

24-Hour Cable News
The Mainstreaming of Politicization

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ABSTRACT

Though the number of viewers flocking to the three major 24-hour cable news networks appears to be reaching a plateau, their influence on the American news-viewing public has revolutionized the industry. From CNN's lone beginnings as the "Chicken Noodle News," the current 24-hour market is a highly competitive and widely popular medium in which three unique channels (CNN, Fox News and MSNBC) compete for loyal viewers and advertising dollars. Yet the 24-hour format has inherently fostered a unique style that distinguishes it from the "Big Three" networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC); most noticeably, cable news devotes a markedly higher proportion of its broadcasting time *discussing* the news, rather than just reporting it. As ratings trends prove, this is a popular format with viewers. At the same time, however, recent studies indicate that a significant percentage of viewers are fracturing along partisan lines in their patronage of particular cable programs. Taken together, this increased politicization and selective viewing suggests a certain role-reversal wherein viewers have started to become their own gatekeepers, filtering through that which does not gibe with their own particular interests or beliefs. The end effect has mainstreamed politicization, infusing discussion and debate into newscasts such that the very definition of "news" has changed.

INTRODUCTION

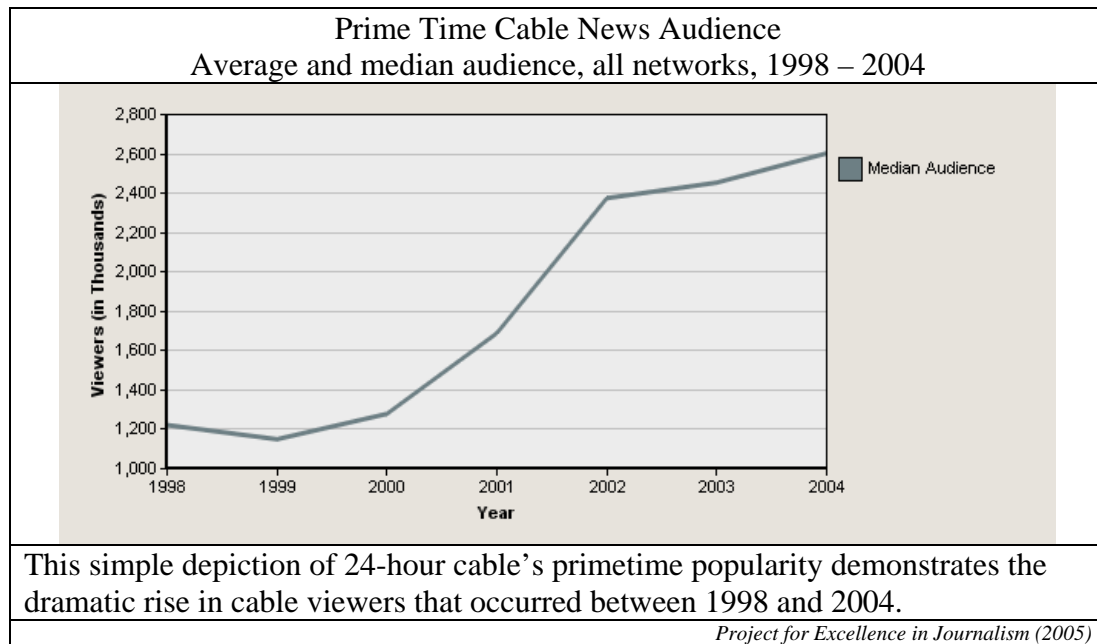
America in 1968 was, to say the least, in a state of utter tumult and disarray. Abroad, U.S. soldiers fought in one of the most divisive wars of American history. At home, the violence engulfing both the Civil Rights Movement and the anti-war movement had ascended to extraordinary levels. To make matters worse, assassins cut short the lives of both Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy. It was at the circus-like 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, however, that the broadcast media first began to play with the fire of ideological partisanship already dividing the nation.

With protesters battling police outside the DNC convention hall and Democrats battling each other inside the convention hall, ABC decided it would be a good idea to let its veteran newsman Howard K. Smith moderate roundtable debates between conservative William F. Buckley Jr. and liberal Gore Vidal on live television (Kloman, 2005). The concept seemed simple enough: stick a liberal and a conservative in the same room, provide a hot topic for them to debate (of which there was no shortage in 1968), and hit the record button. Ideally, the two commentators would provide thoughtful analysis, reasoned arguments and leave viewers with a more holistic perspective of the issue being discussed. Yet on August 28, 1968, as tempers flared and the left/right banter increased in intensity, such idealism quickly disintegrated into an exchange of epithets the likes of which had never before occurred on live television. With nearly 10 million viewers tuned in, Vidal caustically referred to Buckley as a crypto-nazi, to which

Buckley rebutted by calling Vidal a “queer”... and threatening to “sock him in the goddamn face” (Kloman, 2005). This was not traditional ABC programming. Though Smith, ABC executives and the viewing public probably did not realize the magnitude of what they had witnessed at the time, hindsight awards us the luxury of appreciating the Buckley/Vidal altercation for what it was: a harbinger for a new era of television news.

What ABC had unknowingly stumbled upon in the Buckley/Vidal debates of 1968 was a veritable gold mine, the potential of which would not be fully realized until many years later. Essentially, ABC became one of the first networks to promulgate the now-dominant format of high-energy, high-volume political talk shows that occupy the primetime spots of modern 24-hour cable news channels. Such modern embodiments include MSNBC’s *Hardball*, Fox News’ *Hannity and Colmes*, and CNN’s long-running but recently-cancelled *Crossfire*, for example. Though the aforementioned trio of political programs represents the apex of TV news politicization, it is by no means the exception rather than the rule. Rather, politicization has become the defining element of 24-hour cable news channels. This trend is evidenced by the wave of opinionated experts, analysts, critics and commentators (collectively referred to as pundits) that has been drowning the cable channels since their respective inceptions (Barkin, 2003). While the degree of opinionated commentary ranges from program to program, MSNBC, CNN and Fox News collectively dedicate a higher percentage of their broadcasting time analyzing the news compared to both local and network broadcasts (Vinson, 2003; Postman and Powers, 1992). It must be conceded that the 24-hour format inherently allows for more broadcasting time than a nightly network or local news show; however, opinionated

analysis has been showcased by all three major cable channels in response to their high ratings (Pew Center, 2005).



As recent rating trends indicate, an increasing albeit plateauing number of Americans have been turning to more politically-oriented cable channels – especially Fox News (Pew Center, 2005). Almost every year for more than a decade, local television broadcasts have experienced a decline in audience, with ABC, NBC, and CBS following suit; on the other hand, the relatively young Fox News Channel has garnered remarkable ratings and has pushed ahead of the relatively stable CNN in several key ratings categories over the last few years (Pew Center, 2004). The question thus becomes: what's the attraction?

By examining the interaction between 24-hour cable channels and their viewers, several interesting developments are revealed. To understand these developments, a historical examination of both social theory and statistical reality is necessary. To start, it is important to understand the origins and subsequent development of the medium itself – cable news. What is politicized cable news? When did it first begin to develop? How has it metamorphosed into the 24-hour cable news of the twenty-first century? Secondly, a chronological examination of mass communication theory should reveal a psychosocial foundation through which the cable news medium can be best contextualized. What theoretical framework, if any, best explains the phenomenon of cable news' popularity? Thirdly, a sociopolitical relationship between cable news and its viewers will be constructed by fusing critical commentary and textual analysis. What is the current state of the messenger/recipient relationship and what factors contribute to its complexity? Lastly, a content analysis of modern ratings fluctuations will be examined in order to predict the future of 24-hour cable news. How has the advent of the Internet, the blog and online streaming video affected the seemingly limitless potential of televised cable news?

In sum, 24-hour cable news and its effects on viewers will be explored from the perspective of uninhibited hindsight, present reality, and future possibility.

BACKGROUND

Though ABC's Buckley/Vidal debates were one of the most poignant examples of partisan exploitation, it was by no means the first or only such endeavor to appear on American TV screens; the Big Three (ABC, CBS, and NBC) as well as PBS had all experimented with the news discussion program by the middle of the twentieth century (Murray, 1999). NBC's *Meet the Press*, Beadle (1999) relates, can be traced all the way back to 1947. Originally available to radio listeners only, *Meet the Press* first switched over to TV on November 6 of that year. Styled in the manner of a literal press conference, the show "set the pattern for other news interview programs that followed—a moderator and a select number of journalists ask questions of the guests, leading news figures, in an unrehearsed situation" (Beadle, 1999, p. 146). The importance of this unrehearsed news presentation should not be underestimated. Instead of reading a script from a teleprompter or cue cards, newsmen were being asked to interact with a guest as a means of conveying current events. The guests, on the other hand, did not have an opportunity to prepare exactly factual information and thus had to rely on their own opinion or assessment of the topic at hand. As Beadle (1999) explains, part of *Meet the Press*'s early success was dependent on moderator Lawrence Spivak's ability to "get the right newsmakers on the air and to ask them some key, tough questions. He would question a guest's previous public statements if they were contradictory. The intense questioning could be exhausting. John F. Kennedy once referred to the program as the

‘fifty-first state’” (p. 146). This fifty-first state, as Kennedy implies, thus began to close the gap between public figures and the increasing scrutiny of the general public.

At this point, it is wise to dismiss the potential assumption that *Meet the Press* was nothing more than a soft-news predecessor to interview-based shows of the twenty-first century. As Beadle (1999) concludes, this talk-show format should be considered *news* in the same sense as the traditional evening broadcast; in fact, *Meet the Press* first televised several key moments in contemporary America:

Americans got the first official word of the Russian atomic bomb from an inadvertent remark by General Walter Bedell Smith on a 1949 program. Thomas Dewey used the show in 1950 to eliminate himself from the presidential race and to offer support for General Dwight Eisenhower. John F. Kennedy made his debut on *Meet the Press* in 1951 as a young congressman (p. 146).

Such exclusive reporting is significant. Though the program may not have been as hard-hitting as *The O’Reilly Factor* or *Hardball*, the lineage between the different program generations is clear. And after nearly sixty years on the air, *Meet the Press* can still be found on MSNBC every Sunday – making it the oldest network television program on the air today (Beadle, 1999).

Closely following in NBC’s footsteps, CBS created *Face the Nation* in 1954. Almost identical to *Meet the Press* in many respects, *Face the Nation* featured a moderator and guest journalists who questioned a public figure about the news of the day (Beadle, 1999, p. 75). Competition between the two programs quickly escalated as the rival networks vied to air programs featuring the most notable guests and the hottest topics. From its outset, producer Ted Ayers made it explicitly clear that his show would not pamper or coddle its guests; controversy was not an excuse to avoid or circumvent a

newsworthy issue. Beadle (1999) summarizes the theory underpinning the show quite succinctly:

There were no indiscreet questions, only indiscreet answers. As if to prove his point, Ayers's first guest was the controversial Senator Joseph McCarthy. Another of Ayer's early coups was scheduling a union chief just prior to the guest's appearance before the Select Senate Committee Investigating Labor Racketeering. On air, and not under oath, he admitted extensive borrowing from his organization's funds, but later in Washington before the senate committee, he invoked the Fifth Amendment (p. 75).

Like its competition, *Face the Nation* did not wallow in celebrity pomp or tabloid superficiality. To separate itself from its NBC counterpart, however, "*Face the Nation's* staff's aggressive manner went so far as to stow away a staff member aboard an incoming ocean liner to get the first chance at approaching a visiting statesman" (Beadle, 1999, p. 75). The race to secure the most timely and recognizable faces thus became a premium for the genre. Like its NBC counterpart, *Meet the Press*, CBS still broadcasts *Face the Nation* with host Bob Schieffer every Sunday.

The Public Broadcasting Service made its political talk show debut in 1967, offering *Washington Week in Review* to counter the networks' interview-based news programs. Instead of the traditional one-on-one format, PBS initially created a panel of three regular journalists who participated in a roundtable discussion of major news events (PBS, 2006). Over the years, however, it began to coincide more closely with the *Meet the Press/Face the Nation* format by inviting guests every week. PBS maintained the status-quo of emphasizing discussion rather than debate, employing a decidedly conversational atmosphere – the issues remained the axis around which the political talk shows revolved (Barkin, 2003). As Barkin (2003) contends, the genre bore little

resemblance to the garish money-makers that appear today on MSNBC, CNN or Fox News. “News talk on television began with figures in the news, usually politicians, responding to questions from a panel of Washington, D.C. reporters” (Barkin, 2003, p. 76); politicians or public figures were allowed extensive and uninterrupted lengths of time to respond to an interviewer’s question. Guests discussed the issues through their personal ideological lens, but overtly exhibiting that ideology was not yet engrained or expected. As former *Agronsky and Company* mainstay Hugh S. Sidey reflects, “Show business had really not invaded our world back then. The object was to try to get the facts out... The idea was not to shout down anybody” (Cited in Robertson, 1999, p. 1).

Despite news executives’ likely ignorance of the rancor their political talk shows would eventually yield, the format itself would certainly never have made it on the air if nobody was expected to watch. Could the decision-makers at the Big Three have denied that this format of politically-charged discussion, which is inherently structured to highlight differences of opinion, did not contain at least *some* entertainment value? As former CBS newsman Bernard Goldberg would like to believe, the answer is yes. Broadcast news, after-all, wasn’t always expected to attract audiences because of its entertainment value. As Goldberg (2002) reflects,

In the old days, hour-long CBS News programs, like *CBS Reports*, tackled the big issues of our times, and producers were not expected to get big ratings. The men who started up the networks in the earliest days of television thought news was special. They made their money on Lucy and Ricky and Jackie Gleason and Jack Benny. For years and years and years, news wasn’t a money-maker and wasn’t expected to be (p. 92).

Throughout the Golden Age of Television, news and entertainment were wholly distinct genres: “News was a distinctly secondary function in terms of time allocation, financial resources, and profitability. During the 1950s, news and public affairs programming constituted less than ten percent of network programming” (Davis, 1992, p. 97). *I Love Lucy* would attract viewers seeking a laugh; *CBS Evening News* would attract viewers seeking a nightly summary of national and international events. News programs were not glitzy and glamorous because, as Goldberg notes, they didn’t have to be. News interview and discussion shows in particular were not initially created with the purpose of attracting the highest number of potential viewers. As Barkin (2003) clarifies, the majority of such shows were relegated to the dead zone of TV land – Sunday. Primetime was out of the question; there were plenty of successful nightly newscasts like *CBS Evening News* to serve as a particular network’s flagship. So how did 24-hour news transform the subdued genre of mid-century news discussion programs and create the politicized landscape of money-making news programming that we know today?

Television news, according to Goldberg, changed drastically after news executives first realized that news shows could in fact be profitable (2002). The show that most strikingly pierced this profitability barrier was *60 Minutes*:

It’s ironic that *60 Minutes*, far and away the best of all the news magazine shows, indirectly is responsible for the ‘infotainment’ we see on prime-time magazine programs today. *60 Minutes* started out to do good – and it also did quite well. It made the network a not-so-small fortune over the years. When the corporate executives realized news shows could actually make money, all bets were off (Goldberg, 2002, p. 92).

Incidentally, CBS first broadcast *60 Minutes* only a month after the aforementioned Buckley/Vidal debate on ABC. The brainchild of producer Don Hewitt, the show has since become “the most successful news documentary program in the history of television... the longest running, regularly scheduled prime-time broadcast... [and] a top-10 finisher in the Nielsen ratings for 16 consecutive seasons” (Whitt, 1999, p. 237). Its unique news-documentary format distinguished it from the likes of *Face the Nation* and *Meet the Press*, yet it retained the same basic tenet of news analysis and commentary. The issue, rather than the guest, was investigated in-depth; unlike a *CBS Evening News* broadcast, for example, correspondents presented a select number of stories in lengthy detail. To some extent, the philosophy of *60 Minutes* can be seen as a descendent of the network’s universally-heralded news documentary program of yesteryear, *See It Now*. Created in 1951 by broadcasting pioneers Fred Friendly and Edward R. Murrow, *See It Now* specialized in the comprehensive investigation of pertinent topics that affected the American public (Winfield, 1999). The show, for example, “targeted critical issues such as the question of statehood for Alaska and Hawaii, the loss of American civil liberties, and the rise of McCarthyism” (Winfield, 1999, p. 230). The latter report on McCarthyism was arguably one of the most influential and groundbreaking reports of its time. Although *See It Now* did not last more than seven years, it received critical acclaim for its “honesty, pace, informativeness, and innovation” (Winfield, 1999, p. 230). Thus, partly motivated by the previous success of the news-documentary formula, CBS decided to test the viewing waters once again.

After struggling through its first few seasons, *60 Minutes* quickly began to turn heads:

By 1975... *60 Minutes* began a steady ratings ascent, moving from 101 to 52 in the ratings. By the end of spring 1977, *60 Minutes* was tied with *Hawaii Five-O* for number 18. By the end of the 1978 season, it was number 6. And in 1980, it was number 1 out of 106 programs. By the following year, Hewitt had 10 Emmys (Whitt, 1999, p. 237).

For a news show to reach this level of success was simply unprecedented. Though the traditional focus of *60 Minutes* has been the in-depth analysis of a select number of newsworthy issues, it took Hewitt only four years after the show's inception to experiment with a left/right debate-style arrangement: "In 1972, Hewitt initiated a 'Point/Counterpoint' format, featuring conservative columnist James Kilpatrick of the *Washington Star* and liberal columnist Nicholas von Hoffman of the *Washington Post*" (Whitt, 1999, p. 237). Though the segment lasted only six years, it would serve as a model for political talk shows eager to blur the line between news and entertainment.

As Barkin (2003) argues, these two diametrically opposed forces collided in the person of John McLaughlin: "In 1982, he began *The McLaughlin Group*, a half-hour program based neither on interviews nor on reporters discussing the stories they had covered. *The McLaughlin Group* was about heated opinion, expressed loudly and in short bursts of air time (p. 76). In essence, *The Group* became the first television program to overtly glorify scathing debate, partisan animosity and sharp derision – a giant leap away from the comparably tame poli-talk competition. The staccato tempo and brusque attitude was new, fresh, and unreservedly over-the-top; more importantly, however, "The breakneck pace of the program [was] designed to make participants lunge for a quick,

juicy one-liner” (Swan, 1985, p. 2). McLaughlin expected instant opinion, preferably with the core group of commentators insulting one another in the process. Yet, as Shales (1985) points out, the show was intentionally structured to promote such instantaneous gut reactions: “In his defense, McLaughlin will say he likes to keep the pitch feverish because it forces the panelists into unguarded spontaneity, into revealing their ‘innermost thinking’ without filtering it or softening it” (p. 1). And as its early ratings and rapid syndication proved, viewers seemed to appreciate this pre-packaged opinion – or at least were too shocked to change the channel. In Swan’s words, *The McLaughlin Group* “operates on the old pit-dog principle that if you draw enough blood you’ll attract a crowd” (1985, p. 1).

That crowd, slowly but surely, appeared to be shifting away from the less well-known *Agronsky & Company*, which was the closest direct competition to *The Group* (Shales, 1985). Syndicated since 1980, *Agronsky* represented the poli-talk of the old guard – a veritable sloth compared to the hyena-like banter of *The Group*. As Shales (1985) observes, the climate of televised political discussion was again at a crossroads:

Together [*The McLaughlin Group*] wages not only war among itself but against the other political talk shows, most notably the more austere – indeed, the veritably sepulchral – *Agronsky & Company*... *The Group* is clearly the up-and-comer, *Agronsky’s* show the tattered old-timer. They’re all very reasonable on *Agronsky*. They’re all very entertaining on *The Group*” (p. 1).

With the advent and subsequent success of *The Group*, the blurring of news and entertainment thus began to clearly err on the side of entertainment. In effect, the very concept of news was being redefined before viewers’ eyes. McLaughlin himself explains the motivation for creating his show in terms of satisfying a perceived need among

television viewers. Considering McLaughlin made the following observations over twenty years ago, only a few years after the arrival of CNN and over ten years before MSNBC and Fox News, his foresight is remarkably accurate:

I felt there was a need. I felt the appetite for opinion growing, with the amount of information being provided by weekly news programs going up, sometimes doubling – Nightline, CNN, the Brinkley show. With this information overload, people wanted some way to codify it. I thought we would take issues, polarize them, pump out the extremes, and help people decide where they fit along that continuum one way or the other (Shales, 1985, p. 5).

Though President Ronald Reagan jokingly referred to the show's nutritional value as falling "somewhere between potato chips and Twinkies" (Grove, 1985, p. 1), McLaughlin attempted to satisfy a perceived need among the television viewing public. He surveyed the television market, discovered a void, and attempted to fill that void with his show. This void, as McLaughlin saw it, required extreme polarization and unabashed politicking. He can almost be interpreted to be advocating a form of narrowcasting, aiming to serve a select group of dedicated news viewers who yearn for more than the traditional newscast or lighthearted discussion. While *The Group* may have taken this narrowcasting to the extreme (as McLaughlin freely admits – see above), his venture into the poli-talk arena does add a piece to the 24-hour cable news puzzle that exists today. This puzzle is comprised of elements from mid-century political interview shows, *The McLaughlin Group*, *60 Minutes*, and even the networks' nightly newscasts. Mixed together with a character all its own, 24-hour cable news is an amalgamation of multiple journalistic styles.

The 24-hour cable news landscape is principally dominated by three major players: Cable News Network (CNN), Microsoft Network/National Broadcasting Company (MSNBC) and Fox News Channel (FNC). Predating both MSNBC and FNC by sixteen years, news mogul Ted Turner created the Atlanta-based cable channel in 1980 to the dubious expectations of the news community (Huntzicker, 1999). Could a channel really succeed by broadcasting news 24-hours a day, seven days a week? By emphasizing live international reporting and frequent updates, CNN steadily began to overcome its inherent obstacles and convert previous skeptics (Huntzicker, 1999). Its international bureaus in particular gave CNN the clear edge in providing the most in-depth, up-to-date coverage of events happening around the globe. Just as the Big Three were cutting foreign broadcast bureaus and news staffs to offset financial losses, CNN stepped into fill the void (Flournoy and Stewart, 1997). By embracing the most cutting-edge communication technology, Turner was able to maintain a tightly-knit web of reporters who would never be more than a satellite uplink away: “Using satellites and a host of supportive terrestrial technologies, such as transportable satellite uplinks, lighter yet higher-quality cameras, and quick-turn-around digital editing machines... CNN’s Atlanta-based staff maintain contact with international bureaus, correspondents in the field, and news sources everywhere – 24 hours a day” (Flournoy and Stewart, 1997). Comparatively speaking, the Big Three initially remained technological dinosaurs.

CNN’s success was not immediate; the traditional heavyweight networks continued to dominate the market through much of the 1980s (Huntzicker, 1999). The 1991 Persian Gulf War, however, marked the turning point in legitimacy for CNN:

“CNN’s reporters were the only ones allowed to remain in Baghdad, even while American planes bombed the city. Some network affiliates took CNN feeds along with – or instead of – their own. The Gulf War finally made CNN competitive” (Huntzicker, 1999, p. 47). As Fournoy and Stewart (1997) explain, CNN’s Gulf War coverage “not only produced the company’s highest ratings, but led to much talk of a ‘CNN factor’, whereby the network was thought to be inadvertently shaping news events by virtue of its aggressive live television coverage” (p. 6-7). In little more than ten years, Turner had created an international empire that was thought to not only report, but help *shape* the news.

Further, Turner sought to distance his network from the Big Three by creating an environment in which current affairs could be discussed and debated from multiple points of view. To serve this end, CNN acquired the rights to broadcast the radio show *Crossfire* in 1983, a program originally hosted by liberal Tom Braden and conservative Pat Buchanan (Ifert, 1999). Together with variously affiliated guests, the politically opposed hosts would wrestle with contemporary political issues in an often McLaughlin-esque manner. Until its demise in mid-2005, *Crossfire* was a primetime staple in the CNN lineup; its popularity with viewers fueled similar political discussion shows both on competing networks and on CNN itself (Ifert, 1999). One such example of intra-CNN recycling was the creation of *The Capital Gang* in 1989. Self-described by CNN.com (2005) as a “political panel discussion offering provocative insight and scintillating debate” (p. 1), *The Capital Gang* filled Saturday evenings with a Washington-based discussion of current affairs. Though CNN executives cancelled *The Capital Gang* the

same year as *Crossfire*, their influence on the poli-talk genre is plainly evident in their modern-day equivalents on MSNBC and FNC. In 1996, the same year MSNBC and FNC were introduced, Turner Broadcasting System Inc. merged with Time Warner Inc. As a result of the deal, Turner had to give up his post as chairman, president and CEO, but remains active as vice chairman of the new company (Flournoy and Stewart, 1997).

Taking Turner's 24-hour news concept one step further, Microsoft Corporation and NBC joined forces in 1996 to create the internet-oriented MSNBC – a direct challenge to CNN's lone sovereignty. Touted by Bill Gates as an unprecedented grouping of both television and online technology, MSNBC was formed with the intention of making the news more appealing (St. John, 1999). To accomplish this goal, MSNBC utilized a ten megabyte data line to connect Microsoft's online production facilities in Washington, NBC News facilities in New York, and the cable headquarters in New Jersey (Flournoy and Stewart, 1997). This advanced interconnectivity allowed the network to maintain a tightly knit web of unique media that appeal to different audiences; in other words, MSNBC was designed to harness the company's broadcast, cable and cyberspace outlets while allowing viewers to flow seamlessly between all three (Flournoy and Stewart, 1997). A regular NBC nightly news viewer, for example, would be directed to access MSNBC.com in order to find out more information about a story he or she watched on television. Alternately, a regular MSNBC.com web surfer would be directed to a particular newscast so he or she could view a story of interest on television. The internet and broadcast mediums thus thrive on one another's reflexive promotion. As Flournoy and Stewart (1997) note, this reflexive promotion demonstrates the converging

worlds of media and computers; broadcasting and webcasting, as MSNBC envisioned, were quickly becoming inseparable. Yet because MSNBC was created from the ground up with the internet in mind, MSNBC managing editor Merrill Brown contends, its online presence is a unique, stand-alone product that offers quick, topical delivery of breaking news (Flournoy and Stewart, 1997). In this sense, MSNBC's website is structured as the primary source for the tech-savvy MSNBC viewer.

Furthermore, MSNBC.com is adaptable and customizable depending on the individual web user. Instead of passively watching a newscast, the online news viewer is encouraged to personalize his or her own news viewing experience: "MSNBC Online included interactive versions of various subjects and also provided news menus that would allow the user to customize news, weather, and stock reports" (St. John, 1999, p. 158). This online personalization fosters a unique sense of connection and intimacy between the news viewer and news reporter; viewer-specific presentation of news, at least in the realm of the internet, was from the outset MSNBC's goal. Though this concept is now standard in the 24-hour cable world (both online and on television, as we will soon discover), MSNBC was the first network to champion it as the preferred means of news dissemination (Flournoy and Stewart, 1997).

Its foray into the genre of political debate shows, on the other hand, was comparatively sluggish. To attract the *Crossfire* demographic, MSNBC eventually tapped former Congressional staffer Chris Matthews to host a politically-charged discussion show, *Hardball*, in 1999 (St. John, 1999). As its name suggests, Matthews and an array of pundits, officials and experts compete in a battle of wits to wrestle with hot

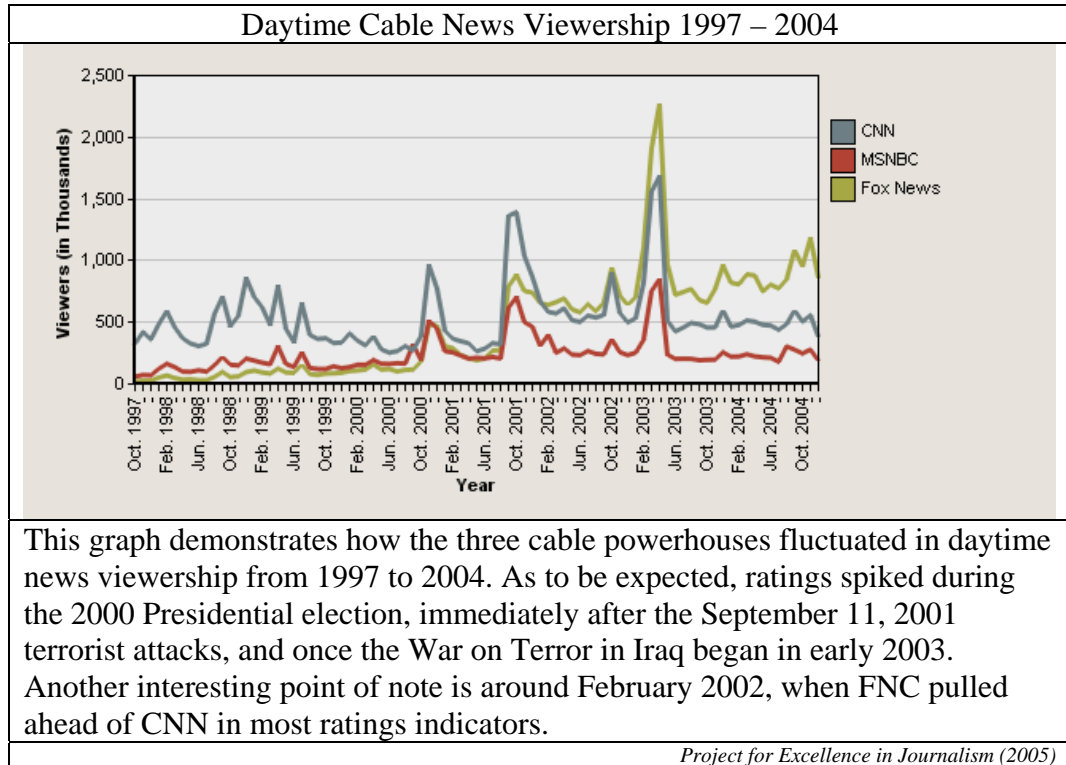
contemporary topics. As with its counterpart on CNN, *Hardball* is often one of the most-watched shows on the channel. Neither *Hardball* nor the network as a whole has ever matched the popularity of its competition, but MSNBC did signal the first threat to CNN's sixteen-year supremacy in the 24-hour market.

When Rupert Murdoch launched Fox News Channel just three months after MSNBC's inception, he too wanted a piece of CNN's pie. Quite simply, Murdoch's long-term goal was to access almost two-thirds of the world's population by utilizing a global news distribution system and embracing the digital revolution (Flournoy and Stewart, 1997). For this end, FNC set up distribution agreements with the big cable operators and subsequently launching its own direct satellite service; strategic alliances with Reuters and the Associated Press also fuel its content (Flournoy and Stewart, 1997). Aside from FNC's innovative mechanical infrastructure, Murdoch from the outset promoted his 24-hour cable channel as ideologically distinct from its competitors. By offering what they coined as "fair and balanced" content, clearly labeling commentary and opinion, and drawing out multiple sides of an issue, Murdoch hoped to overcome what he saw as a liberal bias in the mainstream media (Flournoy and Stewart, 1997). Similar to McLaughlin's reasoning for creating *The McLaughlin Group*, Murdoch explained that FNC was created to fill a void and respond to a need: "Coverage was becoming more and more biased, and people were starved, starved for an alternative" (Cited in Sella 2001, p. 3). With the exception of the three-month old MSNBC, the only 24-hour news source until that point had been what some conservatives had derisively nicknamed the 'Clinton News Network' (CNN).

As Sella (2001) observes, “When Fox News entered the field in 1996, Ted Turner declared he would ‘squish Murdoch like a bug’” (p. 5). Not unlike the skepticism surrounding the creation of CNN in 1980, the Australian-born Murdoch was expected to have minimal success in the U.S. news market. But Murdoch accomplished a supposedly impossible feat only ten years prior: building a fourth American television network – the Fox Network (Huntzicker, 1999). 24-hour news, however, was an entirely unique venture. To further distinguish itself from other news outlets and attract the highest number of viewers, as the Project for Excellence in Journalism (2005) describes,

Fox News hit on a formula of building shows around anchor personalities rather than a universal news desk, livelier graphics and pacing, heavy focus on a few hot-button topics, particularly Washington and politics, and an appeal to its audience in part through ideological affinity (p. 29).

This heavy focus on hot-button political topics is embodied in shows like the *Hardball*-esque *O’Reilly Factor* and the *Crossfire*-esque *Hannity and Colmes*, which encourage opinionated analysis of political controversies. As Foxnews.com (2005) describes, *Hannity and Colmes* is structured to be “fast paced and hard-hitting... a heated discussion in a nightly face-off... relishing in controversial topics...” (p. 1). As host Sean Hannity further comments, “With guests who are in the middle of the fight, we’re able to hear their point of view on the topics, as well as advance our own feelings” (Foxnews.com, 2005, p. 1). Both shows have been on the air since FNC’s creation, and both continue to occupy key primetime slots in the weekday broadcast schedule (weekdays 8 pm and 9 pm, respectively).



As is the case on CNN and MSNBC, FNC’s opinion-based news programs are complimented by more traditional newscasts to balance news *commentary* with news *reporting*. This formula has produced stunning Nielsen ratings. It took FNC only six years to surpass CNN in primetime (Greppi, 2006). Though some charge that the network favors the political right, FNC’s senior White House correspondent Jim Angle takes a different view: “The competition seems to prefer the approach of saying, ‘Eat your peas; this is important.’ Turn down the sound on the networks sometime. How often do you see ‘em smile? Our ratings don’t come from bias. They come from enthusiasm” (Cited in Sella, 2001, p. 7). Whatever the reason, FNC’s distinct style and bold personality have demanded attention, and viewers have responded enthusiastically. Its inimitable ratings

have become a force to be reckoned with, and the response of CNN and MSNBC is still yet to be determined.

The continual tug-of-war between CNN, MSNBC and FNC, however, is only one dimension of 24-hour news puzzle. The cable talk show's impact on public opinion, international political affairs, new media technology, mass communication theory, and sociopolitical viewing habits have all affected the way in which news organizations and their constituents interact. As the number of 24-hour news constituents continues to grow, so too does the medium's level of influence. While local newscasts and the Big Three still retain a measurable percentage of such influence, their previous dominance has been slipping. Klarevas (2003) finds that "increasingly, Americans are turning to 24-hour cable news networks and the Internet for news" (p. 266). As Pew Center statistics indicate, the audience for local news channels and the Big Three networks have been declining for over a decade and the perennial ratings king, CNN, has been outgunned by FNC for five consecutive years. In cyberspace, MSNBC.com is leading the pack with its free streaming video and various interactive content; visits to its website have increased dramatically over the past year and show no signs of tapering off (PR Newswire US, 2005). The internet's effect on the television news market is still unfolding, but the pace of technological advancement suggests that a substantial shift should not be unexpected.

In sum, the landscape of television news has come a long way since the days of Murrow, Cronkite and the traditional nightly newscast. Over the past two decades, the 24-hour news format has emerged as the dominant force in shaping the television news landscape of the twenty-first century. This new landscape, rooted in the political

interview shows of the mid-twentieth century and adapting to the increased politicization of the late 1970s and early 1980s, has considerable ramifications for the modern-day messenger/recipient relationship. With the advent of CNN, MSNBC and FNC, as well as the exponential growth of online news availability, the interaction between the news provider and the news viewer has changed quite dramatically. Understanding this change, especially in the sociopolitical context, will help gauge the true impact that 24-hour news has had on American society.

RESEARCH QUESTION

RQ: How has the advent of 24-hour cable news networks changed the sociopolitical relationship between the television news viewer and the 24-hour television news organization?

RELEVANCE

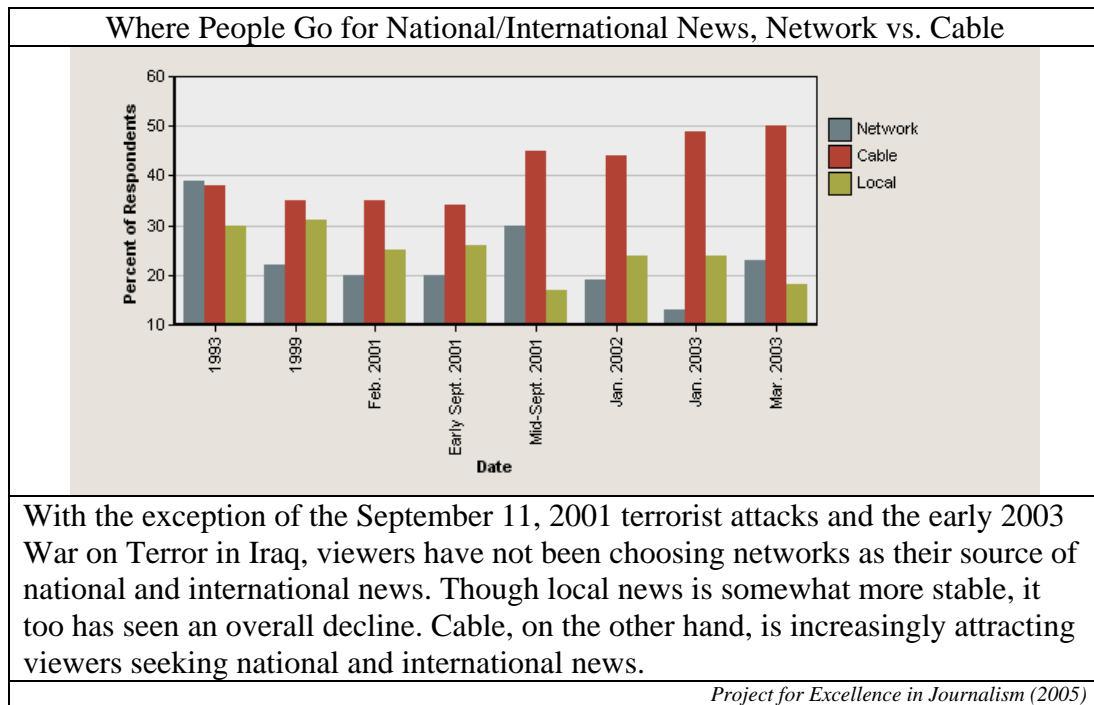
While the political news discussion program may not be an entirely new concept, the genre has become permanently ingrained in American society over the last two decades. Thus, it is not so much the genre itself but its recent growth and development that gives rise to the inquiry at hand. In other words, why is this poli-talk phenomenon important?

As Bennett (2001) states, “Power and influence in a democratic society depend on the control and strategic use of information” (p. 16). As mass communication theory will demonstrate in the Literature Review, the media’s power and influence is undeniable. Scholars have disagreed as to the degree of this influence since the turn of the century, and a current consensus is still indefinable. As Davis (1992) acknowledges, however, there has been a growing body of evidence that suggests mass media exposure affects awareness and knowledge of politics. Dubbed by some as the ‘fourth estate’ of the American democratic system, the news media “play a variety of roles in the decision-making arena and affect the policy deliberations of both the general public and government elites” (Klarevas, 2003, p. 265). The very acknowledgement of the news media as an estate demonstrates the extent to which it is intertwined with American society from the ground up. As the agenda setting theory posits, “Television news powerfully influences which problems viewers regard as the nation’s most serious” (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987, p. 4). Edward R. Murrow’s scintillating investigation of Joseph McCarthy’s brazen scare tactics on *See It Now*, for example, helped change public

opinion against the beleaguered Senator. At the time, there was no print equivalent that matched the impact of Murrow's report. In fact, as Perloff (1998) argues, "There is evidence that television news can lead to as much if not more political learning than newspapers" (p. 337). While Postman and Powers (1992) agree with the concept of television news media's impact on political learning, they take the effect one step further and dispel a common misconception of the messenger/recipient relationship: "Since you control it, you think that television is a one-way street... that you are using it... and it is not using you. But that is simply not the case" (p. 2). Television news programs may not inject opinions and ideas directly into viewers' minds, but they are certainly able to regulate what opinions and ideas are presented, the manner in which they are framed and their degree of saliency. Iyengar and Kinder (1987) say that this control directly influences political decision making: "By priming certain aspects of national life while ignoring others, television news sets the terms by which political judgments are rendered and political choices made" (p. 4). Or, as the oft-cited media critic Bernard Cohen concludes, "The media may not always be able to tell us what to think, but they are strikingly successful in telling us what to think about" (Cited in Parenti, 1993, p. 23). Here, Cohen is essentially contextualizing the media's gate-keeping role.

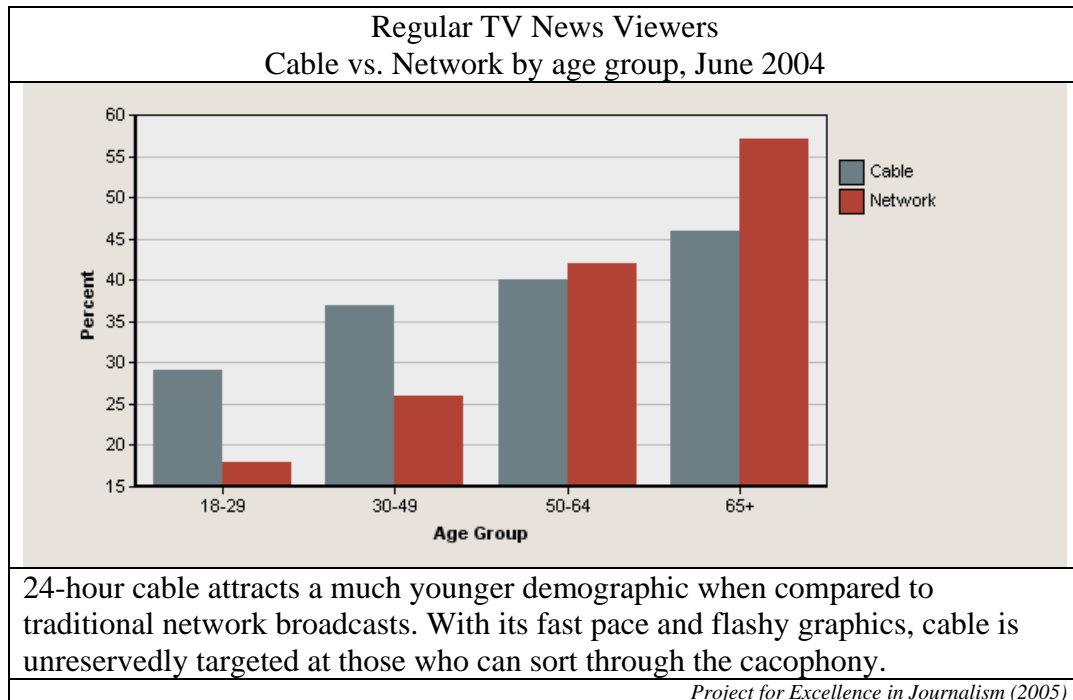
Television news media in general is certainly influential, but 24-hour cable news in particular has created the contemporary shakeout in the television news landscape. In short form, the 24-hour format has changed the way viewers receive televised news: "With each passing year, the national evening newscast, as an American institution, is becoming less and less relevant... Today, there are cable and satellite TV and the

Internet, competition that Cronkite and Huntley and Brinkley didn't even have to think about" (Goldberg, 2002, p. 188). This competition, Compton (2004) cites, has basically destroyed the Big Three's dominance on the U.S. broadcast audience: "In 1970, the big three U.S. networks controlled more than 90 percent of the total broadcast audience... As for the U.S. networks' overall news audience, Michael Gurevitch reports that by 1994, it had fallen 'to an all-time low of slightly over 30 percent of the total television audience'" (p. 73). This all-time low, it should be noted, was recorded before the arrival of MSNBC or FNC.



In addition, the Big Three's monopoly on the national evening news broadcast has been virtually eliminated. Goldberg (2002) offers a telling statistical trend that verifies this downward slide: "The numbers get worse every year. In the 1994-95 season, for

example, 51 percent of Americans with TV sets on were watching Dan [Rather] or Peter [Jennings] or Tom [Brokaw]. In 1995-96 it was 50 percent. For 1996-97, and 1997-98, it was 49 percent. Then it slipped to 47 percent; by the end of 2000, it was 44 percent; And in July 2001, 43 percent” (p. 188). As Lieberman (2004) notes, however, it should not be assumed that each network ratings loss should be attributed to a cable ratings gain; instead, he cites cable’s ability to expand its base and reach more households as the primary cause for the switch. But the fact remains that until the advent of cable and the internet, it was assumed that Americans would get their news from a major newspaper or one of the network’s nightly broadcasts. For a long time, the Big Three seemed to take this reality for granted. With the creation of cable, however, everything changed.



No longer did viewers have to relegate their news watching time to the evening newscast on one of the three networks. News was now available around the clock and could be tapped at the viewer's discretion: "It is there when you need it, and in a nation of multi-taskers, it can be on as a kind of background, something we can turn to in moments of curiosity" (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2005, p. 13). The Pew Center (2005) survey of news viewers confirms this reasoning: "Those with a favorable view of the cable news networks most commonly mentioned the timeliness, convenience, and accessibility of the reports – available 'anytime' in the words of several respondents" (p. 4). The younger generations in particular favor cable in part because of this flexibility: "Rather than setting aside time to watch the network news at a specific hour – what's known as 'appointment television' – younger adults are more likely to go to cable, which is available any time they choose to tune in" (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2005, p. 22).

Furthermore, continuous updates would ensure that viewers could keep track of developing stories; waiting until the next scheduled broadcast was no longer the only option. Most importantly, however, cable popularized the on-camera debate and discussion of politicized news stories. The most recent ratings plainly reflect the poli-talk dominance on each of the 24-hour heavyweights: "The highest-rated program on every network is a prime-time talk show... Larry King on CNN, Bill O'Reilly on Fox and Chris Matthews on MSNBC" (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2005, p. 10). This reality did not go unnoticed by ABC, CBS and NBC. Reacting to this cue from viewers, the Big Three struggled to catch up:

When ABC, CBS, and NBC discovered that they could no longer compete with the twenty-four hour news channels in bringing the freshest news to the public, they reshaped their newscasts to produce longer, more analytical, in-depth stories... They interjected more independently gathered materials to put politicians' statements into perspective, and they drew far more heavily on quotes from experts. Besides citing more conflicting views, journalists provided more of their own interpretation... (Graber, 2001, p. 177).

The impact of 24-hour news thus not only affects the television news audience, but the television news media as a whole. Despite the availability of more traditional nightly newscasts and comparatively non-political programming on cable and network news, viewers still preferred the poli-talk format.

To contextualize this preference in contemporary America, Greenblatt (2004) cites the national political atmosphere as a contributing factor to the increasingly political nature of television news: "Over the past couple of decades, elected officials and party leaders have become more openly partisan, with greater divisions between the parties across the entire range of political issues" (p. 374). Acting in its capacity as the "fourth estate," the media is extremely sensitive to shifts in the American political arena and reacts dynamically when the other estates change. Greenblatt (2004), for example, cites the bitter partisan feelings that resulted from the 2000 election as fanning the fire of division, and further contends that such divided sentiments have only intensified in years since. This bifurcation of politics, he argues, is thus reflected in the bifurcation on cable news. As the Project for Excellence in Journalism (2005) observes, however, "The polarization phenomenon tends to occur primarily within the cable news audience, and not necessarily across the entire television news spectrum" (p. 21). A further sociopolitical fault line, as the Pew Center (2004) points out, is the post-9/11 battle for

Iraq. The extent to which the country has grown apart ideologically (at least on this issue) is quite striking. It is because Iraq has fueled such passionately polarized views, the Pew Center (2004) argues, that its surveys reflect the dramatic rise over the past two years in the number of Americans who say they closely follow international news most of the time; between 2000 and 2001, the number who follow overseas developments very closely has grown from 14% to 21%. Though “the civil rights and Vietnam eras opened larger wounds,” Greenblatt (2004) concedes, “Americans are more perfectly sorted politically than they have been in living memory” (p. 375).

Sorted, as Greenblatt (2004) explains, simply refers to the degree to which previously middle-of-the-road moderates have decreased in size relative to those who more strongly support a particular party’s line; or, more simply, he alludes to increased polarization of the two major parties as well as amplified intra-party conformity. This assertion is corroborated by Gibbs (2004), who reflects on the heightened politicking of the 2004 Presidential Election: “Both parties redrew districts to be more political homogeneous, marginalized their centrists, elevated their flamethrowers, viewed with suspicion anyone who sounded temperate or reached across the aisle” (p. 3). The reach of such politicking, however, was not limited solely to the political arena. As Pew Center director Andrew Kohut explains, polarization of the electorate has crossed over into the media realm as well: “The changing views ‘reflect the political polarization we’ve seen’. Readers and viewers, he says, are ‘reacting to a perception of a political point of view, whether that means bias in political reports or tone’” (Cited in Kurtz, 2004, p. 2). This political, societal and ideological schism is thus mirrored by cable news in an effort to

embrace viewers' increasingly fervent convictions and provide an outlet through which these convictions can be espoused. As the most recent Pew Center (2005) survey confirms, viewers have shown an "increasing politicization of attitudes toward the news media. Republicans, already more critical than Democrats of the press, have become even more so" (p. 1). The interaction of increasingly politicized news programming with an increasingly polarized public accordingly resulted in the transformation of television news viewing preferences that we see today.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Though the advent of cable news may have occurred within the last thirty years, it remains steadfastly grounded in many of the same theories that originally revolutionized the study of mass media.

Stemming mainly from a fear of Adolf Hitler's spellbinding radio oratory (Davis, 1992), early communication researchers of the 1930s and early 1940s originally believed that "the mass media acted like a hypodermic needle on the public – directly shaping public opinion with great impact" (Davis, 1992, p. 237). Media impact was considered direct, uninhibited and extremely powerful. It didn't take long, however, for more sophisticated theories to arise. One of the earliest politically-oriented studies of media effects was Paul Lazarsfeld's *The People's Choice*, which was first published in 1944. Centered in the community of Erie County, Ohio, Lazarsfeld (1968) and his colleagues interviewed residents about their political opinions and their response to mass political messages during the 1940 Presidential election. Specifically, Lazarsfeld selected respondents based on stratified sampling techniques and surveyed their political predispositions and self-reported uses of mass media (Perloff, 1998). From his data, Lazarsfeld concluded that the media operated in a "two-step flow of communication: messages flowed from the mass media to opinion leaders and from opinion leaders to voters" (Davis, 1992, p. 237). Overall, the study suggested that the media in fact had limited effects on the public, contrary to what the previous majority had believed. The media was not injecting its messages into the public with a hypodermic needle; rather, the

public interpreted filtered messages through trusted individual leaders in the community.

As Perloff (1998) summarizes,

The political media had three major influences: They activated latent political predispositions, helping to clarify and crystallize attitudes toward the candidates; they reinforced the vote intentions of strong partisans; and they converted a handful of voters. Voters who were most exposed to mass media had the most fixed political attitudes (p. 192).

The People's Choice thus recognized that the public's own demographic and sociopolitical backgrounds were crucial determinants in voting characteristics: "Social background factors – party loyalty, socioeconomic status, and religion – proved to be highly correlated with voting behavior" (Perloff, 1998, p. 192).

The People's Choice, in a sense, served as a springboard for a wealth of future studies and theories. It also pioneered the panel design and longitudinal research strategy (Perloff, 1998). Partly because of Lazarsfeld's work, Davis (1992) notes that "the study of media effects now includes media's role in political socialization, agenda-setting, vote choice, and political efficacy and participation" (p. 238). Klapper (1960) discovered an even more substantial degree of viewer self-control in his limited effects model, which is outlined in his book *The Effects of Mass Communication*. Building off Lazarsfeld's groundbreaking two-step flow model, Klapper's empirical review of available research revealed the significant limitations of media's persuasive power (Perloff, 1998). As Perloff (1998) summarizes, the limited effects model holds that viewers actually resisted the media's needle of indoctrination and relied on a multitude of preexisting beliefs in responding to political messages:

Klapper maintained that people typically resisted persuasive messages by employing several defensive mechanisms. These consisted of: (a) selective exposure, the tendency to expose oneself to mass media materials one agrees with; (b) selective perception, the tendency to perceive information so that it fits one's preexisting point of view; and (c) selective retention, the predisposition to remember belief-congruent information better than belief-incongruent information" (p. 192).

Klapper's findings suggest that viewers have more control over their exposure, perception and retention of information than Lazarsfeld originally believed (Klapper, 1960). What's more, Klapper's study presupposes a more firmly opinionated public, strong in its values and firm in its beliefs (a foreshadowing of contemporary political polarization, perhaps?). In comparison to *The People's Choice, The Effects of Mass Communication* implies a certain level of empowerment by the viewer, who actively and carefully interacts with the messages presented by the particular medium. Postman and Powers (1992) affirm this dynamic relationship, highlighting the fact that viewers have indeed evolved: "Viewers are no longer passive consumers of news but active participants in a kind of dialogue between a news show and themselves" (p. 104).

It is through the basis of this interaction that the importance of cognition begins to emerge. Cognition, in the broad sense, is defined by Anderson (1996) to include the conscious processes of memory, language, problem solving, imagery, deduction and induction; in other words, that which makes us human. Applied to media consumers, cognition can be described as the knowledge, understanding and application of both one's own beliefs and those of the media. The level and nature of cognition attributed to media consumers has fluctuated quite dramatically over the last century. In the pre-WWII/hypodermic needle era, researchers essentially considered media consumers to be

devoid of all cognition and accepting of any and all messages. Lazarsfeld (1968) dispelled this notion and accepted that a limited range of sociopolitical and demographic factors influenced the acceptance or denial of such messages. Taking the hypodermic needle theory to its opposite extreme, Klapper (1960) holds that media consumers are completely cognitively aware, highly resistant to political messages, and able to use media purely for their benefit.

In an era of highly politicized cable news networks, however, the nature of viewer cognition is unique. Viewers don't rely exclusively on their own preexisting beliefs or those of the news channels, but rather on a unique balancing of both. As Domke et al (2001) explains, "Individuals' value priorities and media's value-framing of political issues work together in shaping issue interpretations" (p. 230). This idea is quite different from that which previous theories posit; it implies a cooperative relationship between the viewer and the cable news media. Instead of the media *injecting* the public with politicized messages or the public *resisting* these messages, Domke et al suggest that the two entities *work together* in forming conclusions. This distinctively more positive relationship is best personified in the uses and gratifications model. As Perloff (1998) describes,

The uses and gratifications model examines both the ways audience members use mass media and the gratifications or rewards individuals receive from the media... the model asks how people bend and mold political media to suit their own needs rather than how media influence or manipulate consumers (p. 201).

Whereas the limited effects model noted a somewhat discordant relationship between the public and the media, the uses and gratifications model alludes to a more amicable

understanding of the cable news media's politicized messages. In other words, though cable news media consumers may still selectively expose, perceive and retain politicized messages, they do so with less resistance and more awareness of the political nature of the cable news networks they choose to watch. As Iyengar and Kinder (1987) note, the post-Lazarsfeld consensus has, more often than not, "concluded that mass media in general and television news in particular merely strengthen or reinforce the public's existing beliefs and opinions" (p. 1). The trend, it seemed, was a gradual reversal in the balance of power between news providers and recipients, as well as an increase in viewers' cognitive awareness. Yet Iyengar and Kinder disagree. They posit that "television news is in fact an educator without peer, that it shapes the American public's conception of political life in pervasive ways..." (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987, p. 2). By soliciting participants to participate in both sequential and assemblage experiments at Yale University, Iyengar and Kinder (1987) observed how participants reacted to manipulated and non-manipulated newscasts given their political pre-dispositions. Essentially, what Iyengar and Kinder (1987) sought to understand was the degree to which viewers were influenced by the gate-keeping, framing and agenda setting functions of news broadcasting.

Before applying the theories of gate-keeping, framing and agenda setting to the genre of 24-hour news, however, it is crucial to first explore their nature. The metaphor of the media as a gatekeeper is actually quite elementary; the public is on one side of the gate, political messages are on the other, and the media controls the ebbs and flows of messages that pass through the gate to the public (Bennett, 2001). On the most

fundamental level, the mere selection of newsworthy topics impacts viewer awareness and knowledge. By flagging certain stories for broadcast while turning a blind eye to others, media executives directly affect what issues viewers do and do not see on newscasts. The story selection process at news stations, as argued by Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw and corroborated by Sheldon Gilberg and colleagues, directly controls the degree of viewer learning: “Voters learn about an issue ‘in direct proportion’ to the attention given to that issue by the press... voters tend to share what the media defines as important” (Cited in Kuypers, 2002, p. 5). Beyond mere definitional power, news executives also regulate who is allowed to comment on each particular issue. It is not simply the issues themselves that must pass through the gate; different interpretations of an issue are also subjected to the close scrutiny of the gatekeepers. As Bennett (2001) explains, “The press plays the crucial role of gatekeeper in the American political system, opening the news gate to admit certain voices and ideas into public view and closing it to other perspectives” (p. 25).

This gate-keeping function is especially important when juxtaposed with the rise of pundit commentary. By controlling which pundits to allow on its programming, cable channels like CNN, MSNBC and FNC are able to control which opinions are granted airtime. In fact, Alterman (1999) claims that pundits are largely responsible for defining the political nature of cable news and controlling the scope of discussion for the nation as a whole: “It is their debate, rather than any semblance of a democratic one, that determines the parameters of political discourse in the nation today (pp. 4-5). While it may initially appear that Alterman is suggesting that it is the pundits who are controlling

the ebbs and flows of political messages, it is important to remember who controls the pundits; by tracing the leash of control back to its source, it is clear that the cable channels have traditionally been the true gatekeepers.

The role of gatekeeper, moreover, is closely related to the framing theory, as Graber et al (1998) point out: “Print and broadcast journalists, editors, and media owners can be the chief gatekeepers who determine which political messages will be publicized through news media channels and how they should be framed” (p. 2). To break down Graber et al’s synthesis, gate-keeping is control of *what* issues make it on the air; framing is control of *how* those issues are presented. Kuypers (2002) puts forth a more thorough definition, stressing the construction of understanding that is central to framing theory:

Framing, then, is the process whereby communicators act to construct a particular point of view that encourages the facts of a given situation to be viewed (or ignored) in a particular manner, with some facts made more noticeable than others. When speaking of political and social issues, frames actually define our understanding of any given situation (p. 7).

What, then, is a frame? As Gamson and Modigliani (1999) simply define, a frame is “a central organizing idea for making sense of relevant events and suggesting what is at issue” (p. 3). This succinct appraisal correctly implies that each issue presented by a newscast is necessarily delivered as part of a packaged story that is intentionally structured in a certain manner. While the basest intention is a general understanding of the issue, Klarevas (2003) goes so far as to say that the deliberate construction of an issue is intended to elicit a particular response: “Framing affects the presentation of a story and the policy response that is advocated” (p. 280). In a certain sense, the very precept of framing an issue supports this response expectation, even if such framing is intended to

increase ratings. Regardless of motive, there are countless ways in which an issue can be intentionally or unintentionally constructed. Word choice, voice inflection, sentence intonation, audio/visual variation, argument sequence... all combine to create a specific message. When combined, Ghanem and McCombs (2001) argue, all the elements of an issue's frame result in a specific agenda: "Framing is the construction of an agenda with a restricted number of thematically related attributes in order to create a coherent picture of a particular object" (p. 70).

This leads directly into the theory of agenda setting. As Klarevas (2003) explains, "Agenda setting is the effect whereby the news media establish what are the most salient policy matters facing a polity" (p. 276). To establish the desired level of saliency, the media focus the public's attention on a particular object or issue and then further focus attention on particular attributes within a particular object or issue (Kuypers, 2002). In this regard, agenda setting can be interpreted as melding both gatekeeping and framing; the central tenet of agenda setting, however, is not *what* or *how* an issue is presented, but the manner in which the audience responds to an issue. The amount of time a channel lends to an issue is directly proportional to the degree of importance understood by viewers; Iyengar and Kinder (1987) in particular emphasized the power of this correlation. Yet interpretation by each individual viewer is not identical; interpretations and conclusions vary on a demographic and psychographic continuum. Speaking to this variation in interpretation, Davis (1992) posits a demonstrable imbalance among viewers who are subjected to the same media message: "Those most susceptible to media agenda-setting are those with less education, political independents, and those who demonstrate

less political interest and activity” (p. 243). The extent to which agenda setting is relevant to different viewers is thus deeply dependent on the viewers themselves. In other words, “Agenda setting is a theory about the transfer of salience from the mass media’s pictures of the world to those in our heads... the media’s agenda sets the public’s agenda” (Ghanem and McCombs, 2001, p. 67). Though Ghanem and McCombs seem to imply an oversimplified connection between the agenda of the “fourth estate” and that of the public (contrary to Lazarsfeld’s two-step flow model), they do touch on a principle vitally important to understanding the effects of cable news; though it may seem trivial at first glance, the fact that they allude to pre-existing “pictures of the world” that reside in the viewer’s head speaks to the central precept of cognition discussed earlier.

In sum, our understanding of the media/viewer relationship has changed and adapted as new research continues to be conducted. Starting with Lazarsfeld’s two-step flow and Klapper’s limited effects models, the interaction between 24-hour cable news outlets and their viewer has come to be best understood according to the tenets of the uses and gratifications framework. Melded with our understanding of cognitive awareness, the role of gate-keeping, framing and agenda setting as applied to this framework begins to become clear. Arriving at this synthesis, however, required a variety of analytical research and statistical analysis that will be explained in the following section.

METHODOLOGY

“Getting a political fix on television journalism is not easy,” wrote Walter Goodman, television critic for the *New York Times*. “It’s like trying to navigate with flawed instruments in heavy weather. There’s just too much of the stuff pouring forth for tidy measurement, and although all big news operations work within the confines of mainstream politics, what seems generally true of Ted Turner’s CNN on any issue is not always true of Rupert Murdoch’s Fox News” (1998, p. 2). Performing an accurate and thorough content analysis as such, as Goodman admits, is an inherently difficult task. The nature of the 24-hour news genre simply defies narrow definitions and categorical coding. Consequently, an empirically qualitative methodology has been implemented to best answer the research question.

This analysis thus focuses on a close document analysis of both recorded statistics and resultant studies. The comprehensive examinations of American citizens’ news viewing habits conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press in 2002, 2004, and 2005, for example, represent an invaluable quantitative source of data that thrives, among other aspects, on its contemporaneousness. In addition, The Project for Excellence in Journalism and PBS’s News Hour commissioned report by ADT research combine the most recent viewing figures with reasoned analysis. Nielsen Ratings from all three sources are the most objective benchmark with which the three cable channels can be judged. In contrast, the discussions of R. Davis, L. Klarevas and R.M. Perloff, for example, offer the crucial theoretical framework on which modern

landscape of 24-hour cable news relies; these authors dig deep into the annals of communication research to trace the evolution of applicable theories and suggest how they have come to function in the context of the twenty-first century. Thus, what this paper attempts to accomplish is a fluid integration of past theory and modern practice as understood through the prism of modern cable news.

In order to achieve this goal, several resources provided by a private Northeast university were utilized. The university's library featured an extensive online book catalogue, for example, that provided an integral database through which the entirety of the hard-copy sources were located. The researcher used the search terms "CNN," "Fox News," "MSNBC," "television news," "television news audience," "24-hour cable," "television and politics," "politicized cable" and "television pundit," among other similar derivatives. Selective editing of the key words and a reverse-citation method for discovering alternate sources within applicable books also proved effective. It was crucial to sort through the indexes, tables of contents and prefaces of the various books to filter out irrelevant subject matter. By searching through such indexes and footnotes, other undiscovered authors and works were recorded for eventual investigation. Once only the most pertinent chapters had been selected by skimming abstracts and conclusions, a close reading and citation of important themes, underlying theories and statistical facts allowed for the finalized book-based information cited throughout. The most significant themes, theories and statistical facts, however, stressed the *active*, not passive, relationship between the media and the consumer.

The researcher also used the electronic databases and online journals available on the library's system. In order to narrow the range of journals to be investigated, the keywords "television media and politics," "political television news" and "communication and politics" were entered variously into the search query. Though the keywords were also entered into the database and journal query, the above keywords resulted in sources more specific to modern political television and its relationship with the viewer. The two main academic search engines I explored, Lexis-Nexis and InfoTrac, offered an array of data. The index of related categories provided by InfoTrac, for example, produced searchable categories that I had not previously considered. Using many of the same keywords, several stories in *The New York Times* and the research study conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press came to light. The library's *Find It* feature also pointed to a number of full-text articles that otherwise would only appear in abbreviated or abstract form. By modifying tense and form (modifying "television" to "TV" and "televised," for example) as well as utilizing a thesaurus for discovering equivalent terms (substituting "bias" for "preconception" and "attitude," for example), the most effective combination of keywords could be applied to the particular search query.

As with the book-centered research, I searched particularly for themes, theories and statistical facts that treated the interplay between the media and the consumer as dependent rather than independent; studies addressing the media and the consumer inclusively rather than exclusively most directly addressed the research question at hand. It is important to remember, however, the limited scope of this study. Library resources

were restricted to that of the university, as was access to InfoTrac and Lexis-Nexis services. The relative recency of 24-hour cable, especially when considered in the context of streaming online video, further hinders the ability to source a truly exhaustive spectrum of research. In addition, studies that overtly asserted either a liberal or conservative bias were discarded entirely or viewed with elevated scrutiny in order to prevent that bias from finding its way into this study. Utilizing the investigative strategies mentioned above to fuse past theory with modern practice, yet understanding the qualifications inherent with my research, the findings below came to life.

FINDINGS

Introduction

The American news-viewing public and the American television news industry, as Graber (2001) laments, are two diametrically opposed forces attempting to achieve their own ends. The idealistic viewer expects instant gratification that is both entertaining and informative; the news organization, on the other hand, must constantly battle to garner the highest possible ratings and maintain the bottom line (Sayre and King, 2003). As Edward R. Murrow put it in his speech to the Radio-Television News Directors Association and Foundation Convention in 1958, television news is “an incompatible combination of show business, advertising, and news” (RTNDA, 2006, p. 1). This observation, though first applied to the broadcast industry nearly a half century prior, is still applicable to the television news landscape of today – politicized news in particular. Graber (2001) frames this fundamentally oppositional relationship as a classic Catch-22:

Americans idolize intellectual news that presents sophisticated analysis but, at the same time, want it to be simple, personalized, and entertaining, though not too blatantly fluffy. They want in-depth, contextualized coverage as long as it can be crowded into snippets measured in seconds and the whole newscast does not delay them from other pursuits for more than thirty minutes. But the snippets are then condemned for being intellectually indigestible because they cram too many words and pictures into too small a package and contain too few moments of silence to allow the information to sink in. Journalists share the scholars’ ideals about the seriousness with which political news should be handled in a democracy, but they find it difficult to reconcile the demands of creating complex news presentations with the demands to produce news quickly, cheaply, and entertainingly so that it earns advertising profits for their organization. And so it goes. It is a classical Catch-22 scenario (p. 158).

To resolve this discrepancy in journalistic integrity and consumer demands, cable has embraced a noticeably different style of programming in comparison to both local and network broadcasts. In comparison to cable news networks, Vinson (2003) notes, local and network news does not generally present stories in a manner that encourages in-depth analysis or debate. Underwood (1998) explains the dearth of politicized content on local news as the result of shifting priorities: “Coverage of politics and government has virtually disappeared from the local television airwaves, crowded out by coverage of crime, sports, weather, lifestyles, and the other audience-grabbing topics...” (p. 171). As Annenberg School for Communication assistant dean Phyllis Kaniss laments, “Unfortunately, most matters of public consequence fail to pass the blood-and-tears litmus test of local television news” (Cited in Underwood, 1998, p. 173). Occasionally, a guest analyst or in-house expert may appear briefly over the course of a newscast; but for the most part, the anchor(s) stick to a fairly standard format. As Postman and Powers (1992) explain,

About the only concession news departments make to this tradition is to call upon “political experts,” usually a nervous-looking person from Georgetown University who is in the studio or his office. The anchor asks the expert if this story is important and what will happen from here. The expert answers by saying that the story is *very* important and only time will tell about the future. This charade takes about thirty seconds” (p. 46).

Because this routine has historically produced sufficient ratings, the local and network channels have been content to keep the status quo (Pew Center, 2004). Since the advent of 24-hour cable, however, “Predictable formats, epitomized by the authoritarian closing words of Walter Cronkite every evening (‘And that’s the way it is’), have given way to a

cacophony of voices and images” (Lichty and Gomery, 1992, p. 3). The audience for more politicized news has grown dramatically and, as a result, 24-hour cable has responded to in several telling ways. By examining the elements that define the genre, the resultant effect on viewers will be properly primed for analysis. The ultimate goal, as outlined in the research question, is to understand how 24-hour cable news has changed its sociopolitical relationship with news viewers.

The Rise of Politicization

On a basic level, a quick rundown of the primetime lineup for CNN, FNC and MSNBC reveals the extent to which poli-talk shows have become ingrained in cable’s Monday to Friday schedule. Instead of tucking away these debate and discussion shows in the overnight hours or the midday lull, network programming executives have chosen to place such shows in the limelight of their 24-hour rotation. *Hardball* airs twice every weeknight on MSNBC from both 5pm – 6pm and 7pm – 8pm (MSNBC, 2006); *The O’Reilly Factor* and *Hannity and Colmes* air every weeknight on Fox News from 8pm – 9pm and 9pm – 10 pm (respectively) (Fox News, 2006); *Larry King Live* airs each night from 9pm – 10pm on CNN (CNN, 2006). Before CNN’s archetypal debate show, *Crossfire*, was cancelled in 2005, it aired every weeknight starting at 4:30pm (CNN, 2005). These are profit-generating slots that are intended to attract as many eyeballs as possible. Even news/commentary hybrid shows like *Countdown with Keith Olbermann* on MSNBC, *Your World with Neil Cavuto* and *The Big Story with John Gibson* on FNC, and *The Situation Room* on CNN are at the very cusp of primetime cable slots.

According to Greenblatt (2004), “The goal is conflict, the goal is to create drama by getting people to yell at each other” (p. 858). The mere titles of *Crossfire* and *Hardball*, for example, are extremely symbolic in nature; their connotative meanings provide the unfamiliar viewer with an upfront admittance that the show revolves around *exchanging fire* and playing by *tough* rules. Even the graphics and promos for the programs are infused with words and symbols of conflict. The *Crossfire* logo, for example, featured a font reminiscent of a military computer screen and a crosshair over the letter “o.” *Hardball*’s introduction begins with bold graphics quickly cutting across the screen in perfect consonance with three loud staccato zinging sounds. An *O’Reilly Factor* promo on April 12, 2005, moreover, described the upcoming episode on US – Mexico border patrolling as “explosive” (Fox News, 2005). As Postman and Powers (1992) note, “It is no accident that in the television news industry, the short blurb aimed at getting you to watch a program is called a ‘tease.’ Its purpose is to grab your attention and keep you watching... to stop you from using the remote-control button to switch channels” (p. 28). The emphasis, it seems, is on building anticipation and energizing stories that could normally be presented by one anchor simply reading the pertinent facts. Tucker Carlson’s new show on MSNBC, *The Situation*, is self-purportedly “so fast, it’s changing the pace of news” (MSNBC, 2006). Postman and Powers (1992) explain the pacing and rhythm of such shows as highly intentional: “The whole news program takes on a rhythm and pace designed to hold interest and build viewership. More viewers, higher ratings, more advertising dollars, more profit, more similar programs to try to attract more viewers... ad infinitum” (p. 5). To capitalize on this fast-paced, attention-

getting and profitable news format, media executives have created an environment in which the competitive nature of opinionated intellectuals can thrive. The concept is simple: put a conservative and a liberal in the same room, give them a topic to debate and hit the record button (remember Buckley and Vidal?).

This is a successful theme for the media, Greenblatt continues; the conflict theme plays better than the consensus theme (2004). Recent findings by the Pew Center (2004) corroborate this claim, noting that “a solid majority (55%) likes debates between people with different points of view, and 46% like in-depth interviews with leaders and policymakers (p. 32). In other words, cable news has capitalized on viewer preferences where local and network news has remained stagnant. By embracing conflict and playing off the popularity of the non-standard regurgitation of news, cable news has been able to get its foot in the door of a large number of households. As Greenblatt (2004) states, “It’s a very lonely business to present the facts, because what sells is opinion-mongering... People are hungry for someone to contextualize the news. They go to opinion-makers because it saves time” (p. 858). Modern media outlets are willing and able to embrace this opinion-mongering, at times even to the point of exploiting partisan allegiances: “Some contemporary media outlets,” Greenblatt asserts, go so far as to “specifically target partisan markets, often deliberately cranking up the political rancor” in the process (2004, p. 375). Mongeau et al (2001) concurs, but further concludes that such partisan-specific media outlets are merely “singing to choir” in an effort to earn the ratings necessary for their organization’s profitability. Graber (2001) explains the logic conversely: “If journalists supply information that is unwanted and largely ignored, while

covering areas of strong demand sparingly, what is accomplished? It amounts to preaching to an empty church” (p. 168).

For years, partisans on both sides of the political spectrum have denounced this media politicking, alternately citing a perceived liberal or conservative bias in various mediums. An investigative inquiry of television news bias is an admittedly enticing subject, yet it is a topic that steadfastly remains beyond the intended scope of this paper (if for no other reason than the author’s own political biases could potentially interject more readily into an objective attempt at such a content analysis). Vinson (2003), however, defines the present issue thusly:

Although there may never be agreement or conclusive evidence that the political preferences of reporters, editors, or publishers and owners create a consistent political bias in political coverage, there is a clear trend (bias?) across all news media from CNN (derisively labeled the Clinton News Network by conservatives for its alleged liberal leanings) to Fox News (“fair and balanced,” but in a conservative sort of way?). All of them exalt controversy (pp. 150-151).

Patterson (1997) cites a move toward more interpretive as opposed to descriptive news writing as the reason for this exaltation of controversy: “Facts and interpretation are freely intermixed in news reporting. Interpretation provides the theme, and the facts illuminate it. The theme is primary; the facts illustrative. As a result, events are compressed and joined together within a common theme” (Cited in Kuypers, 2002, p. 205). To a certain degree, 24-hour cable is re-defining the very definition of news. Traditionally, mainstream news was presented in the familiar who, what, when, where, why, how format. With the rise of news analysis and commentary on 24-hour cable, however, this unsophisticated framework has become inadequate and outmoded; from the cable executives’ standpoint, news in its purest form is simply not marketable.

Discussion, analysis, debate, controversy, drama... this is the stuff of profit-generating programming. Thus, says Goodman (1998), “do the imperatives of show business impinge on the discipline of journalism” (p. 1).

The Rise of the Punditocracy

The rise of politicization is not defined exclusively by the extreme shout-shows like *Crossfire* or *Hardball*. To the contrary, as Vinson (2003) notes, there is also a softer side to the theme of conflict: “In addition to seeking out conflict, the media have added more interpretation to their reporting and programming” (p. 151). Cable channels in particular have upped the number of experts, pundits, analysts and media-friendly members of Congress that appear on news shows, and usually conform to equal-time guidelines for partisans of both sides of the spectrum in an attempt to appear balanced (Vinson, 2003). Collectively, this so-called “punditocracy,” as Alterman (1999) coins it, has added to the overall politicization of cable news. According to Barkin (2003), this rise in politicization and the creation of the punditocracy has questionable ramifications:

Two disturbing trends were put in place in the news-talk programs of the late 1970s and early 1980s. First, opinion was presented so often and with such certainty that it easily could be confused with fact. Opinions were directly presented as facts – or the two were so intertwined in their delivery as to be inseparable. Second, not all of the participants were actually journalists... Television had created a news class of journalists, or semi-journalists, called the punditocracy (pp. 76-77).

Alterman (1999) broadly defines this new class of semi-journalists as “the people anointed by the media to give their opinions on things” (p. 5). Applied to Lazarsfeld’s two-step flow theory, the punditocracy basically fulfills the role of society’s opinion

leaders. It is these talking heads, in part, that also serve as gatekeepers, framers and agenda-setters. As Alterman (1999) continues, “The punditocracy is a tiny group of highly visible political pontificators who make their living offering ‘inside political opinions and forecasts’ in the elite national media” (p. 4).

From its early development on the news-talk programs of the late 1970s and early 1980s, the punditocracy has since infiltrated the genre of 24-hour cable: “In the 1990s, the advent of three all-news cable stations (CNN, FNC, and MSNBC), coupled with the growth of the Internet, vastly inflated the outer reaches of the punditocracy by opening up dozens, if not hundreds, of new slots in news programming” (Alterman, 1999, p. 7). The wealth of new programming slots has thus opened up the number of slots available for various opinions and opinion leaders to espouse them. Especially considering the context of 24-hour cable, a particular network can frame and interpret each issue from an endless number of perspectives depending on the pundits who are invited to give their opinion. The same story covered by both CNN and FNC, for example, may appear quite different on either channel. By selectively choosing the pundits that are granted admission to its televised forum and granting them freedom to express their opinions (gate-keeping), the particular news network thus presents a politicized message (framing) that may influence at least the level of significance viewers grant to certain issues (agenda setting). The end effect of cable’s reliance on the punditocracy, as Greenblatt (2004) terms it, is a general “balkanization of the nation’s news media” (p. 856).

This balkanization, says *Atlantic Monthly* Washington Editor James Fallows, has a detrimental effect on journalistic integrity; the punditocracy, he argues, thrives on

“highlighting personality rather than product, giving opinions rather than reporting, [and] providing thumbs up and down predictions rather than thoughtful analysis” (Cited in Shepard, 1995, p. 5). Compton (2004) concurs with Fallows’ critical appraisal, yet adds the perspective of cable’s executives to balance his argument: “The ability to rant or pontificate in order to fill airtime is favored over reasoned judgments that include shades of gray. Well-researched news stories and documentaries cost money and tie up enormous resources. Whereas, instant faux-analysis is inexpensive, quick and easy to produce, entertaining and, above all, profitable” (p. 78). Once again, the need to maintain the bottom line is cited as a powerful determinant in the decision-making process. Instead of expending valuable time, effort and money on an investigative story, inviting supposed experts to wrestle with an issue on-air yields the most efficient results. As Goodman (1998) believes, the qualifications necessary to become a member of the punditocracy tend to favor a powerful on-air presence over true expertise:

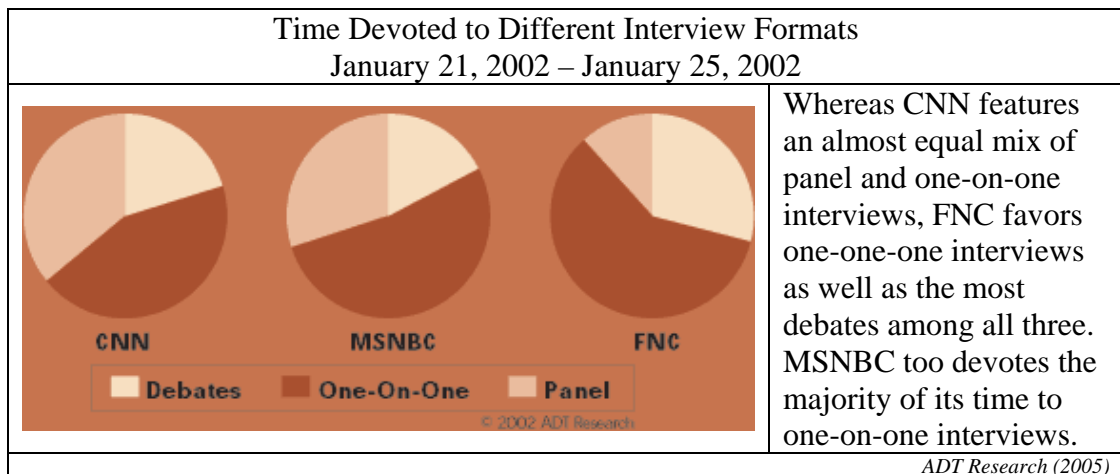
When communication is reduced to noise and populism runs rampant, not only is everyone entitled to be heard, but courtesy requires that all opinions be treated as of like worth. Expertise becomes window dressing; the experts, too, after all, are competing for who will be called back; stutterers need not apply. Credentials, education, knowledge become a form of discrimination (p. 2).

A strong conviction, forceful delivery and convincing character are prized assets to the cable channel wishing to attract the most loyal viewers (Compton, 2004). As Media Research Center executive Brent Baker reveals, “If you are boring and dull and give out facts, you won’t be invited back” (Cited in Shepard, 1995, p. 4). The facts can be briefly summarized by an anchor or host; the pundits are responsible for injecting the opinions. Why this constant chatter? Why the unending discussion and debate? As Goodman

(1998) explains, “It’s in the nature of a medium that never stops running; any sound is preferable to the sound of silence” (p. 2).

CNN, FNC and MSNBC Compared

CNN, FNC and MSNBC have each developed into unique messengers that are distinguished from one another in style, content and appearance. In this way, the sociopolitical relationship between one channel and its viewers may differ slightly from that of another channel and its viewers. Thus, understanding what qualities separate one network from the others will add a valuable dimension to the sociopolitical relationship between 24-hour cable and their viewers as a collective whole.



Television news analyst Andrew Tyndall addresses why someone would create a 24-hour news channel to begin with:

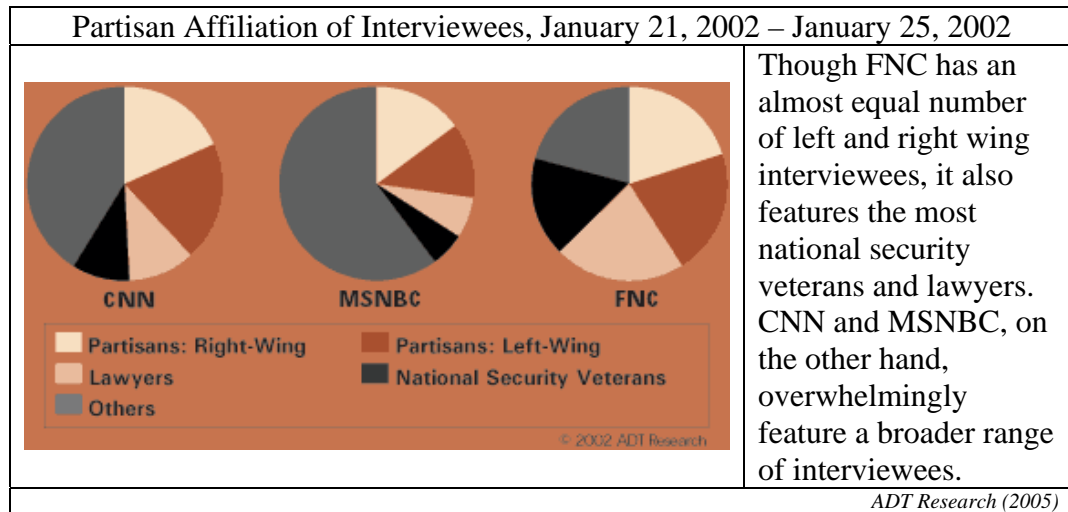
There are two reasons why you would have a 24-hour cable news channel in the first place, why you’d invent such a thing. One of them is to cater to people who are hungry for opinionated political debate. The second is to provide a resource so

that people who want in-depth coverage of a major crisis when it happens will not just check in for a half-hour newscast, but they will get in-depth coverage. Fox News clearly provides the former. CNN clearly provides the latter (Cited in Smith, 2002, p. 4).

Based on his own conclusions and the research conducted by his organization, ADT research, Tyndall has uncovered several ways in which CNN, FNC and MSNBC differ. As he notes above, FNC tends to spotlight opinionated political debate while CNN tends to favor a reporter-based headline news structure. As Tyndall elaborates, “CNN is the reporters’ network; Fox News Channel is the opinion makers’ network; MSNBC is the confused network” (Cited in Smith, 2002, p. 3). Compared to CNN and FNC, MSNBC does not have a clear sense of itself; its programming is comprised of an odd combination of quasi-discussion programming that attempts to mimic both CNN and FNC at the same time (Smith, 2002). The other notable difference that sets MSNBC apart is its lack of a traditional nightly newscast; none has existed since Brian Williams left to replace Tom Brokaw on NBC (MSNBC, 2006). CNN and FNC, on the other hand, both spotlight an hour-long anchored broadcast at 6 pm every weeknight – *Lou Dobbs Tonight* and *Special Report* with Brit Hume, respectively (ADT Research, 2005).

FNC sets itself apart from the competition in a number of respects, but the most obvious difference lies in the viewer’s audio/visual experience. As Sella (2001) describes, “The splash-fabulous glitter of Fox News is a far cry from the days when TV news was represented by a black-and-white icon of an eye. The channel is brisk, brightly colored; shiny textures continually float around in the background. Nothing is static, nothing is haughty” (p. 8). Throughout nearly the entirety of its broadcast schedule, for

example, a waving American flag fades in and out with the Fox News logo in the corner of the television screen. Though all three 24-hour cable channels contain more active graphics and dramatic sound when compared to the Big Three, FNC has its dial turned slightly further toward the extreme (ADT, 2005). What's more, Tyndall explains, FNC goes to greater lengths than any other cable channel to elicit opinions and encourage different points of view: "All through Fox's primetime programming, you can see deliberate, strategic decisions that have been made... which emphasize having an opinion, examining the ideology, knowing what the points of view are about news stories, rather than merely reporting the facts" (Cited in Smith, 2002, p. 5). These decisions are consistent throughout FNC's primetime lineup. But it's FNC's interview style in particular, reports ADT Research (2005), that is responsible for the politicization: "FNC's format decisions make its interviewing strategy a megaphone for underlying differences in its political worldview compared with that of CNN. These decisions include choices in format, guests, expertise, topic and in-house analysts" (p. 7). The questions asked of guests, who already tend to have a strong ideological background, are phrased in such a way as to heighten the controversy surrounding a hot topic. By the same token, Card (2004) argues, "Fox makes it clear that they're on America's side, that what happens to Americans abroad is happening to 'us' – in short, they feel our pain because they are part of us" (p. 2). While a pro-American viewpoint may or may not be the common thread that runs through the entire Fox network, hosts and commentators offer a more personalized delivery of news stories compared to CNN and MSNBC (Card, 2004).



Though FNC has only been in existence for ten years, it has rapidly risen to the top of most ratings categories. In 2002, FNC ousted the traditional ratings king CNN and hasn't since rescinded its lead (Greppi, 2006). In total day viewership for 2005, according to Nielsen Media Research, FNC “generally commanded around 55% of cable news audiences during the year... CNN is second in total-day viewership, with roughly 30%; MSNBC captures the remaining 15 percent” (Cited in Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2005, p. 18). FNC also has a significant lead over CNN and MSNBC in average total viewership, as Nielsen finds: “Fox in 2005 out-muscled all its cable news competitors combined in prime time and ranked No. 1 for the fourth consecutive year. Fox’s average total viewership for 2005 was 1.77 million – more than double CNN’s 853,000 viewers. MSNBC averaged 363,000 total viewers” (Greppi, 2006, p. 1). Attributing this dominance to an increase in market share early in FNC’s existence, Sella (2001) describes the seesaw effect FNC has had on the cable market:

In the prized demographic of adults between the ages of 25 and 54 who watch cable news (according to Nielsen Media Research), FNC’s viewership has

increased by a full 430 percent in the past three years, while CNN's has declined by 28 percent. In its fifth year of existence, remarkably, Fox News is in profit, and is currently worth an estimated \$3 billion. It has three of the top five cable-news programs in prime time – and has been No. 1 in that time block for nearly seven months. And in the 65 million households where Fox News and CNN compete in prime time alone, head to head, Fox is winning by nearly 30 percent (p. 3).

Though FNC may be garnering impressive numbers, should this success be attributed exclusively to its primetime debate programming or do viewers tune into FNC for other coverage as well? Two events in particular suggest that the latter, at least in these instances, is more accurate. On the day of one of America's worst natural disasters, Hurricane Katrina, viewers overwhelmingly turned to FNC for live coverage of the storm as it reached America's border. On August 29, 2005, the day the hurricane hit Southeastern Louisiana, FNC generated some very telling ratings: "FNC continued its domination in primetime with a whopping 4,073,000 viewers, again beating CNN's 2,279,000 viewers and MSNBC's 1,021,000 viewers combined, making the night FNC's second highest rated primetime of 2005. FNC again was up the most among the news networks, with a jump of 376% over the same day last year" (Entertainment Editors, 2005, p. 1). Viewers were not tuning into politicized shows like *Hannity and Colmes* or *The O'Reilly Factor*, but simply seeking the latest information and reporter updates from the Gulf Coast. During the 2002 State of the Union, which was broadcast on multiple network and cable channels, FNC again attracted more viewers than CNN and MSNBC combined (Smith, 2002). Viewers would view the same speech from President Bush, regardless of the channel they chose, but viewers chose FNC.

Perhaps what is most surprising given these statistics is the fact that, as of 2002, CNN was available in nine million more cable households than FNC (Smith, 2002). To remedy this imbalance, CNN has recently shaken-up its traditional lineup in an effort to re-define its role as a mass media outlet in the twenty-first century. As the Project for Excellence in Journalism (2005) notes, “The new leadership at CNN has gone on record as saying that it wants to get out of the shout-show business in favor of storytelling. At the close of 2004, it cancelled the iconic program that helped define the shout genre, *Crossfire...*” (p. 1). Less than a year later, *The Capital Gang* met a similar fate. To help accomplish this shift in style, CNN now spotlights *The Situation Room* with Wolf Blitzer, a glitzy hour-long program that is unmistakably reporter-oriented. Furthermore, as ADT Research (2005) finds, CNN also features noticeably fewer partisan guests when compared to FNC: “Interestingly, none of the three networks invited noticeably more left-wing or right-wing partisan guests. FNC, however, included the fewest non-partisans: almost everybody invited as a guest had an ideological axe to grind” (p. 7). FNC may be the leader in dividing the issues on partisan lines, but all cable networks are equally guilty of presenting only one side of a controversial issue. As the Project for Excellence in Journalism (2005) notes,

Over all, only a quarter of cable stories that involved controversy contained anything more than a passing reference to a second point of view... More than three-quarters of interviews and reporter stand-ups (78%) told only one side, or mostly one side, of controversial stories. That meant only 22% of live reported stories offered a balance of at least two viewpoints (p. 7).

This is a startling statistic, especially considering the politicized nature of cable news; it raises the question of whether, despite cable’s vast resources and literally unlimited

broadcasting time, certain sources and perspectives are favored over others. Though CNN may appear to be equally as guilty of this unbalanced news delivery when compared to FNC and MSNBC, it “is the least transparent about its sources of the three cable channels” (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2005, p. 3). This is not to say that it is attempting to cloud ulterior motives, but rather that the true balance or imbalance of its sources is somewhat more difficult to derive. Even so, CNN’s comparatively tame format and non-hyped style suggest that the channel is beginning to head in what it has concluded is the right direction.

Yet if CNN wants to re-assert itself as cable’s ratings king, it still has several hurdles to overcome: “The gap between CNN’s ability to attract an audience and its inability to keep viewers around for the long haul is the main challenge facing the network. But it is also a sign that the cable audience is not monolithic (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2005, p. 20). CNN must thus not only draw viewers away from FNC, it must give them a reason to stick around. MSNBC does not currently hold enough of the market to even register on CNN’s and FNC’s radar; as far as the latter two are concerned, the cable news race is a one-on-one battle (Smith, 2002). Unless MSNBC continues to expand on the success of its free online video, it may be in danger of falling off the radar altogether. To summarize Tyndall’s observation at the beginning of this section, the ADT Research (2005) report describes the current state of the cable news landscape as follows:

Cable news networks appeal to two distinct audiences: highly ideological so-called news junkies whose daily entertainment derives from the overheated debates of the political class; and a less-committed group who rely on experienced newsgathering when a global crisis hits the headlines. CNN’s operation is

designed as a resource for the latter; FNC's for the former. The course of world events will determine which network is better suited for the times (p. 9).

Sociopolitical Effects on Viewers

A. Audience and Content Fragmentation

As a result of the 24-hour cable phenomenon, the news audience as a whole has broken into unique sub-audiences with specific interests and attitudes. These segmented audiences, says Compton (2004), developed in line with the rise of new media technologies: "The growth of cable and direct-broadcast satellite technology in the 1980s contributed to a growing fragmentation of audiences" (p. 73). As CNN and other direct-broadcast satellite channels expanded the reach and number of mass media outlets, so too did the ability of broadcasters to target a specific audience. This increased availability and diversification of media, the Pew Center (2002) finds, is well-suited for the times: "With a wider range of news sources to choose from, and increasingly busy schedules, many Americans no longer set aside a regular part of their day for news consumption" (p. 13). Because of the 24-hour format, viewers are thus endowed with the ability to choose not only what they view, but when they view it as well.

As a result, the Pew Center (2002) contends, the cable audience can be divided into occasional news users and habitual news users: "The 24-hour availability of news on cable and the Internet has enabled many Americans to set their own schedules for getting the news. About half (48%) describe themselves as news grazers – people who check in on news from time to time over the course of the day. Roughly the same proportion (49%) get the news more habitually" (p. 4). Though the Project for Excellence in

Journalism (2005) uses different terminology, the concept of audience fragmentation is the same: “The data suggest that it is worth looking at cable news in terms of two separate audiences: the day-to-day core audience and the occasional ‘news on demand’ audience” (p. 20). This audience fragmentation is in fact only one way in which 24-hour cable news has re-defined the term *mass-media*.

Though television news is inherently designed as a *mass-medium*, is this definition accurate given the specificity of 24-hour cable? Given its highly politicized nature and fragmented target audience, cable must break its content down into individual segments from which consumers can pick and choose. Graber (2001) parallels this story fragmentation to narrowcasting, which she attributes to the emergence of 24-hour cable. In effect, cable outlets serve specific rather than general needs. Cable, says Graber (2001), has embraced the idea of “allowing consumers of political news to guide the choice of information presented to them for immediate attention” (p. 168). Instead of condensing the news into one or two evening broadcasts, 24-hour cable makes individual stories available throughout the day. In other words, stories are not covered in one continuous time block, but are dispersed across the 24-hour broadcast schedule as details and updates become available. Furthermore, individual stories are packaged and uploaded online such that viewers can browse for a story of interest, click to view streaming video, and then end the transmission at their leisure.

B. Internet-Induced Fragmentation

Fragmentation is especially evident given the increase in news consumers who are turning to the internet as their primary source of current events (Pew Center, 2002). The number of users accessing MSNBC.com's searchable videos, for example, has more than doubled over the last year and a half (PR Newswire, 2005). As 24-hour cable continues to position itself as the leading online news provider, such fragmentation will become even more apparent. To explain this phenomenon, Tyndall (2005) makes a well-suited analogy to the popularity of iTunes-like music downloading technology:

Digital technology has changed the unit of content from the CD (a collection of tracks) to the track itself. Similarly, a newscast is a collection of taped packages and the role of the anchor is to string them together. When we get our television news online, assignment desks and producers and correspondents and editors will still do the work of choosing stories and covering them. Stringing them together – we can do that for ourselves (p. 2).

What's more, Graber (2001) adds, "The Internet has further extended the possibilities for niche programming. It allows people to select, at times and places of their choosing, from a seemingly endless array of multiple types of political information available worldwide" (p. 165). The consumer is thus in complete control. While the news provider still retains the ultimate authority to decide what it reports, this authority is slowly withering away as consumers continue to assert their (specific) demands. Part of this demand is for politically-charged news analysis and debate. As cable in particular has yielded to consumer demand, the news provider as an institution is shifting from its role as gatekeeper to that of authenticator or referee (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2005).

Historically, the Big Three determined what stories would be covered and when they would be broadcast (usually in an anchored evening broadcast). With 24-hours of available broadcast time and the ability to upload individual stories online almost instantaneously, however, news outlets like CNN, FNC and MSNBC are able to provide reports on a broad range of current events at any point throughout the day or night. It is thus up to the viewer to determine which stories are personally salient and when it is most convenient to seek out information about them. As the Project for Excellence in Journalism (2005) explains,

Today, technology is transforming citizens from passive consumers of news produced by professionals into active participants who can assemble their own journalism from disparate elements. As people 'Google' for information, graze across an infinite array of outlets, read blogs or write them, they are becoming their own editors, researchers, and even correspondents (p. 1).

Depending on a particular viewer's specific interests, he or she can effectively create his or her own newscast. Why bother with stories of little personal interest? With 24-hour cable's online availability, viewers can get what they want when they want it. This is especially true of the young Generation-X, says Graber (2001):

GenXers like to participate in shaping their information menu. Half of them enjoy assembling their own television programs, picking and choosing among stories. They also demand interactivity... But, above all, GenXers are niche viewers. They want to limit their news consumption, including news about politics, to the information that interest them most. They resist being told what information they ought to consume. That means that they skip stories they do not like and are eager to get more information about preferred stories at the punch of a button or the click of a computer mouse (pp. 162-163).

As the horizons of the digital revolution continue to expand, so too does the potential for further fragmentation.

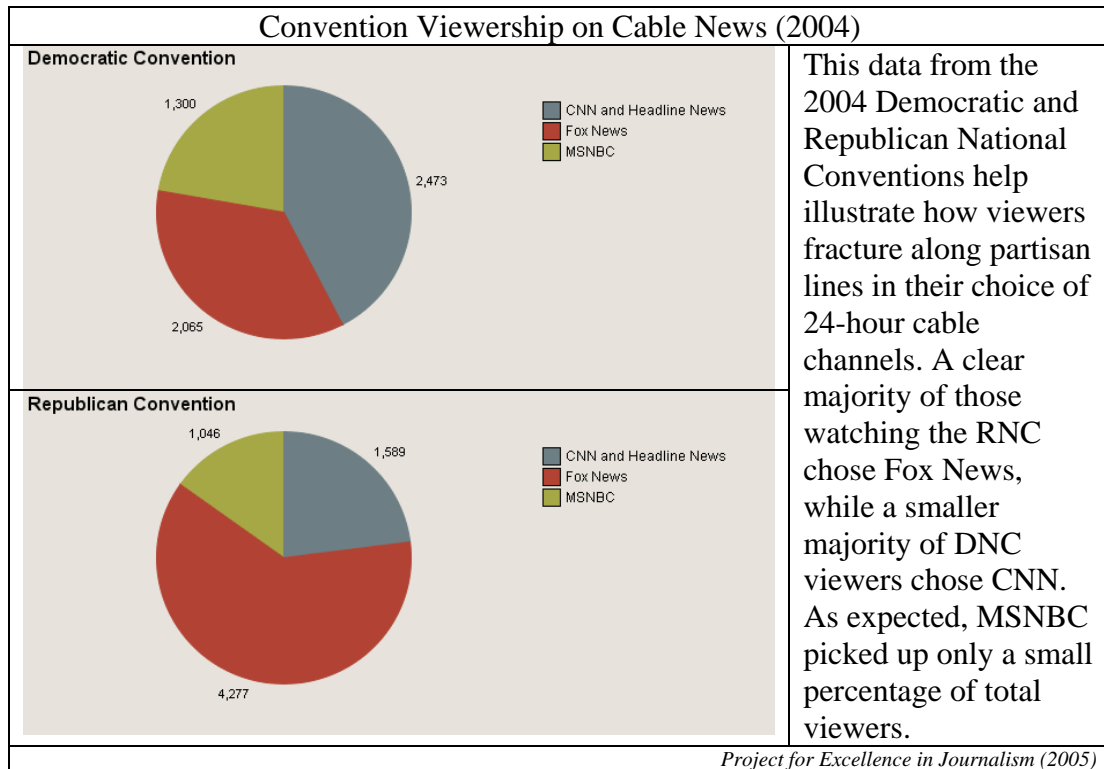
C. Partisan Fragmentation

In terms of popularity and ratings, CNN and FNC lead the pack and set the pace of modern round-the-clock news (Pew Center, 2004). With a mix of both standard news programming and debate-style segments, both powerhouses have collectively captured the bulk of the non-local and network television news audience. MSNBC, on the other hand, has a comparatively negligible effect on setting the cable agenda because, as Tyndall (2005) suggests, the network simply doesn't have a clear vision of its purpose or character. Its ambiguous programming simply has not attracted the level of deference both CNN and FNC enjoy. Especially when examining the partisan fragmentation of cable's audience, MSNBC does not accumulate enough conclusive data to warrant comparison to the other two channels.

As Greenblatt (2004) argues, the 24-hour cable audience is increasingly partisan and growing more ideologically distinct because of the very news channels it watches: "The audience is fracturing on partisan lines, and a big contributor to that are 24-hour cable-news networks" (p. 858). Framing this partisan fracturing in terms of political party affiliation, the Pew Center (2004) has uncovered several interesting trends:

Political polarization is increasingly reflected in the public's news viewing habits. Since 2000, the Fox News Channel's gains have been greatest among political conservatives and Republicans. More than half of regular Fox viewers describe themselves as politically conservative (52%), up from 40% four years ago. At the same time, CNN, Fox's principal rival, has a more Democrat-leaning audience than in the past (p. 1).

Given the framework of the uses and gratifications model (which holds that viewers exhibit less resistance to and more awareness of politicized messages), such findings reveal a very distinct cognitive response to the two cable giants.



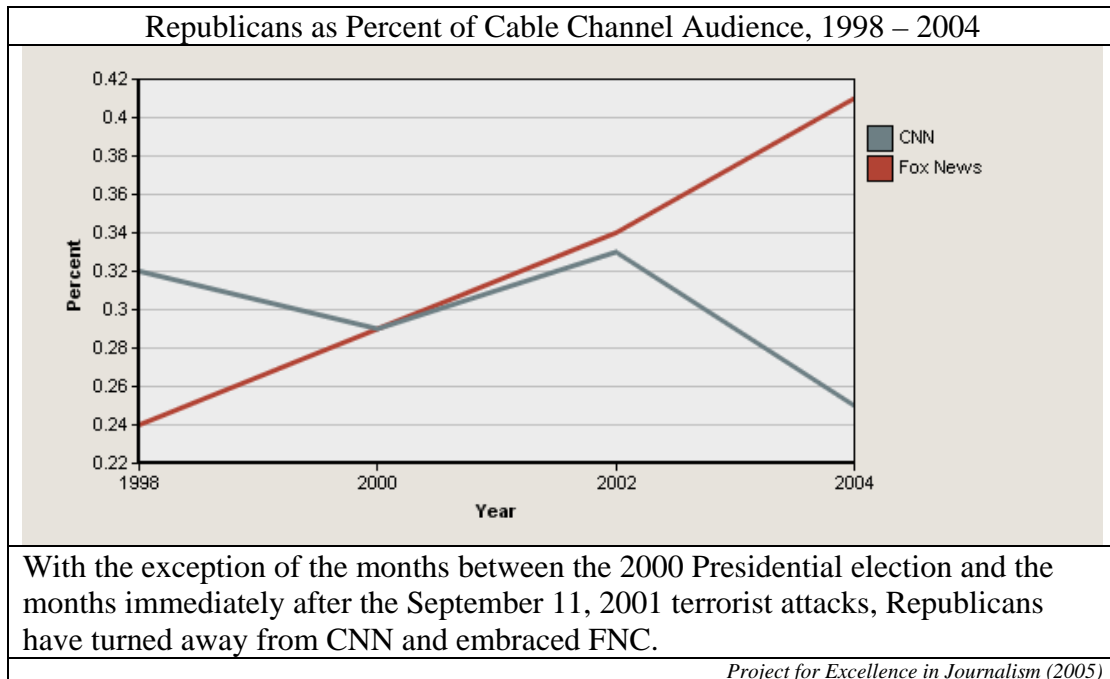
The following conclusion by the Pew Center (2004) seems particularly accurate in light of these trends: “In an era of deep-seated political divisions, conservatives and liberals are increasingly choosing sides in their TV news preferences (p. 13). The discussion of perceived bias and general distrust noted earlier by Greenblatt (2004) and Dautrich and Hartley (1999) also seem at least partially in stride with further Pew Center (2004) findings: “Fox [News] ranks as the most trusted news source among Republicans but is among the least trusted by Democrats” (p. 2); conversely, only one third of

Republicans say they believe all or most of what is said on CNN (Pew Center, 2004). Such parallel viewership/credibility tendencies suggest a correlation between personal political values, the amount of trust placed in a specific cable network, and the resultant decision as to which cable network to watch. In other words, it seems partisan viewers are more likely to both trust and watch cable programming if it features viewpoints that agree with their own.

D. Selective Attention, Retention and the Journalism of Affirmation

In this regard, it appears that the audience's cognitive relationship with cable news programs has an effect on viewing choices. As Klapper (1960) suggested almost fifty years prior, this cognition can be broken down into selective exposure, perception and retention; this theory still applies today. Applied specifically to 24-hour cable news, however, Klapper's theory can be taken one-step further. While Perloff (1998) reminds us that viewers faced with messages inconsistent with their beliefs cognitively distort the information so that it is congruent with their original beliefs, it appears that cable news viewers today tend to avoid inconsistent views altogether by watching particular channels. This is not to say, however, that all television news viewers are picking and choosing their news programs based on consonance with their own beliefs; the Pew Center (2004) is careful to note that "most Americans (58%) do not care if the news reflects their own viewpoint on politics and issues" (p. 35). These statistics are not so much a qualification of the findings within this study as much as a reminder of local news' continued dominance in the non-politicized news media market; most local news

outfits do not offer nearly as much political analysis as 24-hour cable. As alluded to earlier, however, this study is not as concerned with the percentage of American television viewers who watch the less politicized local news; rather, it is the rapid increase in the number of partisan viewers who tune into the more politicized cable news that give rise to the research question at hand. Despite the sparse 32 minutes that the average American spends watching televised news per day, strong partisans tend to use more news, and mainstream cable television news at that (Dautrich and Hartley, 1999; Perloff, 1998). Furthermore, as The Pew Center (2004) concludes, “The minority of Americans that like the news to reflect their own views (36%) are highly selective in their choices of news outlets” (p. 35).



The views and beliefs driving this high level of selectivity are, at their core, inherently political. Bennett (2001) explains the various allegiances motivating selective viewing in terms of group membership or identity: “People occasionally enter the game as voters or as members of organized interests, searching the news for information that helps them decide what to do politically” (p. 19). Bennett (2001) also speaks to the growing partisanship of the American public; as partisan voters and members of organized interests, viewers look to the news media to resolve internal political disputes or affirm preexisting political beliefs. Furthermore, as Dautrich and Hartley (1999) conclude, “It seems that voters who are more partisan use a wider variety of news sources more frequently than voters who have a weak or nonexistent political party identification” (p. 50). Thus, it is the strong partisan who is the most attentive and attuned to the various available mediums through which political messages can be received. But are viewers’ minds already made up before entering the media arena? At least in terms of cable news viewers, the answer appears to be yes.

The following example of this viewer predisposition demonstrates how party affiliation can skew perception and reaction to certain political messages: “One recent study found that negative news about Republican President George Bush’s 1992 campaign intensified Democrats’ opposition to Bush. However, it had the opposite impact on Republican voters, causing them to evaluate Bush more positively” (Perloff, 1998, p. 338). In this instance, Democrats and Republicans had completely opposite reactions to the exact same news; Democrats used the information to bolster their opposition to Bush, while Republicans rejected the information and instead twisted it to

conform to their already manifest support of Bush. The work of Ansolabehere et al (1993) corroborates this theory: “When a pro-liberal message reaches a liberal audience, more-aware liberals – because they are more apt to get the message – will show more persuasion. When the same liberal message reaches a conservative audience, however, the more-aware conservatives – recognizing the message as liberal – will reject it and remain unpersuaded” (p. 151).

Greenblatt (2004) explains the motivating premise as follows: “Millions of Americans are seeking a journalism of affirmation – news presentations that explain or contextualize events in a way that accords with their political outlook” (p. 857). This journalism of affirmation, according to the Pew Center (2004), is particularly desirable for those who pay close attention to hard news; such dedicated news viewers, their study explains, express a preference for news that suits their point of view. News consumers are highly distrustful of cable news in general (as the next section will show), but news channels that do not reflect a viewer’s preconceptions are trusted even less. As a result, the viewer resorts to finding the closest mirror image of his or her own political beliefs. This logic is supported by the increasingly polarized viewing public described earlier; the stronger the preexisting belief-system, the weaker the possibility that news shows will be used for purely objective purposes. Instead of using the news media for informational purposes, the politicized public has the ability to use politicized news to reinforce opinions or refute alternative viewpoints. Politicized news thus becomes a weapon for argumentation rather than a tool for understanding.

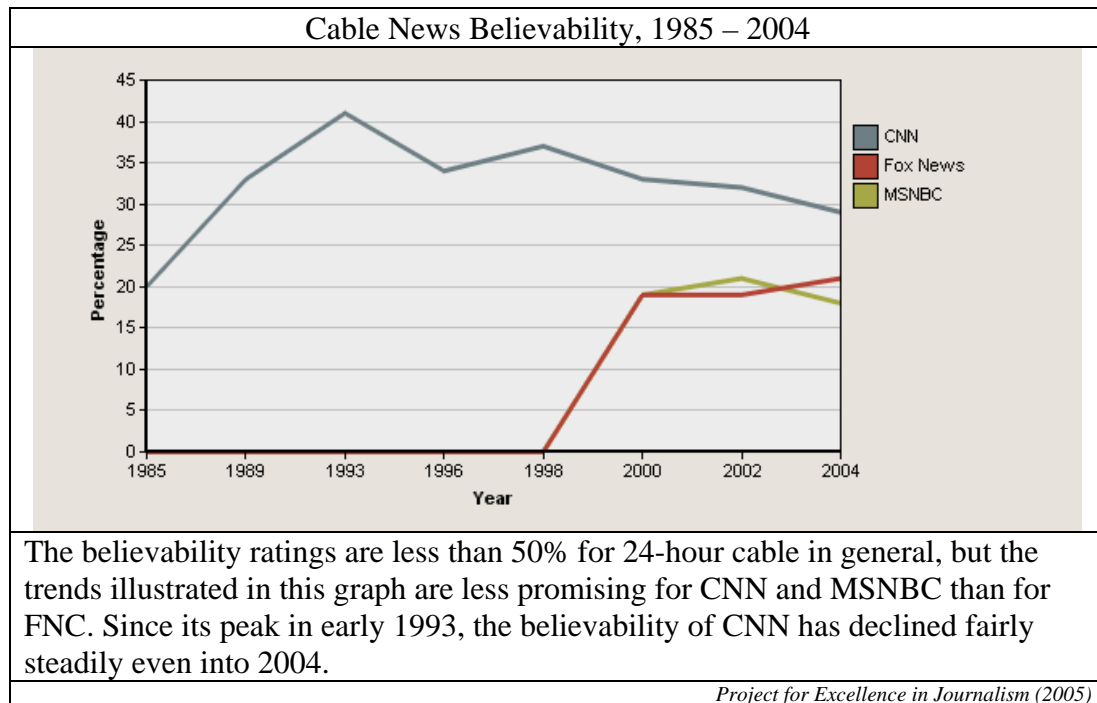
Though the effect of politicized news on partisan viewers who are merely seeking a journalism of affirmation may at first seem trivial or inconsequential, Perloff (1998) warns that “reinforcement of partisan attitudes – which limited effects scholars viewed as a trivial influence – can be important if it leads to greater consistence of people’s thoughts and feelings... which can crystallize political beliefs” (p. 338). The desire for a resonant perspective, even though that perspective may already be firmly established within the conscience of the viewer, thus should not be overlooked.

E. Distrust in the Media

Greenblatt (2004) attributes the desire for belief-congruent media to a general distrust in the objectivity of media outlets: “Many Americans today – convinced that news outlets are biased – are seeking out networks and publications that gibe with their own political views” (p. 856).

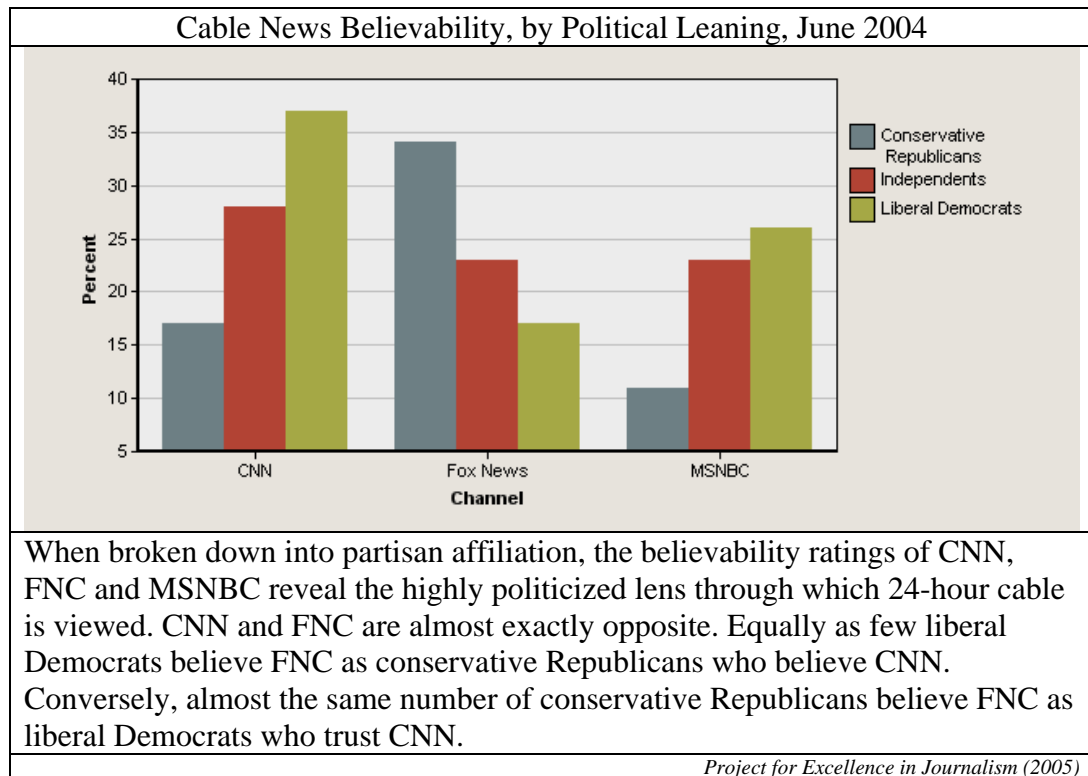
As studies of the 1996 Presidential election conducted by Dautrich and Hartley (1999) explain, this perception of bias transcends party lines: “Three-fourths of partisan Republicans and seven in ten politically conservative voters disagreed that the news media generally provided unbiased accounts of the 1996 presidential campaign. Fewer, though still clear majorities, of Democrats, independents, moderates, and liberals sensed a general bias to coverage” (p. 102-103). Though the work of Dautrich and Hartley reflect a media environment now ten years prior, the Pew Center’s (2004) findings of a mere two years ago demonstrate that the perception of bias and general distrust is still

alive and well: “More than half (53%) agree with the statement ‘I often don’t trust what news organizations are saying’” (p. 4).



It is important, however, to avoid concluding from these statistics that news organizations are therefore biased. As Dautrich and Hartley (1999) explain, it is not the actual bias of the news media that is worthy of discussion; rather, it is the *perception* of supposed bias by the viewer that is most telling of media effects. The Pew Center (2004) agrees, blaming the increased perception of bias not on the media, but on consumer-driven ratings instead: “The falloff in credibility for these news sources is linked to a growing partisan tilt in the ratings” (p. 42). This partisan tilt, as Ansolabehere et al (1993) explain, can be attributed to a psychological pre-conditioned wariness of that which flies in the face of one’s own beliefs, political or otherwise:

The fact that the news media has been cast as simultaneously conservative and liberal suggests that ideological bias may exist largely in the eye of the beholder. Psychologists have identified a ‘hostile media’ phenomenon in which people who call themselves conservatives are more likely to view the media as anti-conservative, whereas liberals view the media as pro-conservative (p. 217).



Whether or not such bias actually exists (perhaps the belief in media bias is a preconception in and of itself...?), Greenblatt (2004) asserts that the nature of modern cable news is such that viewers can “pick their own politically appropriate media” (p. 856). But are viewers choosing their favorite cable channel based exclusively on its perceived political slant?

Information of Entertainment?

Since viewers are distrustful of 24-hour cable yet tune in anyway, it is reasonable to ask whether viewers are tuning in to cable for news, entertainment, or a mixture of both. Compton (2004) suggests that we should treat news and entertainment as mutually exclusive, irreconcilable at their very core: “Entertainment is an indulgence, while information is the currency of responsible civic action and the basic building block of politics” (p. 14). While this may be the case in theory, 24-hour cable news shirks the traditional definition and blends entertainment and news as a single package.

Gail Shister, television columnist for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, says that FNC in particular thrives on injecting its news with entertaining audio and visual stimulants: “You could argue viewers are clearly looking for an alternative to straight news, which is what CNN and also MSNBC, to a lesser degree, have been offering for years – that viewers want more entertainment; they want more oomph in their news” (Cited in Smith, 2002, p. 2). This extra *oomph*, as previously-cited statistics indicate, has rewarded FNC with unparalleled ratings.

Though FNC’s news-to-entertainment ratio may be interpreted by some as slightly imbalanced, it is by no means the only 24-hour cable channel infusing its news content with entertaining elements; the politicization of the genre as a whole and the effects of the punditocracy raise the entertainment quotient for all three channels. As Goldberg (2002) reminds us, entertaining news is what ensures that the news giants maintain their bottom line: “If news could actually make money, the suits who ran the network would expect just that. Sure they would want quality, in theory. But they wanted

ratings and money, in fact” (p. 93). The fact of the matter is that entertainment sells; as a result, Compton (2004) says, “The question ‘Will it entertain?’ has replaced ‘Will it inform?’” (p. 2). This is not to say that 24-hour cable news is devoid of any quality journalism; to the contrary, it is a valuable source of constant information that millions of Americans rely on each day. Yet, as Americans, information in and of itself is simply not enough: “In the United States of Entertainment there is no greater sin than to bore the audience. A TV reporter could get it wrong from time to time. He could be snippy and snooty. But he could not be boring” (Goldberg, 2002, p. 17). If a news program does not hold the audience’s interest, ratings will go down as quick as the click of the remote.

Perhaps Murrow was on to something when he described news as an incompatible combination of oppositional forces. At the same time, cable must inform as well as entertain in order to satisfy journalistic purists and remain competitive in today’s market. Goodman (1997) offers an ironic summary that captures the essence of the ongoing infotainment debate:

And there’s the show-biz aspect. It’s manner over matter, personality over subject, image over everything. The issues are just scenery; the opinions are delivered in primary colors, no shadings. Dan Quayle told Larry King during the *Crossfire* salute that he is often congratulated by people who have seen him on the tube, only nobody remembers what he said (p. 2).

The Future of the News Landscape

Cable has clearly enjoyed a rapid ascent over the last two decades, and its impact on American society has accordingly risen in parallel. But as multiple growth indicators reveal, cable’s reach may be also be rapidly approaching its peak. As the Project for Excellence in Journalism (2005) notes, “In the last three years audience growth measured

properly has slowed almost to a stop... The growth has gone almost as far as it can” (p. 1). As with any new medium, the number of potential new audience members is finite; cable can’t be introduced into the same household multiple times. By 2009, says Sanford C. Bernstein analyst Tom Wolzien, “Cable networks will peak, collectively attracting about 57% of prime-time viewers. That’s up from 53% in 2004 and 43% in 2000” (Cited in Lieberman, 2004, p. 1). Because they can no longer tap into a sizable new audience segment and the older core audience for network news is remaining loyal to the Big Three, Liberman (2004) says that the cable networks have resorted to cannibalizing each other. The battle is decreasingly cable v. network, and increasingly cable v. cable.

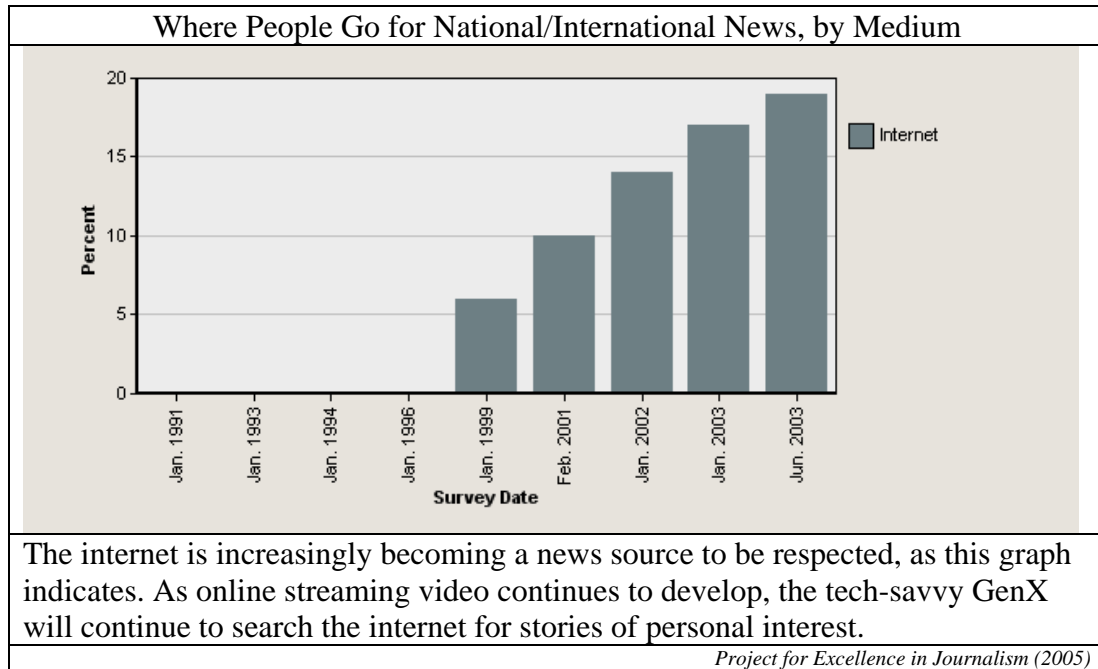
The goal for CNN, FNC and MSNBC is thus to lure viewers away from one another. Though the Project for Excellence in Journalism (2005) suggests that most of the people who have access to cable news now have it and have made their consumer choices, it also points to the fluidity of the 24-hour cable audience: “The era of trust-me journalism has passed, and the era of show-me journalism has begun” (p. 3). In other words, 24-hour cable will have to work hard to both obtain *and* retain viewers. The future of cable will be dependant on several crucial factors: “It will have to be built around establishing viewer loyalty – by building its own dedicated audience, cannibalizing from the news competition, and winning more of the ‘information’ audience that drifts to channels like Discovery, History or TLC” (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2005, p. 25). This viewer loyalty, stresses Goodman (2006), is not merely defined along partisan lines: “For a long time there has been this perception that Republicans watch Fox News, Democrats watch CNN, and MSNBC picks up the undecideds. But that’s simplistic” (p.

2). Goodman (2006) admits that though the country may be heading into an era where news channels are defined by their ideology, the 24-hour cable channel that can break the ideological chain while attracting both new media consumers and holding onto its dedicated core audience will reign supreme. The biggest challenge to 24-hour cable, however, lies within the nature of medium itself

The rise of the internet and online streaming video may result in the downfall of traditional television news as we know it. Someday, perhaps, the television will become outmoded as consumers utilize broadband internet technology to watch television on their personal computers. Though the likelihood of such a drastic transformation is slim (at least in the near future), the rise of the internet is very much a present-day reality: “In a fairly short time, the cable TV news networks will be superseded by interactive on-line news. When that occurs, viewers will have the benefits of the quality of correspondent packages, which they can download as individual stories...” (Tyndall, 2005, p. 2). In this category, MSNBC.com leads the pack. According to Nielsen/NetRatings for July 2005, “In July of 2004, less than 20 million videos were watched on MSNBC.com, while recent months have yielded as many as 45 million video plays” (Cited in PR Newswire, 2005, p. 1). Major news events in particular, reports Greppi (2005), are responsible for continually breaking records in website traffic and online streaming video – especially during weekday lunch hours. Recognizing the popularity and potential of online streaming video, one of the Big Three is taking a big step into the internet age and embracing the digital revolution: “CBS News, the TV news organization perhaps most defined by its past, is going online in a big broadband way in an attempt to redefine, revitalize and

perhaps even reinvent itself as a 24-hour high-speed news organization” (Greppi, 2005, p.

1). Streaming video is now the obvious centerpiece of its impressive website.



What’s more, viewers are not confining their online news consumption to apolitical subjects like weather or local sports scores. Though weather is understandably the most popular subject of online news consumers, the Pew Center (2002) reports that “Political and international news have shown the biggest growth... The number going online for political news has increased by 11 percentage points (from 39% to 50%) since April 2000” (p. 18). The politicization of 24-hour cable, it seems, has carried over to the internet just like the viewers themselves. Hamilton (2004) attributes the rise of internet news sources to both the low cost of information distribution and the possibility for more voices to be heard. By entering the search term “Jill Carroll” (the Christian Science

Monitor correspondent recently freed from captivity in Iraq) on Google News, for example, the search engine produced an incomprehensible 7,110 related stories; “George W. Bush” produced 23,200 news stories, “Illegal Immigration” tallied 26,600 stories (April 3, 2006). This defines information overload.

Yet search engines like Google News, which emerged as a major new player in online news in 2004, have attracted serious attention (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2005); it looks like “Google-ing” for news is here to stay. Another emerging phenomenon is “podcasting,” pioneered by Apple in conjunction with its download engine, iTunes. Using iTunes, tech-savvy news consumers have the ability to download audio or video clips of news programs and play (or “podcast”) them on their personal computer or video-ready portable device (iPod Video, e.g.). As we have seen, with technological advances and increased selection comes selective exposure, perception and retention – as well as the journalism of affirmation. As Goldberg (2002) reiterates, “People will get their news from the people they like and believe, which is very bad news for the old guard” (p. 189). Unless the networks firmly establish themselves in the online streaming video realm (as CBS is trying to do), 24-hour cable could further overshadow the Big Three and spread its influence beyond its current plateau. Or, if news search engines like Google continue to increase their utility and convenience, 24-hour cable could itself be overshadowed by the very content it strives to report. Ultimately, the internet has the capability to be the catalyst for either cable’s rise or fall.

DISCUSSION

We have learned that 24-hour cable is a highly politicized source of news that causes fragmentation, encourages partisanship, and thrives on entertaining its viewers. On the other hand, it is the most convenient, up-to-date, and in-depth source of current events for a large number of Americans. Framed in this way, the tenets of 24-hour cable are commonly judged based on an either/or fallacy instead of a continuum. How can these seemingly opposing qualities be reconciled in order to accurately pass judgment? Traditionally, the pros and cons of news outlets have been weighed on the balance of propriety – what a news outlet *should* be. James Fallows, Washington Editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, typifies this utopian desire in his admonition of politicized news shows: “I think the TV political talk shows are a pestilence. Everything about them is bad for the business. Every one of them rewards traits that are directly at odds to what you are supposed to do as a reporter” (Cited in Shepard, 1995, p. 2). The problem with this analysis, besides the conflation of reporter and pundit, is that 24-hour cable has changed the very definition of news and the nature of news outlet itself. For the purposes of this paper, these changes will be discussed with regard to the sociopolitical relationship between 24-hour cable news outlets and their viewers.

The most significant change in this relationship has occurred in the degree to which politicized analysis and discussion of issues has come to be expected by viewers. This effect is best described as the mainstreaming of politicization. The opinion-packed primetime lineup of all three cable channels is the most obvious indication of this

politicization, but the trend runs much deeper; designated opinion-shows are not the only avenues through which politicized opinion is allowed to pass. Though in-depth discussion and debate was originally relegated to shout-shows like *Crossfire* or *Hardball*, the practice of relying on invited guests, pundits, experts and other officials has crossed over into cable's more traditional newscasts as well (Alterman, 1988). The punditocracy, in other words, is so intertwined with 24-hour cable that the genre has become dependent on its presence to function in its self-defined role. Though certain cable shows certainly spotlight their anchors, the self-defined role of 24-hour cable is to move the delivery of news beyond the anchor's desk and into the realm of analysts and commentators. Even less controversial shows like CNN's *The Situation Room* at least visually embrace breaking the chains of the anchor's desk. Host Wolf Blitzer stands in a modern news arena, so to speak, and tosses stories out to reporters who appear on screens in the background. Rather than just reporting the story or the issue, cable thrives on taking controversial subjects one-step further than most network or local broadcasts. Most cable shows are infused with the host's opinion, guests' opinion, or a combination of both. Just as major newspapers have come to be identified by the tenor of their op/ed section, cable channels too are creating personalities of their own.

If the viewer doesn't like the analyst or analysis on one particular channel, an alternate opinion-leader is only a remote-control click away. If Bill O'Reilly's guests can't seem to get a word in edgewise, Chris Matthews may be a better alternative. If Matthews' show becomes engulfed in five simultaneous pontifications, Keith Olbermann may offer a more subdued atmosphere. If Olbermann's smug mockery becomes too much

to bear, Larry King will always be there with his suspenders and cool demeanor to sooth the waters. If 24-cable as a whole is too much volume and too much hype, the Big Three and a local channel are at one's disposal. Whatever the reason, the viewer retains the ultimate power – choice. This is Klapper's (1960) selective exposure, perception and retention in action. The ultimate power of choice is especially evident on the internet, where viewers have increasingly utilized streaming video to compile their own newscasts and filter out that which does not appeal to them.

Because a sizable percentage of viewers perceive a bias or slant to certain cable channels, they have the power to structure their news viewing along their own partisan lines (Greenblatt, 2004). This partisan attention and retention is best explained by the journalism of affirmation. Politically-motivated news viewing choices, moreover, do not have to be constrained to a single channel. A conservative might watch *The O'Reilly Factor* on FNC and then switch over to *The Situation* with Tucker Carlson on MSNBC. Alternately, a liberal might choose *Countdown with Keith Olbermann* on MSNBC and then switch over to *Crossfire* on CNN. Breaking down the poli-talk politicization one step further, a liberal could watch *Hannity and Colmes* and listen to only liberal host Alan Colmes; alternately, a conservative could watch *Hardball* and listen to only the conservative guests. If viewers watch news merely to bolster their own pre-existing attitudes and beliefs, they have the ability to use 24-hour cable programming for that purpose. Ansolabehere et al (1993) suggests that such partisan politicization is not necessarily a bad thing as long as a range of diverse opinions are available to viewers: “The framers of the Constitution realized that ideological bias in the flow of news would

not be a problem if competing viewpoints were freely expressed. Accordingly, the First Amendment has long protected the ‘marketplace of ideas’” (p. 216). The media, as with any privately-owned organization, is driven by market forces. If the market demands politicized news programming, the media will respond accordingly. As much as Fallows may cringe at the diminution of the reporter’s traditional role in the 24-hour cable world, it is a reality that is here to stay – at least for now.

Though news organizations have traditionally assumed the role of gate-keeping, framing and setting the agenda, the power of the 24-hour cable market has to some extent turned the tables of power. The need to attract eyeballs, earn advertising revenue and remain competitive has enslaved television to the will of the market for half of a century, and 24-hour cable channels are by no means an exception to the rule. But because 24-hour cable is *not* local or network broadcasting, it must continually distinguish itself from both alternatives – as well as the other cable channels. To do this, cable channels must appeal to the individual desires of a certain demographic of news viewers rather than the broad general public – cable is, in this regard, less of a mass-medium than both network and local news. In their search for niche viewers, CNN has chosen the supposed high road by shying away from politicized programming, while FNC has overwhelmingly embraced the poli-talk format; MSNBC has chosen to feature a combination of both (ADT Research, 2002). The market will determine which distinguishing characteristic will reign. Yet whatever that characteristic may be, it must remain entertaining enough to attract and hold viewers for as much of the 24-hour broadcast schedule as possible.

In Goldberg's *United States of Entertainment*, news and entertainment are and forever will be inseparable (2002). Just as the market has demonstrated its political thirst, it has also remained partial to that which stimulates, engages, and appeals to the senses – even in its choice of news. If it bleeds, it leads. News consumers simply don't have the attention span to endure bland recitation of the day's top stories, no matter how socially or politically important they may be. If Walter Cronkite's *CBS Evening News* were to be transplanted into the twenty-first century, it would be cancelled within a year. Never mind that Cronkite was the most trusted man in news; his charm and charisma would be no match for today's computer-generated graphics, dramatic sound effects and high-volume punditocracy. All television news, especially 24-hour cable, can in this way be considered infotainment. Who knows what strategy cable executives will employ next to keep the eyeballs fixated and the remote control hidden between the couch cushions. Yet as Sella (2001) observes, such is the nature of the medium: "The one absolute of television is that unthinkable frontiers are always crossed. That's simple TV physics, the gravitational force of Nielsen" (p. 15).

CONCLUSION

The medium of television news has come a long way since its meager beginnings as “money-losing products limited to a half-hour each day and the Sunday morning ‘public affairs’ ghetto;” today, multiple cable networks turn over staggering profits derived exclusively from presenting the news twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week (Postman and Powers, 1992, p. 4). The format of the average television news program, however, has also evolved. With the advent of the cable news giants came the proliferation of forum-style programming, which thrives on the intellectual debate among hosts, pundits and other guests. Because the tide of ratings has been rising in favor of such politicized programming, the effects of this programming on the decidedly partisan viewers who drive these ratings thus constitute a fascinating field of inquiry. An amalgamation of the various studies, theories and statistics examined in this paper yield several noteworthy conclusions.

Such conclusions can be best encapsulated in terms of what Sommerville (1999) describes as a media/consumer symbiosis. The media does not simply spew out information for the consumer to absorb; rather, the avenue of information linking the press and the public is a two-way street. Both entities have evolved at least in part as a response to one another. The cable channels responded to the favorable ratings of their debate-style shows by increasing their intensity and airtime, and have most recently embraced the country’s growing partisan divide by framing conflict on ideological and party lines. Cable news viewers, on the other hand, have demonstrated network

allegiances in their choice of programming and are increasingly placing their trust and their eyeballs with networks that they perceive as consonant with their values. If the above reasoning seems circular, that's because it is; this symbiotic relationship is inherently cyclical and largely interdependent. Cable networks and their viewers build on each other's responses, thus amplifying the resulting effect.

The long term consequences of this symbiotic relationship have yet to be understood, as multiple potential trends could eventually mature. A particularly compelling unknown, for example, is how the success of cable news will affect the rest of the television media market. Will ABC, CBS and NBC attempt to reclaim viewers who have turned to 24-hour cable news through copy-cat debate segments, or will they stick to the traditional anchor-based recitation of news? And what if the rift separating opposing ideologies and political parties begins to collapse... will cable networks follow the public's lead or remain dedicated to "exalting controversy?" Or, more importantly, is the success of cable news merely a fad that will eventually fade away? Recent moves by CNN, which parted ways with conservative *Crossfire* host Tucker Carlson on January 5, 2005 and subsequently announced plans to cancel both *Crossfire* and *The Capital Gang* later in the same year, perhaps indicate a shift away from the right-left slugfests of the past (Kurtz, 2005). Developing primarily from a *Crossfire* segment filmed in Fall 2004 (which featured *The Daily Show*'s Jon Stewart lambasting *Crossfire* as mere partisan hackery), CNN/US President Jonathan Klein cited senseless bickering and an overly-crowded market as the major factors prompting the shows' cancellation: "Viewers need useful information in a dangerous world, and a bunch of guys screaming at each other

doesn't accomplish that... there is so much of that format around" (Cited in Kurtz, 2005, p. 1). Yet by the same token, rival MSNBC has tapped Carlson to host *The Situation*, a political discussion show airing Monday to Thursday at 11 pm; perhaps this move signifies not a falloff in the debate format so much as a re-shuffling of shows and hosts (Kurtz, 2005).

In addition, the blossoming forum of the internet creates seemingly endless possibilities for politicized news. Will Google-esque news search engines become a mainstay or will news consumers merely go to their favorite channel's individual website? One electronic niche in particular, the "blog," is a fascinating and largely un-researched source of news and commentary that is showing strong indications of future prominence. As the Project for Excellence in Journalism (2005) reports, "The audience for bloggers grew by 58% in six months, to 32 million people" (p. 4). At both the Republican and Democratic conventions in 2004, furthermore, officially registered "bloggers," armed with laptops and internet panache, recorded the inside scoop for their dedicated readers. Exploiting the up-and-coming Really Simple Syndication (RSS) system of automatic information distribution, "bloggers" can quickly disseminate their views and opinions to an enormous audience of online subscribers... all for a literally negligent cost. As Nicole Devenish, Bush campaign communications director puts it, "Blogs are what talk radio was a few years ago" (Cited in Gibbs, 2004, p. 4). With so much potential, the web of internet news will eventually be a force to be reckoned with. More research will certainly be needed to make sense of this force and understand how it is affecting American society.

For regular news consumers, the sheer volume of available news outlets can be quite overwhelming. On cable television networks, moreover, the broad range of hosts, guests and pundits spouting opinions on everything from stem-cell research to border control creates an atmosphere of information overload. Maybe John McLaughlin was right – maybe Americans *are* yearning for a way to codify political news, sort through the cacophony, and establish themselves on a political continuum. To avoid the temptation of exclusively subscribing to value-consonant programs, Postman and Powers (1992) suggest that “The viewer must come with a prepared mind – information, opinions, a sense of proportion, an articulate value system” (p. 114). Armed with both a willingness to learn and a dedication to objective reflection, the news consumer can responsibly enjoy the freedom of the press.

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