that the news media traditionally have failed to cover political debates in-depth, especially on broadcast television, is time constraints. The typical network newscast is roughly 22 minutes long (excluding commercials), and just a portion of that time is devoted to politics and public affairs. As a result, most broadcast news reports are less than one minute, and many can be as short as just a sentence or two.<sup>20</sup> That isn't that much time to tell a story about a complicated change to, say, the nation's welfare system. And while print outlets have more space—lengthy stories in the prestige press can occasionally run to several thousand words—they are still constrained by the size of the "news hole," or the amount of editorial content in a newspaper left after advertising has been placed on the pages.

But cable news channels and Internet sites don't face the same limitations. With 24 hours of news to fill, cable outlets possess more flexibility in devoting time to stories. Articles on web sites can be as long as editors want them to be; theoretically, there are no page limits, unlike in the print media (although readers' attention spans may impose a practical limit). These structural differences suggest that political coverage in the new media might be lengthier and more substantive than in traditional news outlets. If one of the factors that has limited the depth with which journalists cover politics has been time and space constraints,<sup>21</sup> then we might find new media more likely to provide meatier discussions and analyses of public policy.

Second, because new media outlets are also not tied as closely to traditional journalistic conventions and routines, such as beat reporting, they may be less reliant on government officials and perspectives. The "bottom-up" model of many blogs, in which readers are encouraged to offer feedback and critique news stories, may also lead to more attention to non-traditional sources.<sup>22</sup> There is some evidence that this is happening. In a comparison of "citizen journalism" web sites and local daily newspapers, Serena Carpenter finds that web outlets were more likely to include non-official sources than newspaper journalists.<sup>23</sup> Madanmohan Rao argues that news coverage of the Iraq War debate was much less reliant than mainstream outlets on U.S. government sources, who mostly articulated pro-invasion views.<sup>24</sup> As a result, these outlets appear less likely to "index" their coverage to the parameters of debate within the government than traditional outlets. That may lead news coverage in new media outlets to offer perspectives that diverge from the range of views being expressed inside the government.

### Why the New Media May Look a Lot like the Old Media

At the same time, several factors suggest that new media content may in fact look very much like its traditional predecessors. First, cable news channels and political blogs remain reliant on advertising to stay in business. And that means they have to attract viewers and readers. While the media environment has changed, it's not clear that citizens' taste in news has. Research on audience preferences shows that most Americans are not particularly interested in meaty policy discourse, instead preferring more superficial, entertaining fare, such as a focus on the "horse race" during election time.<sup>25</sup> This is not to mention the spike in news attention when a celebrity, like Michael Jackson or Anna Nicole Smith, dies.<sup>26</sup> The news focuses on the non-substantive aspects of politics, such as the legislative process and political maneuvering, in part because that's what media executives believe their audiences will tune in to.

New media outlets are subject to the same realities. If American news consumers continue to prefer coverage of process and political implications rather than in-depth analyses of policy substance, new media outlets will have an incentive to provide the same kind of coverage that traditional outlets typically have. While there is very little empirical research that has examined new media content in these terms, one study found that online and print news outlets had very similar amounts of "mobilizing information," that is, information that would encourage citizens to get involved in politics, suggesting that the new media were no more attentive to the substantive implications of political developments.<sup>27</sup>

Second, cable outlets and the most popular political blogs are in many ways an extension of the mainstream media.<sup>28</sup> Some of the most popular new media venues are run by former mainstream journalists (e.g., Andrew Sullivan). And while the structure of the new media may be different and new media journalists may have more freedom to take political positions, they are still likely to be attentive to the institutional actors who possess political power. Journalists, regardless of the venue, are still interested in "shedding light on future developments" and will be disproportionately interested in the political actors they believe will affect political debate.<sup>29</sup> Whatever the differences in the cultures of new and traditional media, it is hard to imagine bloggers not devoting significant attention to the Supreme Court's March 2012 hearing on the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, as the nine robed justices held the fate of the Obama Administration's major domestic policy achievement in their hands. Indeed, traditional and online journalists see many aspects of their jobs in similar ways.<sup>30</sup> This suggests that new media outlets will have an incentive to pay particular attention to the contours of debate within the mainstream of the government, since these debates will set the terms by which a policy debate is likely to be resolved. Moreover, much of the content in the "blogosphere" is derived from news that originated in mainstream news outlets.<sup>31</sup> As a result, new media content may be similarly likely to be "indexed" to the range of views articulated within the mainstream of government debate.

These competing expectations and the scant empirical evidence suggest the need to examine quality of news coverage in traditional and new media along these important dimensions. In the next section, I describe the results of a small study of news coverage of the 2011 debate over U.S. involvement in the civil war in Libya that will help illuminate the similarities and differences in news coverage of policy debates.

### Case Study: The 2011 Debate over U.S. Intervention in Libya

In February 2011, the "Arab Spring" uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and other Middle Eastern and North African nations spread to Libya. After the military forces of longtime dictator Muammar Gaddafi fired on a group of protestors in the coastal city of Benghazi, the protests quickly escalated into a full-scale rebellion. With the Libyan government under siege, Gaddafi's military forces began striking back, killing rebel fighters and terrorizing civilians who were alleged to be supportive of the insurgency. By early March, a civil war was under way.

With the prospect of a humanitarian disaster looming, international officials in late February began deliberating over whether and how to intervene in Libya. There was sporadic talk of sending in ground troops to stop the bloodshed, but the main focus was the implementation of a no-fly zone by an international coalition to give protection to Libyan civilians who might otherwise be targeted by the threatened Gaddafi regime. In the United States, the political debate focused on the extent to which the country should participate in an international action, and whether it should take a leadership role in doing so. In the end, the Obama Administration ended up providing military support to a NATO-led no-fly zone created late in March.

The United States' possible involvement in Libya provides an opportunity to examine whether the traditional and new media covered this political debate differently. In particular, did the new media provide more high quality news, in terms of the substantive focus of coverage, a less heavy reliance on government officials, and a wider range of perspectives? Or have the hopes for reconstituting the news anew been too optimistic?

To answer these questions, a research assistant and I conducted a content analysis of news coverage of the Libya debate in six popular media outlets.<sup>32</sup> We analyzed coverage on the CBS Evening News and in *The Washington Post*, two traditional news outlets. We also examined the coverage from MSNBC, Fox News, the liberal political blog Daily Kos, and the conservative political blog Hot Air, four new media venues.<sup>33</sup> We randomly selected 10 Libya-related news stories from each outlet between February 15 and March 31, the six-week period during which discussion of possible U.S. military intervention in Libya was at its peak. Stories in the *Post* were drawn from the front section of the newspaper, and the CBS stories came from the network's half-hour nightly newscasts. On Fox, we coded transcripts from the 6 p.m. show *Special Report*,

the network's closest approximation of a typical news broadcast. On MSNBC, our transcripts were drawn from *Hardball with Chris Matthews*, a program that uses a talk show format but that regularly features news reporting and analysis from the network's correspondents. Stories from Daily Kos and Hot Air were drawn from the sites' archives.

### Substantive Coverage

The first question is about the substance of coverage. The stories in the sample were analyzed to determine whether they focused primarily on (1) non-substantive aspects of the story, such as the political "game" (e.g., the effect of Libya action on Barack Obama's popularity), off-hand remarks about the situation by political officials, or minor legislative actions that communicated little about the issues at hand, or (2) the substance of the debate, such as the difficulty of implementing a no-fly zone, the positions of the White House or Republican leaders, or the implications for U.S. foreign policy. By standards of democratic theory, most observers would argue that substantive stories are more useful for citizens trying to discern what the correct course of action should be than stories about the possible electoral implications or other more trivial topics.

Overall, coverage of the Libya episode was more substantive than tends to be the case in most policy debates. Sixty-eight percent of all the stories in our sample were focused on substance, while just 32 percent emphasized non-substantive themes. But Figure 13.1 shows that the traditional outlets were more likely to cover the issue in substantive terms than their new media counterparts. All of the CBS News stories we analyzed were substantive, while 70 percent of the *Post's* coverage focused on substantive themes.

Fox News and the conservative blog Hot Air were similarly substantive, but MSNBC and Daily Kos took a different approach. Seventy percent of MSNBC's transcripts and 60 percent of Daily Kos' articles were coded as non-substantive. On Daily Kos, for instance, one article was simply a snarky dispatch that pointed out that U.S. Rep. Tom Marino (R-Pennsylvania) seemed not to know that Libya was in Africa. Although perhaps entertaining—especially when Daily Kos writer Barbara Morrill suggested that the congressional representative "go to a remedial geography class"—such a story does not provide much useful information for citizens trying to discern whether the United States should participate in an international military action. Several of the MSNBC segments were focused on the political and electoral implications for President Obama of participating in enforcing the no-fly zone.

There is too much variation across the new media outlets to conclude that on this dimension—the relative emphasis on policy substance—the new media are any "worse" than traditional media. But they certainly aren't any better, and some of the newer outlets clearly framed their coverage of the debate in less than helpful terms. If we judge news content by how much citizens might have learned about the substance of the Libya debate, it doesn't appear that they

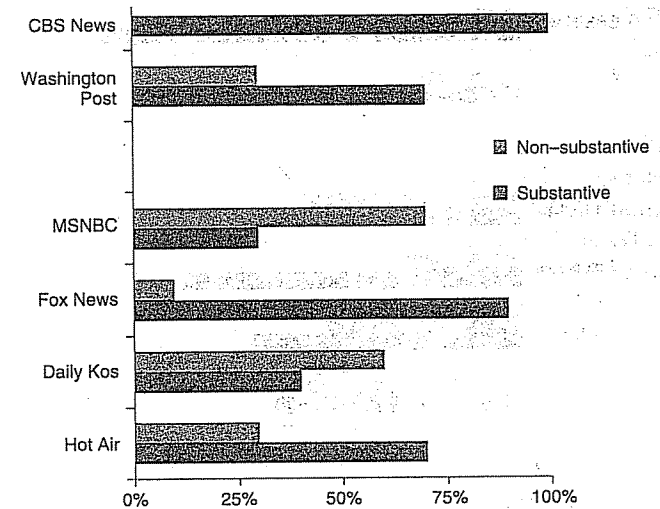


Figure 13.1 Substantive and non-substantive stories in coverage of the Libya debate

Note: Figure depicts the percentage of stories coded as substantive and non-substantive. Analysis is based on 10 randomly selected stories about the Libya episode in each news outlet from February 15 through March 31, 2011.

would have been better served by turning to cable news outlets and web sites than to newspapers or network news.

### The Diversity of Sources and Perspectives in the News

What about the diversity of voices and viewpoints included in the news? And in particular, are there differences in the tendency of traditional and new media to rely on the perspectives of government officials, the very people that the Fourth Estate is expected to be calling to account? In the parlance of the political communication literature, how reliant are news outlets on "official" sources? Our coding scheme analyzed every statement from an individual that appeared in our news stories or segments that advocated or opposed U.S. involvement in Libya. We recorded the direction of the statement—whether it supported U.S. involvement or opposed it—the identity of the speaker, and noted whether the speaker was a government official.

The top two pairs of bars in Figure 13.2 confirm what research has found repeatedly: Traditional news outlets like CBS News and the *Post* rely heavily on the perspectives of government officials. Ninety percent of the statements on CBS News were attributed to government officials—Obama, other White House officials, Republicans in Congress, and the like—as were 71 percent in

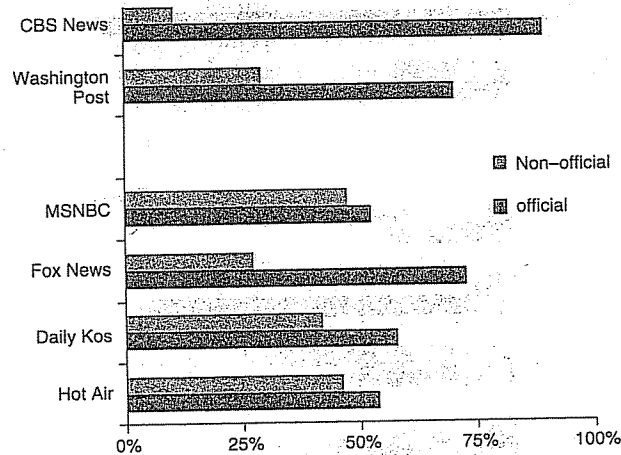


Figure 13.2 Official and non-official sources in coverage of the Libya debate

Note: Figure depicts the percentage of source statements attributed to official and non-official sources. Analysis is based on 10 randomly selected stories about the Libya episode in each news outlet from February 15 through March 31, 2011.

the *Post*. A small minority came from citizens, interest groups, the Libyan rebels themselves, or other voices outside the halls of government.

And while Fox News quoted official sources at a high rate—72 percent of the time—the other new media outlets had more source diversity. Official sources made up 58 percent of statements in Daily Kos dispatches, 54 percent in Hot Air stories, and 53 percent on MSNBC. This appears to be the product of two factors. First, these outlets relied more heavily on analysis of the Libyan crisis from independent experts from outside government officialdom. This was especially true on MSNBC, where “Hardball” roundtables included guests like Middle East expert Shibley Telhami, intelligence analyst Bob Baer, and other figures from think tanks and organizations in Washington.

Second, all of the new media outlets gave their anchors, reporters, and writers leeway to offer their own opinions, something that typically occurs only in op-ed pieces in traditional media. For instance, in a February 26 post, the Daily Kos blogger Meteor Blades passionately advocated for military intervention, writing that “the cause is just” and that “standing by while protesters armed only with rocks and cellphone cameras are gunned down by machine gun-toting loyalists and mercenaries is simply unacceptable.” The new media’s greater reliance on opinionated journalism gave readers and viewers more arguments for and against intervention from outside the halls of government. From the perspective of the value of an independent press, this may be an argument in favor of the kind of journalism that has emerged in the new media.

We can peel back one layer more by looking at the extent to which President Obama and White House officials dominated the news—perhaps what we can call the extent of “Obaminance” in the Libya debate. Traditionally, the media have a tendency to rely heavily on the executive branch as sources in foreign policy debates, owing to the influence that presidents wield over military matters. Consistent with Figure 13.2, Figure 13.3 shows that the new media were less likely to rely on the Obama administration than were the traditional media. Seventy-two percent of CBS News source statements came from White House officials, as did 42 percent in the *Post*. Fox News also relied on the administration for about half of its quotes, but the other new media outlets were considerably less focused on the president and his underlings.

While government and White House sources were less prominent in the new media, this did not, however, lead to more diversity in the perspectives available to news consumers about possible U.S. involvement in Libya. In all the news outlets, as shown in Figure 13.4, more than half of the source statements were supportive of U.S. intervention, with MSNBC’s 59 percent being the lowest. And in fact, the distributions for Fox News, Daily Kos, and Hot Air were all more pro-intervention than in the traditional media. This suggests that while the traditional media relied on officials within government more heavily, this actually led to slightly more variation in the arguments about whether the United States should get involved. The overall picture, however,

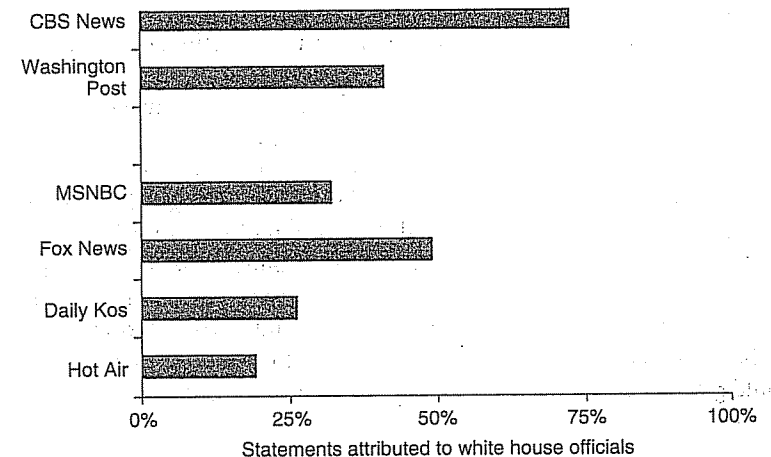


Figure 13.3 Prevalence of White House officials in coverage of the Libya debate

Note: Figure depicts the percentage of source statements attributed to White House officials, including President Barack Obama. Analysis is based on 10 randomly selected stories about the Libya episode in each news outlet from February 15 through March 31, 2011.

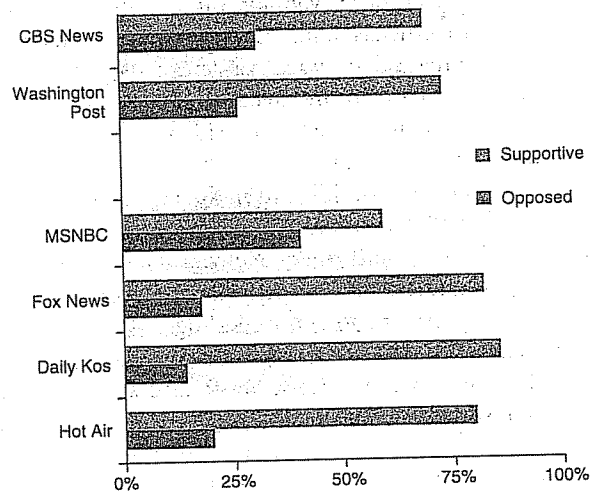


Figure 13.4 Statements in coverage supportive of and opposed to U.S. intervention in Libya

Note: Figure depicts the percentage of source statements coded as supportive of and opposed to U.S. intervention in Libya. Analysis is based on 10 randomly selected stories about the Libya episode in each news outlet from February 15 through March 31, 2011.

is one of similarity—the differences between the traditional and new media were not large.

In summary, the analysis of coverage of potential U.S. involvement in the 2011 Libyan civil war suggests that the content of the news in traditional and new media outlets is not dramatically different. There was no clear difference in the amount of substantive and non-substantive coverage of the debate, as the various new media outlets treated the story in different ways. New media outlets did turn less frequently to official and White House sources, replacing their perspectives with those of independent experts and often the writers and reporters themselves. But in the end, the viewpoints that traditional and new media consumers were exposed to—with respect to whether the United States should get involved in the Libyan crisis—were nearly identical.

## Conclusion

On April 8, 2012, Patrick B. Pexton, writing in the *Washington Post*, lamented the newspaper's relatively scant coverage of the issue concerns of the D.C. Metropolitan area's Members of Congress. While the newspaper covers politics with gusto, reporters often ignore some of the more mundane legislative activities of the region's politicians. This, Pexton said, puts local voters in a bind. "If

newspapers don't cover the substantive work of these officials... how can the people judge if they're doing their jobs or not?" he wrote. "How can they hold their representatives accountable?"

According to many observers, this is the central charge of the media: to provide citizens with the information they need to hold the government accountable for its actions. Because the media serve as the public's window into politics, whether the press offers high-quality public affairs coverage can affect whether citizens have the chance to carry out their democratic responsibilities effectively. While scholars typically have been critical of the media's coverage of politics—noting their tendency to focus on non-substantive aspects of policy debates and to report on a narrow range of perspectives, most of them emanating from within the government—the rise of the new media has raised hopes that the quality of the news might improve.

As this chapter has suggested, however, there appear to be few reasons for optimism about the quality of the information being provided to citizens in the new media environment. The evidence that scholars have accumulated thus far suggests that because new media outlets are subject to many of the same forces as their mainstream counterparts, the content of political news has not changed in ways that help citizens make "better" judgments. New media outlets do not tend to be systematically more likely than the traditional media to focus on policy information rather than non-substantive themes. And while new media may be less dependent on government sources, this does not necessarily translate into a wider diversity of perspectives in the news. When it comes to news quality in the early decades of the 21st century, it seems as if everything new is old again.

## Notes

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- 15 By new media, I refer to cable television channels and Internet sites. But I do not include under the heading of "new media" online outlets that are primarily vehicles for mainstream news content in this new venue. For instance, the liberal blog "Talking Points Memo" is a new media outlet, but nyt.com, the *New York Times'* website, is not. The *Times'* website primarily reproduces its print content, and thus is not sufficiently different from the print version to be considered a new media source.
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- 32 I thank Jon Weakley for assistance.
- 33 *The Washington Post* and CBS Evening News were chosen because research has shown that these outlets offer a fair representation of the way other national news organizations cover politics. MSNBC and Fox News represent the kind of ideologically driven news programming that has become more common on cable news and in the new media environment. Daily Kos and Hot Air constitute the most "centrally linked" sites in the liberal and conservative "blogosphere," according to the Blogosphere Authority Index compiled by communication scholar David Karpf (<http://www.blogosphereauthorityindex.com/>). See David Karpf, "Measuring Influence in the Political Blogosphere: Who's Winning and How Can We Tell?" *Politics and Technology Review* (2008): 33–41.