

**Examining the media agenda:
How traditional and online media presented
the 2000 and 2004 presidential primaries**

Paper presented at the 5th International Symposium on Online Journalism
University of Texas, Austin
March 17, 2004

Preliminary

Donica Mensing
Assistant Professor
University of Nevada, Reno
Reno, NV 89557

dmensing@unr.edu
(775) 784-4187

Introduction

When the first news programs aired on television, the black-and-white, 15-minute, once-a-day programs hardly seemed a threat to the news provided by newspapers and radio. It would have been difficult then to foretell a day when presidential campaign strategies would be determined in large part by the schedules and demands of television news, with newspapers, radio and magazine news relegated to lesser positions of importance and influence. Despite the fact that televised campaigns of recent memory have been criticized for many failings, including ever shorter candidate sound-bites and familiar patterns of coverage dominated by personality and standings in the polls, (Lichter, 2001), television remains the dominant medium by which most people learn about presidential candidates (Pew).

Today, many are eagerly imagining how the Internet might bring similarly profound changes to our patterns of political communication, with predictions ranging from the rebirth of civic engagement and virtual communities to a dysfunctional society imprisoned by self interest. Assessing the influences of the Internet on political communication is an enormous task. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to our understanding of how political news might change online. The specific focus of this paper is on agenda setting theory, examining how this well established theory of media effects might help us assess potential changes in the development of political news online.

Until the relatively recent proliferation of news channels, media scholars generally assumed the media agenda stayed relatively constant across media (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p. 90). Earlier studies provided evidence that *The New York Times* frequently set the media agenda for other news outlets, with broadcast programs often taking their lead from the agenda of newspapers (Danielian & Reese, 1989; Lopez-Escobar, Llamas, McCombs, & Lennon, 1998; Roberts & McCombs, 1994). This constancy enabled researchers to study the effects of “the media” on the public agenda, with the assumption that the message the public received about the relative importance of various news stories didn’t change significantly between news outlets. The measurability and stability of the media agenda has been one factor in the ability of communication scholars to conduct numerous agenda setting studies (see, for example, (Dearing & Rogers, 1986; McCombs & Estrada, 1996; McCombs, et al., 1997; Protess & McCombs, 1991).

However, as new technologies change the way news is produced, distributed and consumed, it is reasonable to expect that patterns in the media agenda might also change. Some predict that news judgment and agenda setting will become fractured, with less continuity among media sources in terms of how much attention different issues warrant (Chaffee & Metzger,

2001). Questions have been raised as to whether the older theories regarding media, such as agenda setting, are even applicable in a new media environment because of the diversity and quantity of news sources available online (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001).

This study examines potential changes in the media agenda between traditional media and online media by focusing on one specific political event – the Presidential primary – and comparing how this issue was presented in print and a variety of online media over the past two election cycles. If election stories are given similar prominence in newspapers and online media, and if the stories are of similar content and type, then it could be suggested that the transition to an online medium – specifically the World Wide Web -- is not substantially altering the media agenda, at least in relation to this critical public issue. If, however, the prominence and type of electoral stories are significantly different between print and online media, then it would be clear that the media agenda is evolving along with the technology, and that the effects of the agenda could be expected to vary with this technological transition. Given the importance of media in providing political information to citizens during elections, understanding how information changes in presentation, emphasis and content as a result of technological changes is critical.

In addition, it is important to address whether the variables traditionally used to measure the media agenda in older media are applicable online. Story placement, prominence and frequency are much more fluid concepts online, and applying the variables that accurately measured the media agenda in newspapers or broadcast news programs could be problematic in this new medium.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to assess whether newspapers and various types of online media present the same political issue – the Presidential primary – in similar ways. To answer the question of whether the media agenda varied across media type, two research questions were developed:

- 1) Did the media agenda – defined by measuring the quantity, prominence, and depth of stories provided about the 2000 and 2004 presidential primary – vary significantly between newspapers and online media? Did it vary significantly between types of online media?
- 2) Did the types of presidential primary stories provided by traditional and online media vary significantly in 2000 or 2004?

Method

The study required identifying traditional and online media to use for comparison purposes. Newspapers were used to represent traditional media because of their role in setting the media agenda, as described earlier (Alter, 2000; Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Weaver et al., 1981). In addition, because online news is still text based, newspapers were a more reasonable comparison than the visually based medium of television. The highest circulation outlets in each media type that contained daily, national, general-interest news, were chosen for inclusion. Thus, to represent traditional media, three newspapers were chosen: *USA Today*, *Los Angeles Times* and *The New York Times*.

Since the focus of this study was to examine differences in news coverage between different media, not between types of journalism, online news sites produced by individuals or that represented a particular point of view were not included. Instead, sites that provide daily news prepared for mass consumption by journalistic organizations with recognized journalistic values were chosen from three categories of online news: online newspapers, online television sites and online-only news sites. Online newspapers were considered the category most likely to be similar in content and presentation to print newspapers. Both are text-based, with online presentation similar to that provided in print. The second category was online broadcast sites. Here, news stories are usually provided by the traditional television station, but because the stories must (in the absence of available broadband) be translated from video to text, they necessarily change from being a visually based story to text based. The third category of online news was defined as news sites produced by journalistic organizations that have no traditional media product. To be included, these sites had to be produced by organizations that utilized standard journalistic practices, employed editors with experience in traditional media, and provided general interest news that would appeal to a broad readership. These sites were considered least likely to resemble traditional news because they had no competing constraints from another dominant medium in the same organization.

The online editions of the print papers, *The New York Times Online*, *Los Angeles Times Online* and *USA Today Online* were chosen to represent online newspapers as discernible differences between the editions would be due entirely to the medium and not to differences between media organizations. The online broadcast sites chosen represent the three largest television networks and, at the time, the highest rated all-news cable station: ABCnews.com, CBSnews.com, CNN.com and MSNBC.com. (Due to technical difficulties in downloading MSNBC, this site was eliminated from the 2000 study before analysis. However, it was included in the 2004 analysis, while the CBSnews.com site was dropped from the 2004 data collection.)

The online-only news sources were chosen based on their prominence in the popular press and recognition by established journalistic organizations (the Online News Association and *Editor & Publisher*). News sites, in general, do not rank among the top-rated websites as compiled by the Internet rating companies of Nielsen and Media Matrix, but the two sites chosen, Salon.com and Slate.com, did receive significant traffic for media sites; were written about in numerous media, including a lengthy article in the Sunday *New York Times* (Barringer, 2000); and are some of the only general-news, daily updated, Web-only sites produced by traditionally defined journalists. Both are staffed by a number of former print journalists, with substantial funding from private investors (Salon) and Microsoft Corporation (Slate). Both have won numerous online journalism awards from the Online News Association and *Editor & Publisher*. In 2004, a third online-only news site was included in the data collection: the news section of Yahoo! (<http://news.yahoo.com>). This site was included to add another highly trafficked site to the data and to provide symmetry to the various types of media under study (three news outlets for each type of media).

The dates for the data collection portion of the study were the day before the Iowa caucus until the day that the nominees for each party were identified. For the 2000 primary season, the dates included in the study were January 23, 2000 (the day before the Iowa caucus) through March 9, 2000 (the day McCain and Bradley ended their campaigns and Gore and Bush became the de facto nominees), a total of 47 days. These dates were chosen to capture the preponderance of news coverage about the presidential primary in 2000. The Vanishing Voter Project confirmed that this was the most intense period of public and media interest in the entire campaign, until election day (Patterson, 2000). The data collection period for 2004 started on Jan. 19, the day before the Iowa caucus and ended on March 3, the day it became clear that John Kerry was the defacto Democratic nominee. However, for this paper, only one week of data from 2004 has been coded, from January 25 to January 31, the week between the New Hampshire primary and the multiple primaries held on Feb. 1, including the South Carolina primary.

Content was gathered by subscribing to the three print newspapers for the duration of the study and by downloading content from the online sites between 11 p.m. and 1 a.m. Pacific time nightly during the study period. Evening hours were chosen because this is the time when newspaper sites are uploading the content from the following day's newspaper, thus reflecting most closely the news decisions made by traditional newsrooms. Because the morning hours are a time of peak Web traffic, and most sites prepared for early morning readership the evening before, it was decided that this would be the optimum time to compare story selection and placement. Downloading during the day would capture breaking news stories, which could push primary news off the front pages temporarily. Downloading software was used to copy the front pages of each site manually each evening, as well as the full content of all primary stories linked

off the front page, page by page. At the conclusion of the study, the data were burned on CDs for analysis.

In 2000, a total of 487 front pages were analyzed from a total possible of 504. In addition, the four most prominent stories about the primary, on the front page of each newspaper or website each day, were coded for a number of variables, including type of story. In 2000, a total of 1,123 stories from the 11 sources were identified as meeting these criteria. For the one week period in 2004 that has been coded to date, 83 front pages, out of a possible 84 front pages, were coded. A total of 242 stories from 12 news sources were coded during the one week selected time period in 2004.

Intercoder reliability: All the sources and stories for 2000 and 2004 were downloaded, coded, entered and analyzed by the author. To assure reproducibility, a graduate student coded 85 stories randomly selected from the 1,141 stories collected in 2000. This number is approximately 7% of the total population, which falls within the suggested 5 to 7% subsample recommended for a large sample (Kaid & Wadsworth, 1989). Intercoder reliability has not yet been calculated for 2004 (forthcoming).

Measuring the election agenda

Traditional agenda setting studies count the number, length and placement of stories about an issue or issues to measure the media agenda (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). Two levels of analysis were used in this study: the front page and the individual story. Front page variables included the number of election stories per source, and, for online sites, the number of front page stories repeated from the previous day and the number of links to primary-election related information. Individual story variables included prominence on the front page, the length of each story, the number of photographs accompanying each story, and the type of story.

Number of stories: The number of front page stories with headlines related to the primary election were counted for each source each day. Headlines with teasers to an inside pages were counted. Non-specific mentions of primary coverage (such as logos or references such as “primary coverage, page X) were not counted, nor were links to lists of stories. Only specific stories with specific headlines were counted as a front page story.

Prominence: This variable measured the placement of each story that was coded (the four most prominent stories per source per day) as stories featured more prominently on the front page have a greater potential to capture audience interest and are more likely to influence agenda-setting (Behr & Iyengar, 1985; Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Graber, 1988; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Prominence in newspapers is easily defined by counting stories that appear on the front page above or below the fold, and by measuring headline size. Online prominence is more difficult to measure because “above the fold” is not an applicable concept. For this study, the equivalent of

'above the fold' was defined as the area that appeared in the first screen when the site address was entered into the browser window. Monitor settings were arranged to be as standard as possible (a 15 inch screen set to 832x624 resolution, with the browser window set to fill most of the screen). Lead stories were coded a 4; stories above the fold or on the first screen online, but not featured as the lead story, were coded 3; stories below the fold or below the first screen with at least some description were coded 2; and stories that were only a headline, teased to an inside page, were rated 1.

Length: Longer stories convey more information and have greater potential to inform and influence readers than shorter stories. Length can also imply that the media source placed greater importance on that particular story by giving it more space. Length was measured in paragraphs, then the average number of words per paragraph per source was calculated and multiplied to determine the total number of words in each story. The frequencies for length were run in SPSS, and the distribution divided into quartiles, with longest stories coded 4, longer stories coded 3, shorter stories coded 2, and the shortest stories coded 1.

Photograph: This variable measured whether a photograph accompanied a primary story on the front page. As information processing research shows (Graber, 1996, 2001) images are powerful communicators of information in ways different from text. The presence of a photograph indicates that editors placed importance on the story. Photos also add to the attention-getting characteristics by increasing the likelihood that a story will be noticed and processed by a reader. Stories that included 3 or more photographs were coded 4; stories with 2 photos were coded 3; stories with 1 photo coded 2; stories with no photographs coded 1. Photographs were coded in 2000 only; the 2004 photographs have not yet been coded.

Agenda setting index: To facilitate comparisons between media types in 2000, three story-level variables (length, prominence, photograph) were tested for significance and then added together to create an index for comparing agenda-setting variables. The indexes were compared across media type using a one-way ANOVA. The higher the index score, the higher the electoral story measured on the media agenda for that particular category of news sources.¹

Story Type and Author: Stories were categorized as straight news, news analysis, feature, opinion/commentary, and other (Semetko et al., 1991). The author of each story was also recorded, and classified as staff, staff and wire, wire service, guest or unidentified. While these

¹ In addition to the index created for story level variables in 2000, two additional variables were used to provide context for agenda setting. These included the total number of stories about the primary in each media source over the 47 day study period in 2000 and the total number of words published about the primary per source. These variables were tested for significant differences by media type using a one-way ANOVA and a post hoc Scheffé for pairwise differences, and then were used as context when drawing conclusions about agenda setting differences between media types.

two variables are not traditional agenda setting variables, they were added as a way to add additional richness to the comparison of emphasis and presentation of news across media types.

Findings

Research Question #1

The first research question examined whether the media agenda – defined by measuring the quantity, prominence, and depth of stories provided about the 2000 and 2004 presidential primary – varied significantly between newspapers and online media, or between types of online media. Significant differences in these variables were found in both 2000 and 2004 between the four types of media compared.

Number of stories: Online broadcast sites and online-only news sources featured far more front-page election stories during the study period than did newspapers or online newspapers. Online-only news sites provided the highest number of front page stories per type of media per day, averaging 4.7 election stories daily in 2000 and 10 stories per front page per day in 2004, whereas newspapers averaged a little over two election stories per day. Table 1 shows how many election stories each of the 11 news outlets ran in 2000 and 2004; Table 2 combines the 11 sources into the 4 media types, to compare how many stories each media type ran on average, every day during the 2000 and 2004 study periods. The trend in both primaries remains the same: online-only news sites featured significantly more election stories on the front pages of their sites than did the three other media types.

However, in 2004, if the number of repeat stories (stories that were published on previous days) are excluded from the count of front page stories calculated each day, and the focus is only on new stories, the differences between online-only sites disappears. Excluding old stories still reveals significant differences, but only between newspapers and online broadcast sites (One-way Anova, $F=5.226$, $df(3)$, $p<.005$). Since the week chosen to code for 2004 was a period of high interest, the differences between the four media types may be less during this time period. A fuller picture may emerge once the entire 2004 primary season has been coded.

Table 1. Number of Election Stories by Media Source

<i>Media outlet</i>	<i>Average number of election stories per front page per day (2000)</i>	<i>Average number of election stories per front page per day (2004)</i>
New York Times	2.5	2.8
Los Angeles Times	2.3	3.1
USA Today	1.8	2
NYT Online	3.0	4
LAT Online	2.0	4.5
USA Today Online	1.0	2.7

CBS.com	4.3	not coded
ABC.com	3.6	1.2
CNN.com	3.4	2.7
Slate	5.2	19
Salon	4.3	9.7
MSNBC.com	not coded	9.1
Yahoo News	not coded	1.7
Total	3.1	5.2

Table 2. Number of Election Stories by Media Type

Media outlet	Total frontpage pages analyzed (2000)	Average		Total frontpage stories analyzed (2004)	Average	
		Total frontpage stories (2000)	stories per page day (2000)			Total frontpage stories analyzed (2004)
Newspapers	125	282	2.3	21	53	2.5
Online newspapers	136	273	2.0	21	82	3.9
Online broadcast	138	517	3.7	20	83	4.1
Online-only sites	88	417	4.7	21	213	10.1

Length of stories: In both 2000 and 2004, newspapers and online newspapers published much longer stories about the election than did online broadcast sites, or online only news sites. In 2004, online newspapers had the longest average stories of the four media types and published the most words in the stories linked off the front pages of the sites. Individually, *The New York Times* had the longest stories and consequently the highest total word count of the media sources studied. The shortest stories appeared on ABC.com, less than one-third as long as *Times* stories. *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *The New York Times Online* had, by far, the longest stories in 2000, averaging 1,400 words per story. All the other sources had stories that averaged 900 words or less. The trends in 2004 were similar, but the differences were not statistically significant. Online broadcast sites published much shorter stories than the other media types; *The New York Times Online* had the longest stories, and the highest word count of all the media sources. In 2004, *USA Today* had the shortest stories, averaging just 500 words each.

Table 3. Number of Words in Each Story by Media Type

Media type	Total number of words (2000)	Average number of words per story (2000)	Total number of words (2004)	Average number of words per story (2004)
All newspapers	327,441	1226	60,581	1236
All online newspapers	274,154	1133	97,323	1474
All online broadcast sites	245,110	616	42,469	801
All online-only sites	187,713	869	71,347	1081

Prominence: Significant differences in prominence were found among the four media types in 2000, but not yet in 2004. In 2000, online newspapers gave election stories the most prominence on their front pages; over one-third of election stories were the top story on the page. By comparison, broadcast sites placed only 15% of election stories as the lead story. ABC.com and CNN.com placed more than 60% of election stories in the lowest priority on the front page -- a short headline with no teaser, several screens below the first screen, linked to a story on another page. Online-only news sites also gave election stories lower prominence, with only 12% of stories placed in the lead position.

In 2004, however, some changes were observable. Newspapers placed primary stories in the lead position the most often (35% of all primary stories were the lead story), as well as putting the largest percentage of stories in the least important position (37%). Online broadcast sites continues to place the least attention on primary stories (16% of primary broadcast stories were played as the top story.) All four media types placed nearly half of all primary stories “below the fold” on the computer screen. At the same time, that also means nearly half of all primary stories within the one week study period were above the fold; as mentioned previously, this most likely reflects the high interest in the primary during this one week between the New Hampshire and South Carolina primaries.

Table 4. Percentage of Stories by Category of Placement by Media Type (2000)

	Highest priority	Medium priority	Lower priority	Lowest priority
Newspaper	28%	20%	14%	39%
Online newspaper	36%	36%	22%	6%
Online broadcast	15%	13%	14%	58%
Online-only news	13%	22%	43%	23%

Table 5. Percentage of Stories by Category of Placement by Media Type (2004)

	Highest priority	Medium priority	Lower priority	Lowest priority
Newspaper	35%	22%	6%	37%
Online newspaper	21%	30%	18%	30%

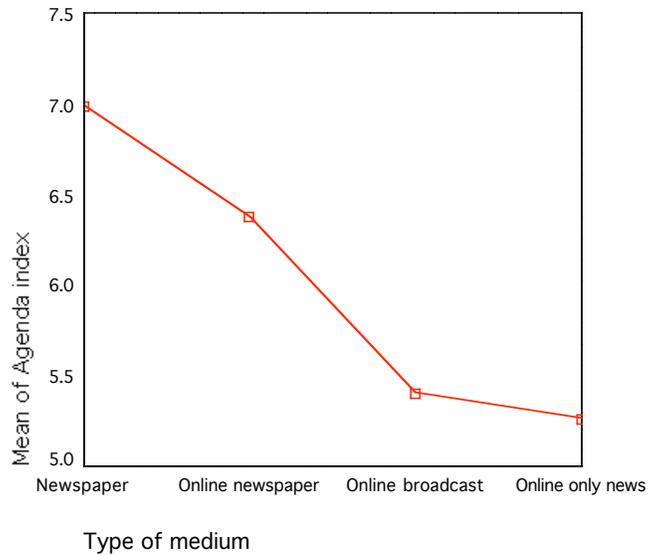
Online broadcast	16%	32%	27%	25%
Online-only news	21%	32%	22%	25%

Photographs: In 2000, *The New York Times* printed the largest number of photographs about the election, 39, and *Slate* published the fewest, 6. Online newspapers printed half as many photographs on the front page as did newspapers; online broadcast sites published the most photographs of the three types of online sites. Casual observation indicates that online sites used more photographs in 2004 than in 2000, but this has yet to be formally coded.

2000 Agenda index: To help facilitate comparisons of media agenda setting between the four news categories, a simple index was created by adding together the variable scores for three story-level variables: story length, story placement, and number of photographs. Rankings for the three variables for each story were added and the mean of the combined scores used to create one measure of agenda-setting potential. Significant differences were found in the agenda index across the four media types ($F=100.934$, $df=3/1051$, $p<.001$). Means for the agenda index indicate that online newspapers emphasized election coverage the most, while online broadcast sites emphasized the election the least of the four media types. Newspapers were the second most likely media type to emphasize the primary election, and online-only news sites were third.

One potential problem with this analysis is that it includes a number of stories that were of such low prominence that they likely had little effect on agenda setting among the public. Front page stories that required scrolling several screens below the opening screen, that were just a headline with a link to an inside page, conveyed little information to readers. The type font on the stories at this level of prominence was so small, and the amount of competing information on each page so high, it is unlikely these stories added anything to a reader's awareness of the election. If these stories are removed from the agenda index (filtering out all stories with a prominence level of 1), the means on the agenda setting index change to show a significant difference between newspapers and online newspapers as one group, and between online broadcast and online-only sites as another group ($F=44.579$, $df=3/681$, $p<.001$). Figure 1 illustrates the difference in means of the agenda setting index for the four types of media outlets studied:

Figure 1. Agenda index means, excluding stories of lowest prominence



The answer to research question #1, then, is that there were significant differences in the way the Presidential primary was presented among the four types of media examined in this study during the 2000 primary season. However, the results were not as conclusive for the 2004 data that has been coded to date. A fuller picture should emerge once that data has been completely coded and analyzed.

Research Question #2

The second research question investigated the types of stories provided by the four media types in their coverage of the Presidential primary. Significant differences were found in both 2000 and 2004 in the types of stories each media type published (Pearson chi-square tests run in both years found significance at the .001 level: In 2000, $\chi^2_{(9)}=371.0, p< .001$; in 2004, $\chi^2_{(9)}=82.63, p< .001$).

As can be seen in Tables 6 and 7, online broadcast sites published the most straight news of the four media types, while online only news site published the most opinion and commentary. All of the online sites had more opinion and commentary than the newspapers. Items such as an opinion column by Dan Rather on CBS.com and front page placement of a Maureen Down column on *The New York Times Online* indicate that editors and producers consider opinion and

commentary appropriate front page content for online. This contrast in story type could lead to very different messages being communicated to audiences. As Entman (1989) found, editorials influence liberals or conservatives more than moderates, prompting him to recommend more research on media reinforcement and agenda setting. The emphasis on opinion and commentary in online media also leads to the question of whether the objective type of news that has dominated American journalism in recent history

Table 6. Story Type by Media Type in 2000

	<i>Straight news story (descriptive, factual)</i>	<i>News analysis (analytical, interpretive, explanatory)</i>	<i>Feature (informal candidate interview, family, etc.)</i>	<i>Opinion/commentary plus other types of stories</i>
Newspaper	54%	36%	8.5%	1.5%
Online newspaper	53.1%	26.4%	3.9%	16.5%
Online broadcast	65 %	17.6%	4.0%	13.4%
Online-only news	5.1%	23.4%	12.6%	58.9%
Total	48.5%	25.1%	6.7%	19.8%

Table 7. Story Type by Media Type in 2004

	<i>Straight news story (descriptive, factual)</i>	<i>News analysis (analytical, interpretive, explanatory)</i>	<i>Feature (informal candidate interview, family, etc.)</i>	<i>Opinion/commentary plus other types of stories</i>
Newspaper	47%	49%	4%	0%
Online newspaper	59%	27%	4%	10%
Online broadcast	75%	16%	2%	7%
Online-only news	22%	27%	2%	50%
Total	50%	29%	3%	19%

might decrease in importance over time. The rise of objectivity in newspapers, beginning in the 1890s, coincided with the Progressive ideal of an informed citizenry and of the media as a marketplace (Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001; Shaw, 1967). As news moves from being marketed primarily to a mass audience to being marketed to multiple niche audiences, or as the “mass” in mass communication disappears (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001), an emphasis on objectivity might evolve into other forms of less “objective” news. The trend observed in this study of a rise in

opinion and commentary as part of the news mix lends evidence that an evolution may be under way in the types of news prevalent in election coverage and news in general.

Discussion

The question in this paper was to determine whether newspapers and online news organizations made similar or different decisions about the importance of news related to the presidential nomination process during the primaries of 2000 and 2004. The decision of each news organization to feature stories about the election is a consequence of the news judgment practiced by editors, publishers and producers. The research evidence provided by agenda setting scholars shows that these news decisions have consequences for the public, influencing the degree of attention and importance readers and viewers place on issues highlighted in the media. The data presented here show that differences do exist. Newspapers and various types of online news sites published varying numbers of stories, of varying lengths. Stories were placed differently in the various publications and different types of stories were written and presented. We have much to learn about what these changes might mean for the news consuming public. Understanding what readers notice and choose to read on online news pages, what they learn by reading blogs as opposed to straight news stories, what features make stories stand out online, are just some of the many questions awaiting today's scholars. What does seem clear is that this isn't just the same old news delivered down a new pipe. The medium does change the message, in ways that will likely affect what news readers and viewers become aware of, learn from and act on.

Agenda setting differences

The first question in the study was whether online news organizations covered the presidential nomination with the same intensity as it was covered in traditional media. Based solely on counting the number of front page stories in each media source, online sites featured the election *more* than did newspapers. In 2000, the online-only news sites averaged 4.7 election

stories a day, online broadcast sites averaged 3.7, and online newspapers and print newspapers averaged 2.0 to 2.3 election stories a day. In 2004, the trends were even more pronounced, with online-only news sites presenting an average of 10 stories related to the primary on their front pages each day. The caveat on this comparison, however, is that online news sites frequently keep the same story on the front page for several days in a row; a situation that would never occur in a newspaper. The design of online news sites, particularly *Slate*, means that a full week's worth of content is available on the front page on any given day. Whether this helps provide context to readers who only occasionally visit news sites, or whether this information is largely ignored by regular readers, is a question that could be answered by examining tracking logs and conducting audience research. It might be premature to dismiss the repetition of stories as being less useful, until the audience research proves that such a dismissal is warranted.

In comparing length of stories, it is clear that newspapers and online newspaper reporters write much longer than do broadcasters and online only writers. For the purposes of agenda setting, it would appear that this variable lends weight to the attention newspapers and their online counterparts are giving to the primary as a new topic. However, perhaps online news sites are presenting nearly as much information, but chopping it up and presenting it in different size nuggets. Again, audience research is needed to determine how important length is to reader's comprehension, and ability to stay with a story. Conventional wisdom says that it is much better to write shorter online, because of the difficulties of focusing on computer screens and sustaining focus. How this variability in length might affect reader's perceptions regarding the salience of a particular public issue is another question that will need to be addressed as scholars recalibrate agenda setting variables.

An examination of the placement of stories about the primary election shows that online broadcast sites consider the primary campaign story the least important, compared with the other three media types. In both years, broadcast sites places the lowest percentage of stories about the primary in the lead position on the page, and placed a large percentage of stories at the bottom of the page. Online newspapers had the highest percentage of lead stories about the primary in

2000; in 2004 print newspapers gave primary stories the most prominent positions on the front page. The differences in placement among the four media types was significantly different in 2000; while the same trends are observable in 2004, the differences are not statistically significant.

One question that arises in thinking about prominence is that audiences may not understand the prominence cues of online media in the same way that they understand them in newspapers and on the network news. Some indication of this is evident in an experiment conducted by Tewksbury and Althaus (2000). They found that online readers of *The New York Times* appeared to have read fewer national, international and political stories than readers of the print edition, and were less likely to remember events that had happened during the study period. If it is true that readers do not interpret prominence cues in the same way online, then some of the assumptions behind agenda setting theory need to be revisited. If even the mainstream news sites are producing different signals about prominence, then the news audience may be perceiving even fewer clear messages about what news stories are the most important. The weaker this signal, the weaker the potential for agenda setting.

Until further research is conducted into how audiences use and read online news, it is impossible to know whether individual items, such as the presence of links to information about important stories, offsets the lack of prominent placement of particular news stories on the front pages of online news sites. CBS.com appears to have emphasized the election the least based on the agenda index, yet it daily featured a prominent graphic on its front page that linked to election information. This feature was not coded or factored into the analysis, but clearly it should be considered in some way. Additional research is needed to know whether navigational links to inside information attract reader attention and provide prominence cues, or whether these graphics and links blend into the background of a site and remain relatively unnoticed.

In 2000, the variables of length, prominence and the presence of a photograph were combined to determine which media types presented the presidential primary highest on the public agenda. These were assembled in an index that included a measure of the number of words

published in each election story, the prominence of each story, and whether the story included a photograph. The index means were calculated twice -- once for all stories that were coded, and a second time by excluding the stories that were of the very lowest prominence and thus least likely to attract or influence public attention. The mean of this adjusted index for each media type showed significant differences between the four media types. Newspapers featured the election most prominently (M=6.99), followed by online newspapers (M=6.38), online broadcast sites (M=5.41), and online-only news sites (M=5.26). Based on this measure, there was a clear continuum of differences, with newspapers providing the most attention to this traditionally important political event, and online-only sites the least.

Several points can be made about this finding:

Based on the results that show the election received more prominence in newspapers and online newspapers, readers of those sources would be more aware of the primary election and more likely to consider it an issue of importance than would readers of online broadcast or online-only sites. This preliminary finding could be tested by surveys, depth interviews, and voting analyses, although demographic variables would have to be considered to determine if certain types of people tend to select certain types of media.

The medium itself does not dictate the type of issue that receives prominent attention, since print papers and online papers scored similarly on the agenda setting index. Instead, differences in emphasis may have more to do with the characteristics of the organization producing the news rather than with the medium. All the major news organizations that produce the country's largest newspapers and most watched network news shows are large corporations staffed by professional journalists and business managers. Online news organizations that are independently owned, or that are organizationally separate from the parent news company, may develop news values that differ from the existing values that drive most political news coverage.

One additional finding needs to be mentioned in this discussion, and that is the type of stories that are being promoted on the front pages of online news sites. The trend, especially in online-only sites but evident on all online sites, is the greater attention given to commentary and

opinion stories. This type of story appears to have greater credibility online, and is considered an acceptable form of political coverage, mixed in with wire service stories and indepth news analyses. This kind of writing may be more accepted online; if news develops away from more objective news reports and becomes more opinionated, this could certainly effect what and how people respond to, and learn from, political news stories.

Methodological questions

This study indicates that the methodology for measuring agenda setting variables needs to be adjusted to account for differences in design and presentation online, as compared with measuring the agenda in newspapers, television and magazines. For example, because the front pages of newspapers and the front pages of most online sites are designed differently, simply counting the number of election stories on each may not be a valid comparison. The online sites provide listings to nearly every article published that day and often those published on previous days, while newspaper front pages highlight only the most important news of the day. The two types of front pages are not directly comparable. Design differences between newspapers and online media mean that readers/viewers have to cope with greater choices, self selection and competing visual elements before deciding what to notice. Experiments observing user behavior online, coupled with follow-up surveys to gauge what stories were noticed and why, are necessary to develop an understanding of online prominence and patterns of attention. Poynter's eye-tracking study (2000) sets forth initial research in this area; before definitive comparisons about agenda setting can be made, more research is needed to evaluate whether readers gain as much information from the front page of an online site as they do from the front page of a newspaper.

The front pages of most online news sites are more like indexes than traditional front pages. If lead stories are measured only from the first screen online, then online news is able to feature only a few stories prominently at any one time. Given the transitory nature of online headlines (Mensing & Greer, 2001), one impact of online news could be to reduce the number of

prominent stories communicated to readers and to narrow the common perception of what issues are important and salient to the public. The rapidly changing headlines of online news and the changing media environment could dilute the potential for agenda setting effects by the media.

Other factors that are unique to online sites, such as links and graphics to related information that are independent of individual stories, need to be evaluated when comparing the media agenda across media types. Tewksbury and Althaus (2000) found differences in knowledge acquisition between readers of the print version of *The New York Times* and the online version of *The Times*. Further experiments need to be conducted to test whether the salience of public issues differs between readers of traditional media and online media, and to determine what factors influence differences in public opinion. If national election surveys add questions about use of online media, it will become possible to analyze survey data to evaluate differences in awareness, knowledge, attitudes and behavior between online news readers and traditional news readers.

Clearly, this is an exciting time to observe and study journalism in the public arena. Rapid changes in the technological, social and economic conditions in which journalism is produced and presented requires that previously constructed models of media effects be adapted and adjusted to be meaningful in this new environment. Careful observations of the changes will help us construct stronger and more finely tuned models of media effects.

Bibliography

- Alter, J. (2000). Print journalism: Still alive and well in presidential campaigns. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 5(1), 89-91.
- Barringer, F. (2000). Covering the campaigns for the citizen-browser. *The New York Times on the Web*. Retrieved June 27, 2001, from:
<http://www.nytimes.com/library/tech/00/02/biztech/articles/14medi.html>
- Barnhurst, K. G., & Nerone, J. (2001). *The form of news: A history*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Chaffee, S. H., & Metzger, M. J. (2001). The end of mass communication? *Mass Communication & Society*, 4(4), 365-379.
- Danielian, L. H., & Reese, S. D. (1989). A closer look at intermedia influences on agenda setting: The cocaine issue of 1986. In P. J. Shoemaker (Ed.), *Communication campaigns about drugs* (pp. 47-65). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Dearing, J. W., & Rogers, E. M. (1996). *Agenda-setting*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Lichter, S. R. (2001). A plague on both parties: Substance and fairness in TV election news. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 6(3), 8-30.
- Lopez-Escobar, E., Llamas, J. P., McCombs, M., & Lennon, F. R. (1998). Two levels of agenda setting among advertising and news in the 1995 Spanish elections. *Political Communication*, 15(2), 225-238.
- McCombs, M., & Estrada, G. (1996). The news media and the pictures in our heads. In S. Iyengar & R. Reeves (Eds.), *Do the media govern? Politicians, voters, and reporters in America*. (pp. 237-247). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- McCombs, M., Shaw, D. L., & Weaver, D. (Eds.). (1997). *Communication and democracy: Exploring the intellectual frontiers in agenda-setting theory*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Mensing, D., & Greer, J. (2001). *Above the fold: A comparison of the lead stories in print and online newspapers*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco.
- Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. (2000c). *Youth vote influenced by online information: Internet election news audience seeks convenience, familiar names*. Retrieved September 9, 2001, from <http://www.people-press.org/online00mor.htm>
- Protest, D. L., & McCombs, M. (Eds.). (1991). *Agenda setting: Readings on media, public opinion, and policymaking*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- Roberts, M., & McCombs, M. (1994). Agenda setting power of political advertising: Origins of the news agenda. *Political Communication*, 11(3), 249-262.
- Shaw, D. L. (1967). News bias and the telegraph: A study of historical change. *Journalism Quarterly*, 44(1), 3-12, 31.
- Shaw, D. L., Hamm, B. J., & Knott, D. L. (2000). Technological change, agenda challenge and social melding: Mass media studies and the four ages of place, class, mass and space. *Journalism Studies*, 1(1), 57-79.
- Tewksbury, D., & Althaus, S. L. (2000). Differences in knowledge acquisition among readers of the paper and online versions of a national newspaper. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 77(3), 457-479.
- Weaver, D. H., Graber, D. A., McCombs, M. E., & Eyal, C. H. (1981). *Media agenda-setting in a presidential election: Issues, images and interest*. New York: Praeger Publishers.