

Cable News Networks, Online Coverage, and the Indexing of Electoral Politics

Introduction: Rise of the Cable News Networks

The proliferation of news networks in America's market-oriented media system has increased significantly since the 1980s. Today, we see that cable news networks like Fox News and MSNBC have crafted niche audiences based on partisanship: Fox News is aimed at conservative viewers while MSNBC appeals to liberal viewers. One way to explain this phenomenon is through the market forces in the American media system; partisan news sources appeal to specific segments in society in order to maximize audience size and increase profits.

By appealing to certain audiences, partisan networks reinforce existing beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes in society through their news coverage. Cable news networks have traditionally given citizens the opportunity not only to be selective in the views they are exposed to, but they also shape the issues people think about and how they think about these issues. Today, the rise of information technology has become a new avenue for partisan sources to share information and reaffirm citizen beliefs. However, we know very little about how these cable news networks utilize the Internet to shape the way viewers think about issues, but we can start to by understanding the ways information is presented by these networks online. Ultimately, we believe that partisan news networks will provide slanted coverage online as they do on television, following the theory of adversarial journalism.

Background & Problem: Partisanship Takes Hold

Political scientists have brought forward the following points: Our society has become increasingly polarized and party animus has grown (Abramowitz, 2010; Iyengar

2012); biased news sources have reinforced partisan viewpoints in the electorate; the Internet has increased an individual's ability to be selective of the information they are exposed to (Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2011). These assumptions are important as they lay the groundwork for which we can better understand the increased partisan nature of news sources.

Americans understand some news sources provide a partisan slant, especially in the era of interpretive journalism. With increased polarization and interparty animus, news organizations feed off these phenomenon in order to raise revenue. Sources like Fox and MSNBC recognize these divisions and cater to one side of the political spectrum. Because cable news sources play upon these partisan viewpoints, "politically polarized consumers are motivated to exercise selectivity in their news choices" (Iyengar, 2007, 127).

Today, partisans can exercise selectivity through the Internet. They may choose to access well-known partisan sites like the Drudge Report or Huffington Post. Partisans may also choose to access websites of the three major cable news networks. In fact, Fox and CNN are some of the most visited websites each month ("CNN"). As an extension of the cable news networks, we would expect that these websites match the partisan nature of their televised coverage. However, it is unclear whether these websites follow the partisan slant exhibited on television such as in Hannity on Fox News or The Rachel Maddow Show on MSNBC. With very little literature focused on partisan websites and their short-term media effects, we are unable to recognize the extent to which partisan news websites also serve as echo chambers of ideological views.

Because of the limited research on partisan news coverage of political issues on the Internet, this paper focuses on that topic. The questions we grapple with include: What political news stories are covered by cable news websites? Do these websites provide more coverage to specific topics, people, or groups than others? Do these websites provide a partisan slant similar to the ideologies of their respective news network, and if so, which websites are more slanted? Do these networks index the stories covered on their websites? Answering these questions may help us further understand the ways cable news networks set the agenda online.

Assessing the Theories of Media and Media Affects

Earlier, we introduced the idea that market forces drive the American media system, referred to as the *supply side of media politics*. As Iyengar mentions, news organizations are “subject to the same logic that drives all other economic activity”, namely through maximizing revenue. In this, producers are under pressure to make news programming more entertaining for viewers (Iyengar, 2007, 72). While coverage of entertaining news is one way in which revenue can be maximized, cable news networks also tailor coverage based on the *demand side of media politics*, where audiences drive the content of the news through their desires and preferences.

Part of the demand side of media politics is the idea of *selective exposure*, which states that individuals actively seek out or ignore information based on preferences, such as ideology (Sears and Freedman, 1967). Selective exposure is central to the new-media environment as individuals are able to have greater control over the information they consume. The combination of partisan cable networks with the Internet results in an environment in which partisans can easily access information they agree with. One such

theory of selective exposure that supports this notion is the *partisan polarization hypothesis*. Under this theory, individuals prefer to encounter information supporting their beliefs and avoid information inconsistent with beliefs (Iyengar, 2007, 124). Individuals reaffirm beliefs by viewing coverage of news they agree with. In the new media age, liberals should easily find that MSNBC provides coverage in line with their ideology while the same is true for conservatives and Fox News.

With the understanding that viewers prefer news sources they agree with, the question then becomes how do these sources affect the viewer? Theories of news media, specifically regarding media effects, focuses on the media's ability to persuade the public to not only think about certain subjects but to form opinions on those subjects. Media effects are argued to have profound consequences on the individual's short-term analysis of politics.

One media effect occurs through *agenda setting*, where the media directs viewers to think about certain issues or policy areas (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). From this perspective, the media is seen as a gatekeeper of the news, "selecting some issues for presentation and ignoring others" (Iyengar, 2007, 233). For instance, we might expect Fox News to cover stories on ISIS and foreign policy in order to make viewers think about issues of national security. By setting an agenda favorable to their partisan viewpoint, cable news networks can address policy issues that their party is seen as strong on, a notion known as *issue ownership* (Petrocik, 2003). Americans are socialized to associate each party with a set of interests and with a set of problems on which they will deliver (Iyengar, 2007, 165). Because each party is seen to be better on specific

issues, it is likely these cable news websites will also set a news agenda favorable to their partisan views in line with the theory of issue ownership.

Although there is significant evidence that cable news networks provide partisan news coverage through television and set the agenda on issues through the application of issue ownership, we know little about how these sources present news online. However, understanding the organizational process model of journalism may give us clues about what to expect from cable news coverage on the Internet.

Political scientists have presented two contrasting notions on the approaches journalists take towards politicians and political issues. On one hand, the idea of *adversarial journalism* emphasizes journalist' autonomy, as they replace politicians' voices with their own. Known as *product substitution*, reporters react to candidates' attempts at news management by creating alternative forms of news- most of it negative- that they can market to the public"(Zaller, 1998, 1). Adversarial journalism and the use of product substitution argue for a generalized competition between politicians and journalists for control of the news.

On the other hand, *The Indexing Hypothesis* argues that journalists and news coverage follows the contours of elite debate, reporting both sides of a political argument. The process of indexing is attributed to the "journalistic norms of using official sources and of seeking objectivity by reporting different sides of a debate" (Iyengar, 2007, 95), which is used as an argument for the decline of adversarial journalism in that both Republican and Democrat sources will be utilized in the coverage of stories. However, while indexing suggests that all journalists will provide two-sided coverage on political issues and news, it does not formally take into account the independence and partisan

nature of cable news networks, especially in regards to reporting on elections instead of specific policy issues.

Since we are interested in both the subject matter and partisan slant of cable news coverage on the Internet, the Indexing Hypothesis and the idea of adversarial journalism are important in understanding the nature of online news coverage. Adversarial journalism should help explain the partisan nature of cable news networks. Partisan journalist will use their autonomy to provide coverage skewed toward the position they support. On the other hand, Indexing Theory should support the objective approach of journalistic norms, meaning that journalists should provide fair and balanced coverage on politicians and their positions. Assuming that networks index and set the agenda online based on partisanship like on television, we expect that partisan sources will provide more coverage on individuals with the same ideology and that adversarial journalism takes precedent in news coverage online.

Hypothesizing Online Partisanship of the Cable News Networks

Based on the assumption that adversarial journalism will take precedent over the Indexing Theory, we hypothesize the following:

(H₁) Fox News will not follow the Indexing Theory and will provide the greatest percent of Republican sources in their stories compared to CNN and MSNBC.

(H₂) MSNBC will not follow the Indexing Theory and will provide the greatest percent of Democratic source in their stories compared to CNN and Fox News.

Based on the assumptions of the demand side of media politics and the notion of the Partisan Polarization Hypothesis, we expect to see that partisan news sources will

skew the tone of their news stories online in favor of their own partisan viewpoint. We hypothesize the following:

(H₃) Fox News will provide coverage that is more conservative than CNN and MSNBC.

(H₄) MSNBC will provide coverage that is more liberal than CNN and Fox News.

Testing the Hypotheses: Methodology and Data

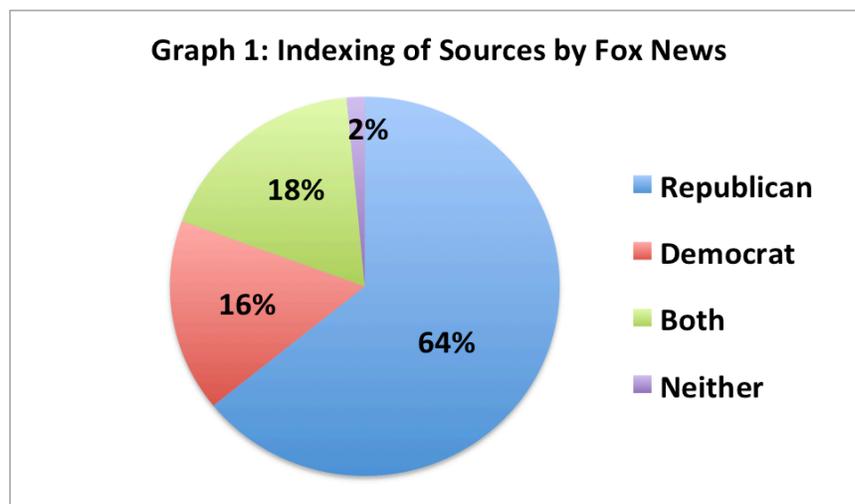
In order to test these hypotheses, we looked at the stories featured on the main page and politics page of CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC websites. Overall, we examined 84 stories from CNN, 83 stories from MSNBC, and 67 stories from Fox News. We recorded the title of the news stories on each website. (In the case regarding Fox News, we examined less stories due to a lack of political stories presented on the website on certain days.) We then collected data on whether each website provided coverage of the same news stories in order to measure the extent that websites index the news. To do so, we analyzed each news story and determined whether the story indexed only Republican sources, only Democratic sources, both Republican and Democratic sources, or neither. This data was then used to examine the percent of news stories covering prominent Republican and Democratic members such as Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton.

We then examined the tone of each article by analyzing the words used, the subject of the article, and the commentary of the sources indexed. To score the tone of the article, we used a five-point scale ranging from Strong Left (SL) at a score of -2 to a Strong Right (SR) at a score of +2. Each story was assigned a Strong Left (SL), Lean Left

(LL), Middle (M), Lean Right (LR), or Strong Right (SR) and those values were averaged to provide the mean tone of the articles.

We plotted three charts (Graph 1-3), one for each cable news network, in order to compare the amount of news stories that included Republican sources, Democratic sources, both, or neither. Each section of the bar charts indicates the amount of news stories including a Republican source, Democratic source, both, or neither. Additionally, we created a table (Table 1) to compare this data between news networks. The three columns include the amount of stories involving these sources for CNN, MSNBC, and Fox. We also created a chart and table (Graph 4 and Table 2) in order to show the ideological slant of each news website based on the average tone of the news articles examined. Each bar in the graph indicates the partisan score for each news website and the chart shows these scores. Lastly, we created a bar chart and table (Graph 5 and Table 3) in order to compare the amount of news coverage provided by each news network to the top members of the Republican and Democratic Parties.

Graphs and Tables



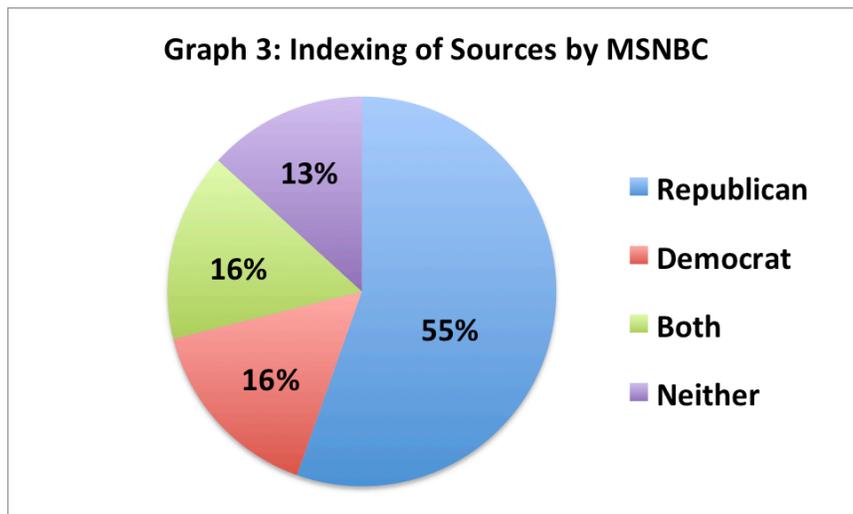
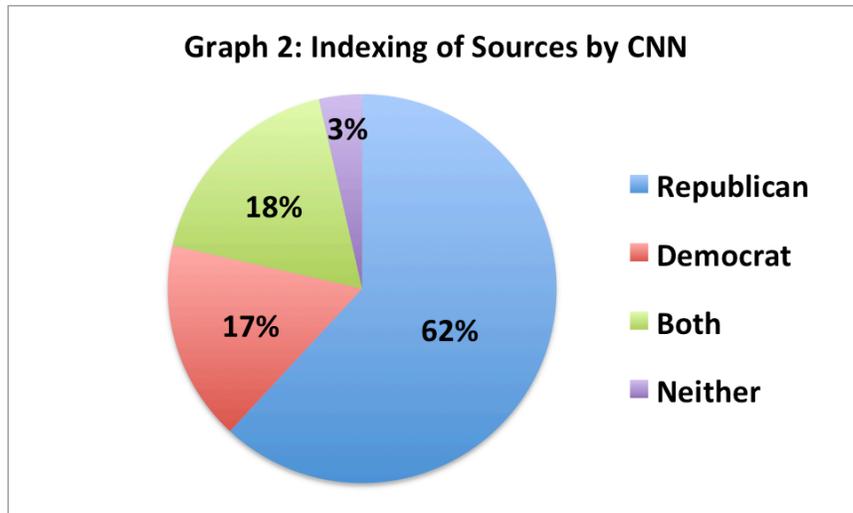


Table 1: Cable Network Indexing by Category

	CNN	MSNBC	Fox
Republican	0.62	0.55	0.64
Democrat	0.17	0.16	0.16
Both	0.18	0.16	0.18
Neither	0.03	0.13	0.02

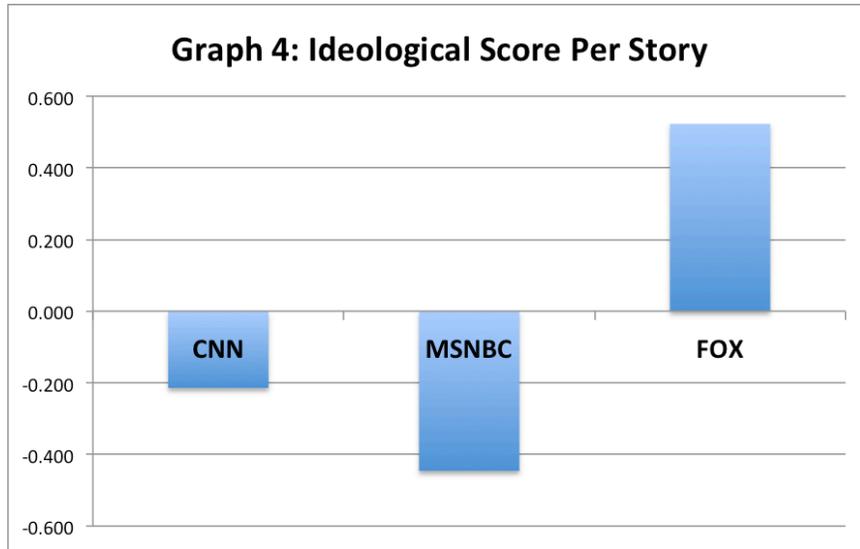


Table 2: Average Ideological Tone of Stories

Network	Average Ideological Score
CNN	-0.214
MSNBC	-0.446
Fox	0.523

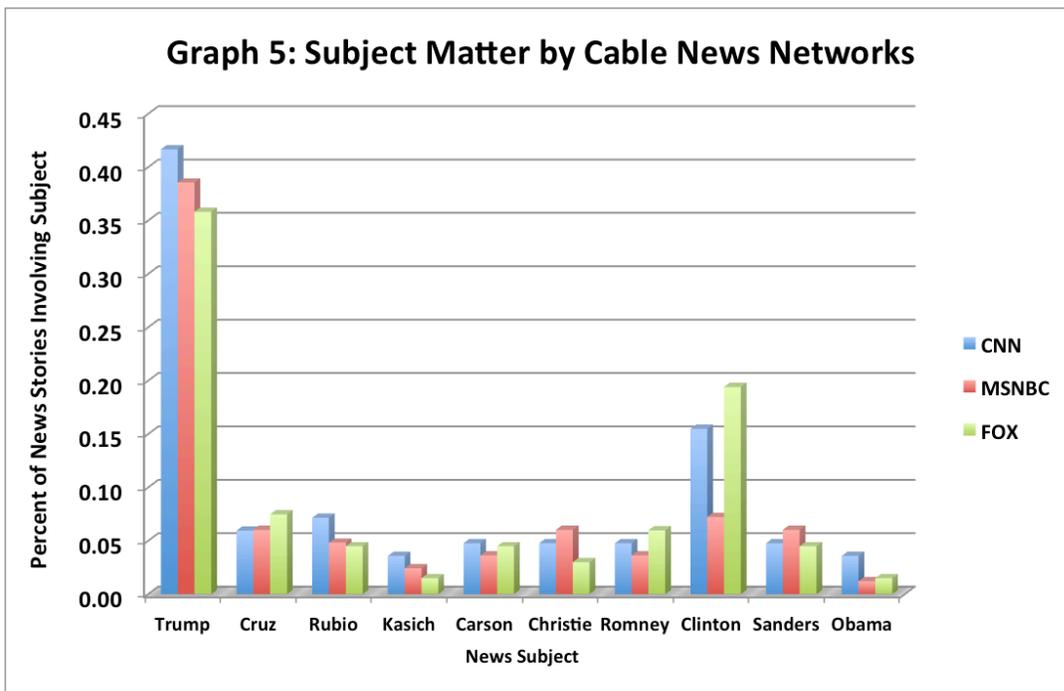


Table 3: Percentage of News Stories on Party Members

	CNN	MSNBC	Fox
Trump (R)	0.42	0.39	0.36
Cruz (R)	0.06	0.06	0.07
Rubio (R)	0.07	0.05	0.04
Kasich (R)	0.04	0.02	0.01
Carson (R)	0.05	0.04	0.04
Christie (R)	0.05	0.06	0.03
Romney (R)	0.05	0.04	0.06
Clinton (D)	0.15	0.07	0.19
Sanders (D)	0.05	0.06	0.04
Obama (D)	0.04	0.01	0.01

Discussion of Results

The results reveal that Fox News indexed by the following percentages: Republican 64%, Democrat 16%, Both Republican and Democrat 18%, and Neither 2%. Fox News included a Republican source in 82% of its stories online and a Democratic source in 34% of its stories online. CNN indexed by the following percentages: Republican 62%, Democrat 17%, Both Republican and Democrat 18%, and Neither 3%. CNN included a Republican source in 80% of its stories online and a Democratic source in 35% of its stories online. MSNBC indexed by the following percentages: Republican 55%, Democrat 16%, Both Republican and Democrat 16%, and Neither 13%. MSNBC included a Republican source in 71% of its stories online and a Democratic source in 32% of its stories online. The average ideological score for the online stories of each news network based on the five-point ideology scale is: MSNBC at -0.446, CNN at -

0.214, and Fox News at 0.523. The percent of news stories involving prominent members of the Republican and Democratic Parties include: Donald Trump (CNN-42%, MSNBC-39%, Fox- 36%), Ted Cruz (CNN-6%, MSNBC-6%, Fox- 7%), Marco Rubio (CNN-7%, MSNBC-5%, Fox- 4%), John Kasich (CNN-4%, MSNBC-2%, Fox- 1%), Hillary Clinton (CNN-15%, MSNBC-7%, Fox- 19%), and Bernie Sanders (CNN-5%, MSNBC-6%, Fox- 4%).

Analysis and Conclusion

Based on the data collected, we can conclude that Fox News did provide the greatest amount of indexing of Republican sources, but MSNBC did not provide the greatest amount of indexing of Democratic sources. We can also conclude that Fox News provided coverage that was more ideologically conservative than CNN and MSNBC, and MSNBC provided coverage that was more ideologically liberal than CNN and Fox News.

Table 1 shows that Fox News (.64) indexed Republican sources more than CNN (.62) and MSNBC (.55). However, MSNBC (.16) did not index Democratic sources more than CNN (.17) and Fox News (.16). Even when accounting for the stories that indexed both Republican and Democratic sources, these results still hold true. Fox News (.82) indexed Republican sources more than CNN (.80) and MSNBC (.71) even when accounting for the stories that indexed both Republican and Democratic sources. MSNBC (.32) did not index Democratic sources more than CNN (.35) and Fox News (.34).

Because of this information, we can conclude that we can accept Hypothesis 1 but reject Hypothesis 2.

Graph 4 and Table 2 reveal that Fox News (.523) provides the greatest conservative coverage while MSNBC (-.446) provides the greatest liberal coverage, with

CNN (-.214) in the middle. Because of this information, we can accept Hypothesis 3 and Hypothesis 4 as these networks did bias their online stories based on ideology.

Graph 5 and Table 3 show the percentage of news stories on each website that features a current prominent politician. Interestingly enough, Donald Trump receives the most coverage of any politician on CNN (.42), MSNBC (.39) and Fox News (.36). On the other end, Hillary Clinton receives the most coverage among Democratic officials on CNN (.15), MSNBC (.07), and Fox News (.19). All other political figures do not individually receive more than 7% of coverage in news stories on these websites.

Overall, we received mixed results on our predictions based on the Indexing Hypothesis. While all networks indexed Democratic sources by almost the same percentage in their coverage online, the networks varied to a greater degree in the percent of Republican sources indexed. This might be attributable to the attention brought to the Republican nomination race by Donald Trump. With intense coverage of Trump by the cable news networks since the summer of 2015, the focus of the election cycle has largely rested on the Republican race. This idea is further supported by the percent to which Donald Trump is referenced in online news stories by each of the three cable news networks. Donald Trump, the Republican primary front-runner, receives two to three times the amount of coverage as Hillary Clinton, the Democratic primary front-runner.

An interesting trend seen in this coverage is the idea that Fox News provided the least amount of coverage of Donald Trump compared to the other news networks and similarly, MSNBC provided the least amount of coverage of Hillary Clinton compared to the other news networks. Applying the indexing theory to the coverage of news and politicians, one would expect that each cable news website would follow the contours of

debate among politicians during the election cycle. Similarly, the idea of *pack journalism* argues that “high-prestige news organizations will define the daily agenda” (Iyengar, 2007, 84), which in the case of cable networks would mean following the lead of one of the other major networks. These ideas would point us in the direction that the organizational process of journalism overcomes the partisan nature of cable news networks to provide partisan coverage on different subject matter. However, the results varied and each cable news website differed in the amount of coverage provided to different candidates and politicians as well as the news stories covered and sources indexed.

In conclusion, cable news networks do provide online coverage in line with their partisan viewpoints. Fox News provides coverage skewed towards a conservative ideology and MSNBC provides coverage skewed towards a liberal ideology, with CNN skewed slightly toward a liberal ideology. Overall, Fox News is the strongest partisan network online, followed by MSNBC and CNN. It is not surprising that we see these networks following the ideologies regularly attributed to them. However, as evidenced by the unequal amount of coverage given to Donald Trump, we would like to examine the tone of the coverage provided specifically on individual politicians in the future, as that may give insight to the media’s stance on certain politicians and issues.

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