

# Presidents and Front-page News: How America's Newspapers Cover the Bush Administration

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Presidency and political communication scholars have given scant attention to how local news media cover the presidency. The author offers a comparative study of coverage of the Bush presidency on the front pages of 100 American newspapers during a five-month period in 2006. Sociological and economic theories predict slanted coverage of national politics by America's newspapers, despite journalistic professional norms to the contrary. The analyses suggest there is a slant to the coverage of President Bush that is partly explained by the political leanings of the newspaper and its audience. Newspapers that endorsed Bush's reelection in 2004 tended to write more favorable headlines, and newspapers in states where Democrats are strong politically tended to write less favorable headlines.

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Successfully reaching the public through the news media is an important governing strategy for modern presidents, a strategy that is a significant part of modern presidents' permanent campaigns (Edwards 2007). Much research has addressed presidential efforts at news management, offering rich descriptions of the process (Kumar 2003; Maltese 1994; Mayer 2004). Presidential efforts to manage the national media have met with mixed results, according to scholars (see Edwards 2003), leading recent presidents to pay more attention to affecting local media. Additionally, scholars have focused their attention on the slant of media coverage of the presidency (Cohen 2004; Groeling and Kernell 1998; Groseclose and Milyo 2005) and presidents' ability to affect the media's agenda (e.g., Wanta and Foote 1994).

Research on the presidency and the press has focused primarily on the prestige press (e.g., *The New York Times*) or national news outlets, excluding almost

completely analyses of the types of news most Americans consume: local news media. This is problematic for our understanding of the public presidency because recent presidents have expended extensive resources in cultivating local news media. For example, presidents have increased their domestic travel (Cohen and Powell 2005; Cook 2002; Kernell 1997) and focused on providing services to local reporters (Lizza 2001). President George W. Bush has eschewed the national press in favor of local press, holding fewer press conferences while increasing his public events outside of Washington, D.C. (Edwards 2007: 38–9; Kumar 2003).

How does the local press cover the presidency? To a large extent, scholars do not know the answer to this question, as little systematic research has sought an answer. The general impression is that local news reporters tend to treat national political figures more favorably than reporters from the prestige press (Cohen and Powell 2005; Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2006; Graber 2006; Kannis 1991). Press accounts of President Bush's local media strategy largely confirm the impression that the local press is more favorable toward the president than the White House press corps is, especially when Bush takes his show on the road (e.g., Bumiller 2002; Lizza 2001). Recent research on newspaper coverage of Bush's 2001 domestic trips and his Social Security Reform Tour in 2005 verifies this local versus prestige press distinction (Barrett and Peake 2007; Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2006). It is also clear that the local press covers the president less often than the prestige press, which by definition focuses its attention on national and international news of consequence and has a correspondent assigned to the White House.

Only recently have scholars begun to examine the effects of presidential efforts at managing local news, but these analyses are limited in that they address only instances where the president traveled domestically (Barrett and Peake 2007; Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2006). The studies that focus on local media coverage of the presidency more broadly address the question primarily in the context of presidential elections (Koilbassa 1997; Patterson 1993; Shaw and Sparrow 1999). Day-to-day local news coverage of the president, outside of an electoral period or local visit, remains largely ignored by scholars.

Below, I offer a comparative study of the front pages of 100 American newspapers during a five-month period (from June 2006 through October 2006) during the George W. Bush presidency. First, I draw on previous research on the production of political news to develop a theory and draw testable hypotheses for the comparative analysis. The theory rests on ideas related to market pressures and political atmosphere that might affect coverage of the president in terms of both the space devoted to the president on the front page and the general tone of the coverage. Then, I describe the extent and scope of the analysis. Using content analysis, the amount of coverage given President Bush and headlines of all front-page stories related to the administration are compared. The findings

lend support to the general argument that newspaper coverage is often slanted in predictable directions, as governed by a newspaper's market and political leanings.

### **News Production and the President**

Newspapers differ in their capacity to cover national news. The prestige newspapers assign a correspondent to the White House, whereas local newspapers, typically lacking these resources, rely on wire reports (Kaniss 1991). While some local papers may have a Washington correspondent with White House press credentials, these correspondents typically must cover the scope of Washington politics (Graber 2006). To a certain extent, local news on national political figures may vary little from one outlet to the next because of the local news editors' reliance on newswires. When local reporters do write on national politics, they may be more subject to news management or the attractiveness of made for media "pseudo-events" (Boorstin 1961) because they lack the experience in public policy that prestige press journalists have.

That generic news is likely to result from newswire reports (see Bennett 2003: 104–10) suggests limited variance in the slant of national political coverage across local newspapers. However, local newspaper routines are to rewrite wire reports, in particular, the headlines and deckheads (subheadings), because of style and space requirements of specific editors. The rewriting of headlines and lead paragraphs may alter the slant of a story (Althaus et al. 2001), especially for the casual reader of the front page. Moreover, editors make conscious choices about what to include as prominent news and what, if any, of the national news stories should get onto the front page (Tuchman 1973). The variance in the coverage of the president across newspapers is likely to be substantial even with the reliance on wire reports, as headlines and news leads are rewritten from wire reports; newspapers' own journalists write stories on the president; and editors decide where to place, or even whether to print, stories on the president. Given these realities, the empirical question then becomes whether these differences across newspapers are largely a result of the idiosyncrasies of the news business or whether there is a pattern to the data.

### **Explanations for Newspapers' Slant on Presidential News**

If newspaper coverage of the president is largely idiosyncratic, based on the whims of editors and the randomness of events, and objective, based on journalistic professional norms and reporting routines (Tuchman 1973), then we learn that arguments for slant in news reporting on the presidency, other than the well-established negative focus of today's media (Bennett 2003; Patterson 1996), are largely unfounded. However, there are very good reasons to suspect some patterns in the variance of coverage of the president across newspapers.

First, among national politicians, presidents are popular news items, as demand is typically high for presidential news (Gans 1980; Graber 2006). Much of what local newspapers report on national news will reflect in some way on the president.

Second, potent arguments exist for political slanting of the news. A great deal has been written in the popular and scholarly press arguing the existence of media bias in political news. Some argue a liberal slant (e.g., Goldberg 2001; Groseclose and Milyo 2005; Hamilton 2004; Kuypers 2002), while others claim a conservative bias (e.g., Alterman 2003; Lee and Solomon 1990), and some question the existence of rampant political bias altogether (Bennett 2003; Eisinger et al. 2007; Niven 2002). The one area most careful studies of news bias appear to agree on is that political news tends to have an overriding negative bias (see Groeling and Kernell 1998; Patterson 1996). What these studies do not account for, however, are variations in local news media coverage of national politics, because they focus exclusively on the prestige press and national media.

### **Are Local Newspapers Slanted Politically?**

Evidence exists for variation in political bias among local media outlets, despite objectivity norms and routines designed to avoid political bias (Bennett 2003; Tuchman 1972). For instance, some research on political coverage in local media supports the relationship between editorial endorsements of candidates and campaign coverage (Kahn and Kenney 2002; Page 1996b; Schiffer 2006), suggesting the erosion of the “wall of separation” between the editorial and news pages despite these professional norms. Further evidence suggests that subtle editorial decisions, including which photographs of candidates to use in stories (Barrett and Barrington 2005), may be influenced by the political leanings of the newspaper. According to these studies of local media, the political slanting of the news tends to be subtle, varies from one news organization to the next, and may be affected by local conditions.

The sociology of the newsroom leads newspapers to “develop an organizational political culture that influences the nature of their coverage” (Barrett and Barrington 2005: 610; see also Kahn and Kenney 2002: 391–92). When combined with market forces represented by the newspaper’s readership, a dominant political atmosphere affecting trends in how reporters and editors decide to cover the president may result (Barrett and Peake 2007: 8). These trends may be influenced by relationships with owners and corporate parents (Page 1996a). Such effects are likely to arise for reasons related to professional socialization and organizational culture, as tendencies may exist for “publishers to hire and retain like-minded editors . . . with or without subsequently intervening in what they do” (Page 1996b: 129). Employees of news organizations conform to observed behavior and adopt dominant values or self-select out of the organization (Barrett and Barrington 2005: 610–11; Davis 2001;

Paletz and Entman 1981). Moreover, interactions between publishers, editors, and reporters involve power relationships, and objectivity norms may lose out even without overt behavior on the part of the more powerful actors (Sigelman 1973; Sparrow 1999).

The political coverage of a local newspaper might also be influenced by the political leanings of its audience—but mainly for economic rather than sociological reasons. Newspapers are businesses, and therefore are affected by market forces (Hamilton 2004; Kaniss 1991; Underwood 1993). Market pressures have increased in recent decades, with corporate pressures to maximize profits increasing during the move toward chain newspapers and conglomeration (Bagdikian 1997). For example, two recent studies focus on the local coverage given to President Bush's domestic travel and find that newspapers serving communities favorable to Bush tended to cover his visits more extensively and favorably than newspapers serving communities hostile to Bush (Barrett and Peake 2007; Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2006).

To summarize, bias might stem from the editors, owners, and journalists, for example, as suggested by the sociological model; or bias might arise from the newspaper's audience and its advertisers (Sutter 2001), as suggested by the economic model. Media firms may slant their news reports toward the beliefs of their consumers to satisfy their audience and maximize profits (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006; Underwood 1993). The political atmosphere (Barrett and Barrington 2005) may provide part of the equation: The political leanings of editors and owners slant coverage of politics. The market, however, may condition or constrain bias that occurs as a result of political atmosphere (Sutter 2001: 438) or may provide direct economic incentives for slanted news (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006).

Costs of coverage present another potential economic influence on how local media cover the president. Covering national politics is expensive for local reporters, hence their reliance on the wire services. Corporate ownership encourages editors to consider the profitability of the news when making decisions, which has encouraged a greater focus on soft news. Since most stories about the president fit into the hard news category, corporate demands for profits might condition how corporate-owned papers cover the president. The demand for splashier and attention-grabbing headlines might lead to more negative rewrites of wire reports. The most likely outcome, however, is that corporate-owned papers will cover the president less often to focus on more popular, and profitable, soft news and local stories (Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2006: 691).

## **Hypotheses**

How are these organizational and economic effects likely to manifest in newspapers? There are essentially two means of slanting coverage on the president.

The first has to do with editorial decisions on whether to cover the president and where to place stories related to the president. The second could emerge in the actual news coverage—the stories written on the president could be slanted to favor or disfavor the president, or be neutral. More than likely, however, since most American newspapers rely on newswire services and stories from the prestige press for their coverage of the presidency, the slanting by the local newspaper is likely to occur in the rewriting of headlines and lead paragraphs.

Below, I test several hypotheses drawn from the organizational and economic theories. The first hypotheses tested concern the political leanings of the newspaper and stem from media organizational theory: *Newspapers that endorsed the president's election slant their coverage of the president more positively than newspapers that did not endorse the president's election.* Additionally, *endorsing newspapers cover the president more heavily and prominently than newspapers that did not endorse the president.*

Given the market-driven economic demands discussed above, three additional hypotheses are tested. The first deals with the potential audience of the newspaper: *Newspapers serving markets politically favorable toward the president slant their coverage of the president more positively than newspapers serving markets unfavorable toward the president.* Corporate ownership may encourage local editors to focus less on the president than independent newspapers: *Corporate-owned newspapers cover the president less than independent newspapers.* And finally, greater audience interest in large urban areas is likely to drive editorial decisions to cover the president: *High circulating newspapers cover the president more than lower circulating newspapers.*

## Collecting and Coding Newspaper Coverage

To examine newspaper coverage of the presidency, I examine one day of coverage per week for five months during the George W. Bush administration (June through October 2006), to include a total of twenty-one days of coverage.<sup>1</sup> The time frame includes coverage of a variety of events related to the president, including his surprise visit to Baghdad in June, his nationally televised address on the fifth anniversary of 9/11, and two press conferences. There are also days of coverage that included more limited coverage of President Bush because of his relative inactivity on the previous day. Days were chosen (Monday through Friday) randomly; however, several days were included because they followed major presidential events. A table of the days and corresponding events is included in the appendix. Newspapers are used because of their availability, their proclivity to endorse presidential candidates, and because newspapers influence the agenda of local television more so than vice versa (Mondak 1995; Shaw and Sparrow 1999).

## Sample Selection

The newspapers included in the study were selected based on several factors. First, since an image of the front page was necessary for valid analysis of the front-page news, I rely on Newseum ([www.newseum.org](http://www.newseum.org)), an interactive online museum compiled by the Freedom Forum. Newseum makes available for one day a Portable Document Format file of each day's front pages for about six hundred daily newspapers across the world, most of which are located in the United States. To narrow the large sample to a manageable and meaningful representation of America's newspapers,<sup>2</sup> I turned to circulation reports. Working from the Newseum sample of newspapers, I used a list of the top one hundred circulating newspapers in the United States as reported by the Audit Bureau of Circulations. I cross-referenced the top one hundred list with the Newseum newspapers to formulate my sample of America's newspapers. To allow for comparison across the small states that do not have newspapers in the top 100 (e.g., the Dakotas), I supplemented the list of newspapers with the top circulating newspaper in the state as reported on the top two hundred list published by the Audit Bureau of Circulations.<sup>3</sup> Finally, newspapers that met the above criteria but did not include a single front-page story on the Bush presidency were dropped from the analysis altogether.<sup>4</sup> A list of newspapers included in the analysis is provided in the appendix.

The final sample includes one hundred newspapers, ranging from high-circulating prestigious newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* to the much smaller dailies that serve much of the United States. I analyzed twenty-one days' worth of coverage, which sums to a total of 2,100 front pages, including 841 front-page articles specifically dealing with Bush. I analyze only front-page articles because these articles are those most likely read by consumers and for practical reasons involving the data-coding effort.<sup>5</sup>

Most of the newspapers relied on wire reports from the Associated Press, newspaper chains, or the major daily newspapers.<sup>6</sup> Rarely do local newspapers write their own stories about the president. Unless the stories relate to a presidential visit to the region or state, the local newspapers rely on the menu of wire reports. This could potentially cause a problem in the forgoing analysis because so much of the local newspaper content is dictated by wire reports. However, the local papers exercise choice in which wire services they use and whether to even include an article on the president on the front page. Moreover, each newspaper is free to rewrite the wire report, and the analysis clearly shows that local newspapers commonly rewrite at least the headline and lead paragraph of their reports. In fact, newspapers using the same wire report would commonly write very different headlines and lead paragraphs.<sup>7</sup>

To assess whether an article had to do with the president, I include only articles where the president, the White House, or someone close to the president

in the White House is the focus of two or more paragraphs on the front-page portion of the story. The sample of newspapers includes papers that covered the president heavily, with the *Los Angeles Times* (20 articles), *The New York Times* (18), and *The Washington Post* (18) leading the pack. The average number of articles in the one hundred newspapers examined was 8.4, with significant variation around the mean (from a low of 2 to a high of 20).<sup>8</sup>

### **Coding Individual Headlines and Leads**

The headlines and lead paragraphs of the front-page articles were coded for tone, to reflect the general slant of the front-page coverage provided in each newspaper across the time period. Headlines and lead paragraphs, when aggregated, can reflect trends in news coverage of a news outlet; however, they may differ from the full text in terms of tone and source emphasis (Althaus et al. 2001). The headlines (including the deckheads or subheadings) provide emphasis (or a dominant frame) to the story and are a product of local editorial decisions.<sup>9</sup> If the headline or lead paragraph reflects positively on the president or adopts the White House framing of an event, it was coded positive (and scored a 2). If the headline or lead paragraph reflects negatively on the president or frames the story in a way detrimental to the White House view, it was coded negative (and scored a 0). Finally, if the headline or lead reports a fact or opinion in such a way that is neither negative nor positive toward the White House, it was coded as neutral (and scored a 1). Coding the tone of headlines and lead paragraphs is not as problematic as coding the tone of each statement or sentence within a story, as done in some previous research (e.g., Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2006). Coding headlines and leads correctly weights the measure of tone to the most commonly read part of a story and more accurately accounts for the dominant frame in the story. However, I adopt the approach used in previous analyses when making decisions on what is negative or positive.<sup>10</sup>

To quantify and aggregate tone measures for each newspaper, I summed the headline (including deckheads) and lead scores for all of the articles in a newspaper, then divided by the number of articles coded for each paper, yielding a score ranging from 0 (least positive) to 2 (most positive) for the headlines and leads. The empirical models reported below focus on the headlines, as these are more commonly rewritten from wire reports than the lead paragraph, and tended to better reflect the overall tone of the entire front-page article.

### **The Statistical Analysis**

To test the hypotheses drawn from the market-based and political atmosphere theories, I employ ordinary least squares (OLS) regression.<sup>11</sup> The analysis is conducted using two separate samples. The first sample includes ninety-eight

newspapers, while the second sample excludes newspapers that were not on Newseum often enough, barely covered the president during the time period, or are among the prestige press.<sup>12</sup> The major hypothesis dealing with political atmosphere tested below relates to editorial endorsements. Each newspaper endorsement is given a dummy code, with a 1 representing an endorsement for Bush and 0 representing an endorsement for Kerry or no endorsement.<sup>13</sup>

To measure market-based forces, I rely on two measures. I adopt the same approach used by Barrett and Peake (2007) to measure local support for President Bush, calculating how well Bush did in the 2004 election compared to the national vote average in each newspaper's potential geographic market. Specifically, the measure is the simple difference between the Bush vote in the county and contiguous counties where each newspaper is located minus Bush's national vote percentage, based on the votes for Bush and Senator Kerry. I exclude contiguous counties from a newspaper's measure when another newspaper from the sample exists within that county. The method is explained more extensively in Barrett and Peake (2007: 14).<sup>14</sup> I also include an additional measure of state-level politics to account for the long-term political leanings of a state. I measure the percentage of the congressional delegation (Senate and House) that are Democrats. Finally, I include measures of corporate ownership and circulation to account for further economic constraints on coverage of the presidency.<sup>15</sup>

## Findings

In Table 1, I present the results for the amount of front-page coverage of President Bush. In Table 2, I present the results for the slant of the front-page coverage. As hypothesized, there is a clear difference between the coverage given President Bush by newspapers that endorsed the president's reelection in 2004 and newspapers that did not endorse his reelection. This is especially the case in terms of the slant of coverage. Newspapers that endorsed Bush averaged 1.10 on the tone scale, while other newspapers averaged only 0.99. The relationship is stronger in the reduced sample (model 2); the estimated difference between endorsing and nonendorsing papers on the 2-point scale is 0.15. Endorsing newspapers also appear to cover the president more often, but this relationship is significant only in the reduced sample.

I find that newspapers serving markets where Bush did well in the 2004 election do not cover Bush any differently than newspapers in markets where Bush did poorly. Unlike Barrett and Peake (2007: 17), who found that newspapers serving communities supportive of Bush covered his visits more extensively, similarly situated newspapers do not appear to cover Bush more day to day or more favorably during the time period I examine. However, in states

**Table 1**

Ordinary least squares regression analysis of variation in amount of front-page coverage of President Bush in America's newspapers, June through October 2006

Independent Variable	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coefficient (SE)	t Statistic (Marginal Effect)	Coefficient (SE)	t Statistic (Marginal Effect)
Constant	0.29 (0.06)	5.03**	0.35 (0.07)	5.21**
Endorsed Bush	0.01 (0.04)	0.31 (0.49→0.51)	0.063 (0.037)	1.68** (0.48→0.55)
Bush support in newspaper's market	0.002 (0.002)	0.66 (0.48→0.51)	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.42 (0.49→0.48)
Share of Democrats in congressional delegation	0.20 (0.08)	2.40** (0.44→0.54)	0.13 (0.09)	1.40* (0.47→0.51)
Corporate paper	-0.08 (0.04)	-2.06** (0.49→0.41)	-0.06 (0.04)	-1.54* (0.48→0.42)
Circulation (thousands)	0.0004 (0.0001)	5.03** (0.39→0.59)	0.0003 (0.0001)	2.37** (0.44→0.53)
N		98		73
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>		.26		.12
Model F statistic		7.80**		2.87**

Note: The dependent variable is the average number of articles per day of coverage. Model 1 includes the larger sample of all newspapers but the two national papers. Model 2 includes the restricted sample. See note 12. Marginal effect is the expected value of Y (average number of daily articles) when all independent variables are at their mean values (or 0 if dummy) and the variable of interest is moved from one standard deviation below its mean to one standard deviation above its mean (or 0 to 1 if dummy). Analysis conducted in Stata 9.0.

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ , one-tailed; two-tailed for F statistic and constant.

where Democrats make up a larger percentage of the congressional delegation, newspapers tend to report on the president more heavily. This is similar to Barrett and Peake's finding, which they attribute to the availability of opposition members of Congress as sources for local reporters who contribute to more perspectives and therefore more coverage, which tends to be negative. However the measure is conceptualized, newspapers in Democratic states cover President Bush more heavily. The model estimates, for example, that newspapers in a state with 70 percent of its congressional delegation made up of Democrats has on average 11.3 front-page articles for the twenty-one days of the study, compared to 9.2 articles for a newspaper in a state with 22 percent Democrats in its delegation. The heavier coverage Bush generates in these Democratic states, however, tends toward the negative, which is consistent with the market-based hypothesis.

**Table 2**

Ordinary least squares regression analysis of variation in the slant of front-page coverage of President Bush in America's newspapers, June through October 2006

Independent Variable	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coefficient (SE)	<i>t</i> Statistic (Marginal Effect)	Coefficient (SE)	<i>t</i> Statistic (Marginal Effect)
Constant	1.12 (0.11)	10.42**	1.02 (0.12)	8.56**
Endorsed Bush	0.11 (0.07)	1.53* (0.99→1.10)	0.15 (0.07)	2.33** (0.92→0.07)
Bush support in newspaper's market	-0.001 (0.004)	-0.19 (1.00→0.99)	0.0001 (0.004)	0.02 (0.92→0.92)
Share of Democrats in congressional delegation	-0.30 (0.15)	-1.92** (1.06→0.92)	-0.24 (0.16)	-1.54* (0.95→0.87)
Corporate paper	-0.10 (0.07)	-1.32* (0.99→0.89)	-0.04 (0.07)	-0.65 (0.92→0.88)
Circulation (thousands)	0.00004 (0.0001)	0.32 (0.98→1.00)	0.00004 (0.0002)	0.24 (0.91→0.93)
<i>N</i>	98	73		
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		.05		.07
Model <i>F</i> statistic		1.96*		2.03*

*Note:* The dependent variable is the average tone score of the headlines for Bush-related articles appearing on the front pages in each of the newspapers. Model 1 includes the larger sample of all newspapers but the two national papers. Model 2 includes the restricted sample. See note 12. Marginal effect is the expected value of *Y* (average number of daily articles) when all independent variables are at their mean values (or 0 if dummy) and the variable of interest is moved from one standard deviation below its mean to one standard deviation above its mean (or 0 to 1 if dummy). Analysis conducted in Stata 9.0.

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ , one-tailed; two-tailed for *F* statistic and constant.

The coefficient for the share of Democrats in the state's congressional delegation is negative and significant. To illustrate, a newspaper in a state with 22 percent Democrats in the delegation had an average tone score of 1.06, whereas one in a state with 70 percent Democrats in the delegation had an average score of 0.92, a substantial difference on a 2-point scale.<sup>16</sup>

I find stronger support for the hypotheses related to ownership and circulation in terms of the amount of coverage. Corporate-owned newspapers covered President Bush significantly less than did independent newspapers. For example, an independent newspaper is estimated to average 0.49 articles per day on its front page, whereas a corporate-owned newspaper is estimated to average 0.41. Additionally, corporate papers tend to cover the president more negatively. However, this relationship is relatively weak and is insignificant in the reduced

sample. Higher circulating papers covered the president more, as expected given audience demand. A large urban newspaper (circulation = 563,000) averaged 0.59 daily articles, whereas a much smaller newspaper (circulation = 53,000) averaged only 0.39 articles. In the smaller sample, I find a similar result, although it is not as pronounced because the highest circulating prestige press papers and the newspapers that rarely covered the president are not included.

## Discussion

Both market-based and sociological theories receive some support in the analysis of how America's newspapers covered the Bush administration from June through October 2006. When combined with recent published articles on local newspaper coverage of President Bush's domestic travel (Barrett and Peake 2007; Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2006), an interesting pattern emerges. Local newspapers slant their coverage of President Bush, and the slant is influenced in part by the markets of the newspapers and the political atmosphere of newspaper organizations as represented by editorial endorsements. There are substantial differences between the results reported here and those reported by the analyses focused on coverage of Bush's trips, however. Barrett and Peake (2007) found that endorsements similarly influence the amount of coverage, but do not affect its tone. Moreover, they find that community support influences local newspaper coverage of Bush's visits. The results here, however, suggest that the narrow community support measure does not predict day-to-day coverage of the president, but endorsements clearly do, particularly in terms of tone.

Both studies find similar patterns regarding statewide measures of Democratic Party support: Newspapers in Democratic states cover the President more, but the coverage tends to be more negative than in Republican states. The reasoning behind the negative coverage is clear. However, why do these same newspapers cover the president more? It could be a result of the president's poor approval ratings during the time period of study—his national-level approval ranged in the thirties. Audiences in states where Democrats are well represented or where Bush is unpopular might prefer negative stories about the president, and such stories are more readily available when the president is doing poorly. A strong negative correlation exists between Bush's state-level approval ratings and Democratic representation in Congress (Pearson's  $r = -.60$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Moreover, Bush's state-level approval ratings are negatively correlated with the amount of coverage he received (Pearson's  $r = -.26$ ,  $p < .05$ ).<sup>17</sup>

Why the difference between patterns in local coverage of Bush's visits and coverage of the president more broadly? When the president is popular or the event covered is likely to tilt coverage toward the positive, having the story in

the paper and prominently on the front page is favorable to the president. Coverage of a fully controlled pseudo-event, such as a visit from the president to the community, might be the type of story that an editor inclined to print favorable stories might decide to place prominently. However, more general coverage when the president's approval ratings are particularly low is likely to generate negative stories on the wire reports, and similarly situated editors might avoid placing these stories prominently. The difference in findings may also be because of the fact that newspapers local to a presidential visit use their own journalists, who are likely to be less critical of the administration, whereas newspapers' more general coverage of the president relies on national wire reports written by members of the White House press corps, who tend to be more critical.

## **Conclusion**

Analyses examining the presidential–press relationship have focused almost exclusively on the national media or prestige press, despite clear presidential efforts to affect local media coverage. Ignored in most of the research, however, have been the local media consumed by most Americans. Very good reasons exist to suspect slanted coverage of national politics by America's newspapers, despite journalistic and professional norms to the contrary. The theories presented here suggest that organizational culture within the newsroom can lead to slanted news reporting, thus compromising the apparent “wall of separation” between the editorial pages and the news pages. Market-based theories suggest political coverage may be a function of a newspaper's potential audience and corporate pressures. Decisions on what to cover affect the bottom line, both in terms of the costs of coverage and its popularity among readers.

Given this backdrop, the findings presented above are not that surprising. They tend to confirm both the sociological and market-based theories, with interesting twists given the case employed: recent coverage of an unpopular president, specifically, President George W. Bush in 2006. The analysis shows that while many of the newsroom decisions made about presidential coverage by editors are largely idiosyncratic, as they are based largely on the randomness of national and, especially, local events, there is a slant to the Bush-related coverage that is partly explained by the political leanings of the newspaper and its audience. Newspapers that endorsed Bush's reelection in 2004 tended to write more favorable headlines. Newspapers in states where Democrats are strong politically tended to write less favorable headlines. While the external validity of these findings is limited, the tenor of the results suggests that research focused on variations in local media coverage of the presidency is worth pursuing.

## Appendix

**Table A1**

Dates (2006) of coverage included in the content analysis

Date of Coverage	Main Event Related to Bush	No. of Bush Articles
June 9	Zarqawi, Al Qaeda leader, slain by U.S. forces; Bush responds	41
June 14	Bush makes surprise visit to Baghdad; Rove not charged in CIA leak scandal	126
June 22	President visits Europe; GOP embraces Iraq War issue	16
June 30	Supreme Court decides in <i>Hamdan</i> ; Bush meets with Japanese prime minister	106
July 3	President issues federal disaster assistance statement	8
July 12	President discusses economy; application of Geneva Accord to terror suspects	59
July 18	President participates in G-8 Summit	28
July 27	Cease-fire talks for Lebanon War fail	37
August 4	Bush in Texas discussing immigration; debate on whether Iraq is civil war	38
August 7	Bush discusses Iraq; continued Lebanon War	16
August 15	Bush discusses foreign policy; Lebanon War cease-fire holds	8
August 23	Bush visits Minnesota	5
August 31	Bush travels to Utah, Tennessee; Bush casts Democrats as defeatist	11
Sep. 7	Bush, in Atlanta, acknowledges secret CIA detainee program	83
Sep. 12	Bush addresses nation on 9/11 anniversary	60
Sep. 20	Bush addresses UN General Assembly	60
Sep. 28	Bush hosts Karzai and Musharraf; House passes Bush detainee bill	49
Oct. 6	Bush discusses education	6
Oct. 12	Bush press conference on North Korea and economy	38
Oct. 16	U.S.–China talks on North Korea	15
Oct. 26	Bush press conference on progress in Iraq War	52

**Table A2**

Newspapers included in the content analysis

<i>Akron Beacon Journal</i>	<i>Manchester Union Leader</i>
<i>Albany Times Union</i>	<i>Memphis Commercial Appeal</i>
<i>Albuquerque Journal</i>	<i>Miami Herald</i>
<i>Allentown Morning Call</i>	<i>Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel</i>
<i>Anchorage Daily News</i>	<i>Minneapolis Star Tribune</i>
<i>Arizona Daily Star</i>	<i>Nashville Tennessean</i>
<i>Arizona Republic</i>	<i>New Orleans Times-Picayune</i>
<i>Arkansas Democrat-Gazette</i>	<i>New York Times</i>
<i>Atlanta Journal-Constitution</i>	<i>Newark Star-Ledger</i>
<i>Austin American-Statesman</i>	<i>Norfolk Virginian-Pilot</i>
<i>Baltimore Sun</i>	<i>Oklahoma City Oklahoman</i>
<i>Bergen County (NJ) Record</i>	<i>Omaha World-Herald</i>
<i>Billings Gazette</i>	<i>Orange County Register</i>
<i>Birmingham News</i>	<i>Orlando Sentinel</i>
<i>Boston Globe</i>	<i>Palm Beach Post</i>
<i>Buffalo News</i>	<i>Philadelphia Inquirer</i>

(continued)

**Table A2** (continued)

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<i>Burlington Free Press</i>	<i>Pittsburgh Post-Gazette</i>
<i>Casper Star-Tribune</i>	<i>Pittsburgh Tribune-Review</i>
<i>Charleston (WV) Gazette</i>	<i>Portland Oregonian</i>
<i>Charlotte Observer</i>	<i>Portland Press-Herald</i>
<i>Chicago Tribune</i>	<i>Providence Journal</i>
<i>Cincinnati Enquirer</i>	<i>Raleigh News and Observer</i>
<i>Cleveland Plain Dealer</i>	<i>Richmond Times-Dispatch</i>
<i>Columbia (SC) State</i>	<i>Riverside Press-Enterprise</i>
<i>Columbus Dispatch</i>	<i>Rochester Democrat and Chronicle</i>
<i>Contra Costa Times</i>	<i>Rocky Mountain News</i>
<i>Dallas Morning News</i>	<i>S. Florida Sun-Sentinel</i>
<i>Dayton Daily News</i>	<i>Sacramento Bee</i>
<i>Daytona News-Journal</i>	<i>Salt Lake City Tribune</i>
<i>Denver Post</i>	<i>San Antonio Express-News</i>
<i>Des Moines Register</i>	<i>San Diego Union-Tribune</i>
<i>Detroit Free Press</i>	<i>San Francisco Chronicle</i>
<i>Detroit News</i>	<i>San Jose Mercury News</i>
<i>Fargo Forum</i>	<i>Seattle Post-Intelligencer</i>
<i>FortWorth Star-Telegram</i>	<i>Seattle Times</i>
<i>Fresno Bee</i>	<i>Sioux Falls Argus Leader</i>
<i>Ft. Wayne Journal-Gazette</i>	<i>Spokane Spokesman-Review</i>
<i>Harrisburg Patriot-News</i>	<i>St. Louis Post-Dispatch</i>
<i>Hartford Courant</i>	<i>St. Paul Pioneer Press</i>
<i>Honolulu Advertiser</i>	<i>St. Petersburg Times</i>
<i>Houston Chronicle</i>	<i>Syracuse Post-Standard</i>
<i>Indianapolis Star</i>	<i>Tacoma News Tribune</i>
<i>Jackson (MS) Clarion-Ledger</i>	<i>Tampa Tribune and Times</i>
<i>Kansas City Star</i>	<i>Toledo Blade</i>
<i>Knoxville News-Sentinel</i>	<i>USA Today</i>
<i>LA Daily News</i>	<i>Wall St. Journal</i>
<i>LA Times</i>	<i>Washington Post</i>
<i>Las Vegas Review-Journal</i>	<i>Wichita Eagle</i>
<i>Lexington Herald-Leader</i>	<i>Wilmington News Journal</i>
<i>Louisville Courier-Journal</i>	<i>Wisconsin State Journal</i>

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## Notes

1. The time period was selected because of the timing of the study and the availability of electronic versions of each newspaper's front page. Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake (2006), it should be noted, examine only those stories appearing on the front pages of local

- newspapers related to visits by the president during his Social Security Reform Tour, which covered five months during 2005. Barrett and Peake (2007) examine a year of coverage, but limit the analysis to those newspapers local to the president's visits, and their content codes are limited to front-page articles. Kahn and Kenney (2002) examine all campaign-related coverage for two-month periods for eighty-four Senate races.
2. Using all of the Newseum newspapers would not be representative. While the largest papers are well represented, the small dailies are represented in haphazard fashion.
  3. I consulted the 2004 edition of *Editor and Publisher International Year Book* to determine top-circulating newspapers for states that did not have any on the top two hundred list.
  4. These newspapers were either completely locally focused on their front page (e.g., *Asbury Park Press*, of New Jersey, and *Idaho Statesman*) or were mainly tabloid in their coverage of politics (e.g., *New York Daily News*).
  5. Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake (2006) examine only a single front-page article for each newspaper in their analysis, totaling 30 local articles and 14 *Washington Post* articles, with dates and locations defined by Bush's travel schedule. Barrett and Peake (2007) also limit their content coding to front-page articles, but their study covers an entire year (2001) of Bush's domestic travel, so their study addresses sixty-one separate editions of local newspapers and a sum total of 141 front-page articles. Both studies code the entire article, whereas I code only the headline and lead paragraph of the 841 articles.
  6. The Associated Press is the most common wire service used. Other common wire services include *Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and McClatchy. Other less commonly used services include *Chicago Tribune*, *The Boston Globe*, *USA Today*, and Cox News Services.
  7. For example, the October 12th headlines and lead paragraphs covering the president's news conference on North Korea in the *Providence Journal* and the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* are both from the same AP wire report. The *Journal's* headline was "Bush Defends US Policy on North Korea: The President Says a Number of Countries, Including China, Are Beginning to Unite Against North Korea's Nuclear Activities." The *Star-Telegram's* headline was simply "Bush: US Won't Attack North Korea." The first headline suggests international cooperation is building to pressure North Korea, a positive development and the primary frame of the president's news conference. The second simply states a point Bush made during the press conference. The lead paragraphs also differ significantly. The *Journal* reports, "President Bush unapologetically defended his approach to North Korea's weapon's program yesterday, pledging he would not change course." The *Star-Telegram* adds this to the end of that same sentence: "despite contentions that the Stalinist regime's apparent atomic test proved the failure of his nearly six years of effort to prevent one." The *Providence Journal* discards the last phrase in the wire report's lead, focusing instead on the president's steadfastness. The *Star-Telegram*, however, by leaving the phrase in, reminds readers of the failed Bush policy, framing the story negatively.
  8. Most newspapers missed a day or two of the twenty-one days of coverage because Newseum did not carry the newspaper on a given day. Forty of the papers were included for all twenty-one days of the time period. Another twenty-six missed one day of coverage. Ninety-three of the newspapers included 75 percent of the days of coverage (sixteen or more).
  9. The coders included the author and a trained graduate assistant. A third coder was used to conduct an intercoder reliability check. The coverage for June 14 was used to check for intercoder agreement. Previous research has shown high reliability when coding for headline tone (Kahn and Kenney 2002). The headline tone scores were summed for each newspaper containing stories on the 14th, yielding a correlation (Pearson's *r*) of .86. The intercoder agreement statistic (alpha) is .92.

10. Using the examples provided in note 7, the *Providence Journal's* headline and lead were both coded positive. The *Star-Telegram's* headline was coded as neutral and the lead was coded as negative. Kahn and Kenney (2002, 393) used a similar approach to coding headlines in their study.
11. Ordinary least squares (OLS) is the appropriate model specification. Visual inspection of each variable's histogram verifies that the variables are normally distributed. Skewness and kurtosis measures are all near zero, as is appropriate for OLS.
12. *USA Today* and *The Wall Street Journal* are dropped from the sample of one hundred newspapers as these are truly national newspapers; therefore their markets are national, not geographic to their locations. The smaller sample further excludes cases where the newspaper had fewer than sixteen (75 percent) days of coverage on Newseum, fewer than five articles total on the president, or were members of the prestige press, including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Boston Globe*.
13. These data are available from George Washington University's Democracy in Action Web site and are located at <http://www.gwu.edu/~action/2004/cands/natendorse5.html>.
14. A more proximate measure would be local-level presidential approval ratings at the time of the coverage, but approval ratings are available only at the state level. Moreover, state-level approval correlates highly with the community support measure used here (Pearson's  $r = .69$ ) and state-level vote totals (Pearson's  $r = .95$ ).
15. Corporate-owned papers are given a code of 1 and independent papers are given a code of 0. The *Columbia Journalism Review* Web site (<http://www.cjr.org/tools/owners/>) was consulted to code newspapers as corporate-owned or independent. Circulation data are from the Audit Bureau of Circulations, available online at <http://www.accessabc.com/reader/top150.htm>. For newspapers not in the top two hundred, I consulted the 2004 edition of *Editor and Publisher International Year Book*. Circulation is represented in thousands.
16. To arrive at these estimates, I used MFX command in Stata to compute the marginal effect going from one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean, while holding other variables at their mean values or 0 if dummy.
17. For reasons of multicollinearity, the state-level approval measure is excluded from the regressions reported.

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