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Local News Coverage in a Social Capital Capital: Election 2000 on Minnesota's Local News Stations

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This article examines local news coverage of an election in one of the nation's "social capital capitals," Minnesota. In Minnesota, according to theorized connections between civic involvement and news media use, we might expect the orientation of local news to be local and the quality of coverage of local campaigns to be high. Content analysis of all evening newscasts on all four non-cable channels in the Minneapolis market (the 13th largest television market in the United States) for the 12 weeks leading to the day of the election yielded striking evidence on the amount and nature of local television news coverage. The predominant news emphasis was on the presidential race, with considerably less attention to the close U.S. Senate contest, and very little or nothing on any other race; local television news was mostly not local. As with previous studies, this analysis showed prime emphasis on strategy and game, while the far fewer "issue" stories tended to be thin. These local television news shows also offered very little airtime with candidates speaking directly. In addition, seven focus groups were conducted in Minnesota, in which subjects were asked about local television news coverage. Subjects expressed frustration with the brevity and superficiality of election news stories and with the stations' claims of providing in-depth coverage. Judging by our data, levels of civic and political involvement in Minnesota may remain high despite, rather than because of, political coverage by local television news.

Keywords campaign 2000, campaign coverage, local democracy, local news, social capital

The past few decades have brought mounting concern about the health of the American political system. Election turnout is in decline, as are other indicators of systemic health, including trust in government. Expressions of civic commitment have become more impersonal, reflecting changing perceptions of social voluntarism and the status of voluntary associations in American political culture (Putnam, 2000). Mass media, especially television, are prime contributors to this trend, Putnam contends. Nevertheless, Putnam also notes that, "regular viewers of network newscasts (as well as followers of National

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Public Radio and even of the local TV news) spend more time on community projects, attend more club meetings, and follow politics much more closely than other Americans" (p. 220). Although he qualifies the connection, *local* television news, especially, is positively associated with civic involvement. Television news matters to those who invest in their community's "social capital."

In neither Putnam's work nor in the literature more generally is the link between local television news and civic engagement clearly defined, however. Studies of media coverage of politics and of campaigns have focused either on the need for revision of the previously established wisdom of "minimal effects" on viewers (Bartels, 1993; Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998; Entman, 1989; Gamson, 1992; Hetherington, 1996; Iyengar, 1991; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Iyengar, Peters, & Kinder, 1982; Joslyn & Ceccoli, 1996; Krosnick & Kinder, 1990; Zaller, 1992) or on the pathologies of the coverage itself (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Jamieson & Waldman, 2003; Patterson, 1993). This literature reveals the considerable range of significant influences that media representations can have on what citizens think and say about politics. Researchers have clarified the routes by which a story's subject matter—agenda setting—and the framing of coverage influence perceptions, but the stories linking media coverage to civic involvement remain to be told. In the growing literature on civic engagement, those who look at media effects[1] have focused on the potential role of news media in the development of associations (Skocpol, 1999b) or associational life (Ray, 1999), news media coverage of different kinds of associations, and the decline in civic engagement as well as the effect of "civic journalism" in newspapers (Friedland, Sotirovic, & Daily, 1998). Connections between local media coverage of politics and civic life remain largely unstudied.

Since 1993, local television news has become the dominant source of information for a plurality of Americans, meaning that "the cumulative audience for evening local news easily surpasses the cumulative audience for national news" (Iyengar, 1998, p. 1). Local news has become the biggest game in town (Graber, 2001, p. 330). Indeed, Graber (2001) found that 54% of survey respondents said that local news was their primary source of political information more generally. The state of Minnesota is no exception in this regard. About two thirds of the viewing audience at 10 p.m. is tuned to local news (*Star Tribune*, May 30, 2002).

Previous research on local news has examined such phenomena as its increasing sensationalism (Slattery, Hakanen, & Doremus, 1996), its focus on crime stories, and its role in perpetuating racial stereotypes (Gilliam, Valentino, & Beckman, 2002; Iyengar, 2001). Those who have examined local campaign coverage, including coverage in local television news in Minnesota (Cappella & Brewin, 1998; Just et al., 1996), have generally not taken television as their primary focus (Fico & Freedman, 2001). Researchers who have studied television coverage have either concentrated on a single station or race (Carter, Fico, & McCabe, 2002) or focused on a single station in comparison to an alternative source of local news such as a newspaper. In the present study, we evaluate and dissect local news coverage on all evening newscasts for the four stations in the Minneapolis and St. Paul (Twin Cities) metro area to which local citizens with televisions had universal access (i.e., noncable stations) during the 2000 election, when the importance of the informational role of local news was great.

Although the sources and measurement of social capital are topics of debate, researchers agree that social and political participation are vital to a democracy. We use the term to refer to the breadth and depth of a society's social networks. In this regard, the state of Minnesota is in many respects a "social capital capital." It ranks first in turnout at presidential elections, first in the proportion of citizens who have served on a

committee for a local organization and who have served as an officer of a club or organization, second in the average number of times its citizens volunteer, fourth in the number who attend meetings on town or school affairs, and fourth on Putnam's "comprehensive social capital index" (see Putnam's Web site at www.bowlingalone.com). In a 1995 survey, four in five Minnesotans agreed that "I feel very much that I belong to this community," and 75% claimed to be very or somewhat interested in politics (Elazar, Gray, & Spano, 1999). New Jersey and Minnesota have the most balanced electorates in terms of relative turnout among the lower and upper classes (Hill & Leighley, 1992). In short, Minnesota has a vibrant civic and political life: "Minnesotans, as compared with citizens elsewhere, are very interested in politics, have faith and confidence in government (especially in their own government), are closely attached to their communities, and want government to be involved in most problems" (Elazar, Gray, & Spano, 1999, p. 67).

One might expect that such a vibrant local community is matched by its local media —and in some respects it is. The Twin Cities area has two major daily newspapers, one of which is "a national leader in the civic or public journalism movement" (Elazar et al., 1999, p. 64), and several commercial and noncommercial radio stations that provide in-depth political coverage and, like Minnesota Public Radio, syndicate programs for an international audience. But what of local television news? Here we address that question in an in-depth analysis of the coverage given to federal and local politics during the election of 2000. If any state should be well served by its local television stations, it is Minnesota. What insights does the Minnesota case provide about the relationship between television news and social capital?

In the Twin Cities, some stations acknowledged this responsibility rhetorically, promising 5 minutes of quality campaign coverage per night and, in one case, "to take you behind the sound bites." Yet, several deficiencies in campaign coverage—at least from the expectations raised in the social capital literature—emerge in our study. These inadequacies include a predominant focus on the presidential race at the national level and, given limited commitment to public affairs coverage and limited airtime, much less attention to the U.S. Senate campaign, little to U.S. House races, and none to other offices. Relative to the coverage of national election campaigns, and, perhaps in absolute terms, Twin Cities television generally ignored state and local election campaigns. Air-time for "candidate-centered discourse," allowing viewers to see the candidate speaking on substantive issues, suggests another potential deficiency. In-depth analysis used in verifying or interpreting candidates' claims according to a factual record and the ad-watch format offer informative alternatives to a candidate-centered discourse. Yet, the preponderance of election news stories shown in the Twin Cities concentrated on the strategy and tactics of campaigning, not the candidates' positions on issues as provided in the candidates' own speech or through journalistic analysis.

Methodology

The bulk of our research involved the gathering of news from all of the evening newscasts of the four local television stations in the Twin Cities metro area: WCCO (CBS; owned by Viacom), KARE (NBC affiliate; owned by Gannett), KSTP (ABC affiliate; owned by Minnesota-based Hubbard broadcasting), and KMSP (UPN affiliate in 2000; owned by Fox/ News Corporation). Three of these owners are among the dozen largest "megamedia" corporations in the United States (Alger, 1998). Alger (1998) reports the pressure to produce larger profit levels from the owners of WCCO and KARE as well as general concerns regarding the homogenizing effects of large corporation ownership.

For WCCO, KSTP, and KARE, there were three evening newscasts on weekdays, from 5–5.30 p.m., 6–6.30 p.m., and 10–10.35 p.m. and two, the early and late evening newscasts, on weekends. KMSP aired an hour-long program at 9 p.m., followed by a 35-minute broadcast at 10 p.m. Ratings points for the late evening newscasts as of late November 2000 were as follows: WCCO-CBS, 14.1; KSTP-ABC, 9.5; KMSP-UPN, 2.1; and KARE-NBC, 14.3. These findings are in keeping with typical viewing patterns for local news in Minnesota, with WCCO and KARE the leaders, KSTP a distant third, and KMSP attracting a fraction of the viewers of the other stations.

We taped all of the evening newscasts on all four stations from August 13 until election day. We, along with a large group of research assistants whom we trained, coded a number of characteristics, including the length of all political stories on these networks for each newscast from August 13 until the day of the election, a total of 87 days and 1,292 segments. The stories were timed in seconds. Each story was coded on a number of characteristics that, according to the literature on media coverage of politics, are the primary indicators of the quality and focus—local or national—of coverage.

Some codes are straightforward. A vast literature on agenda-setting effects (e.g., Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; McCombs & Shaw, 1972) shows that the subjects of stories and the intensity with which the media focuses on them are taken by citizens to be cues regarding their importance. We therefore identified the office or offices on which a story focused and whether the candidates for the office were mentioned, to assess the extent to which some races received more attention than others did. In addition, while Patterson (1980) first illustrated the extent of "horse-race" coverage as opposed to issues in campaigns, others have since shown how little this kind of story does to stimulate or inform citizens (e.g., Just et al., 1996). We ascertained whether each story was concerned with an issue (and, if so, which issue), with some aspect of a candidate's biography or personal life, or with the "horse-race" aspect of polling and campaign strategy. We evaluated depth of coverage by distinguishing discussion or analysis of an issue from the mere mention of a current political concern. For example, stories will sometimes mention an issue, such as simply saying "Candidate Doe talked about the issue of health care today," without engaging in any analysis or presenting any other information or insight. Past research into media coverage of issues has tended not to distinguish between the mere mention and more in-depth analysis and discussion of issues (e.g., Just et al., 1996), yet clearly they differ greatly in the quantity and quality of information they provide. For example, on October 26, 2000, a WCCO story about social security in the Senate race ran as follows:

> WCCO is committed to taking you behind the sound bites this election year. . . . We'll bring you political coverage you won't see anywhere else. A big issue this election year is whether taxpayers should be allowed to invest a portion of their Social Security taxes in private funds. Republican Rod Grams says "yes." Democrat Mark Dayton says "no." He encourages other retirement investments. Independence Party's James Gibson and the Constitution Party's David Swan say "yes" to allowing Americans to direct their own investments.

This segment narrowly defines the issue of Social Security as a matter of privatization, one area of partisan debate in election 2000, but it ultimately represents candidate stands in terms of a reductionist categorical response to the issue as framed. In this news story, moreover, no actually articulated questions or answers are being reported; a figurative "yes" or "no" stands for a candidate's often already abbreviated issue position. Similarly,

KSTP's (ABC) news on October 26 included the following at the conclusion of a story about the presidential candidate's travel that day: "Vice President Al Gore made stops in Missouri, Iowa, and Wisconsin. Gore talked about the environment, blaming global warming on manmade pollution. He also attacked Bush's record in Texas." We coded stories with this kind of analysis as "stated candidate position." A story could examine the Gore campaign's contention that air pollution contributed to a "greenhouse" effect and, thus, global warming. News analysis could mention the Bush campaign's response that scientific evidence of such claims was highly contested. Information on specific environmental conditions in Texas, including Texas air quality, and their relationship to state policies (and the gubernatorial powers during the Bush tenure) could help the citizen sort out the campaigns' claims. Recognizing that such detail may be rare given the time constraints of news broadcasts, we set the bar low, coding a story that transcended the categorical, vague descriptions illustrated above in any degree as "in-depth discussion." Indeed, this content analysis category was clear enough to gain 100% agreement from our coding teams.

Finally, newscasts' "shrinking soundbite" is symptomatic of a growing unwillingness to let candidates speak in their own voice as opposed to either ignoring their words completely or editorializing them (Adatto, 1990; Hallin, 1994; Jamieson, 1992; Just et al., 1996; Patterson, 1993). A Roper Poll for the Freedom Forum study *Lethargy '96* found that "voters in various ways expressed a preference for receiving direct and unfiltered information about the campaign, preferring to judge the candidates themselves. Many voters wished that reporters would just get out of the way" (McGill, Szanto, & Johnston, 1997, p. 99). Forums that allow candidates and citizens to interact directly (e.g., debate formats permitting citizens to question candidates directly) have, moreover, been shown to provide more substantive information and analysis than the staples of "horse-race" coverage and punditry that often overwhelm candidate centered discourse (Patterson, 1993; Lichter & Noyes, 1995; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). In 1998, the president's Advisory Committee on the Public Interest Obligations of Digital TV Broadcasters (the "Gore Commission") responded to mounting criticism engendered in such findings by recommending that "5 minutes of candidate-centered discourse" be broadcast during each evening on TV newscasts for 30 days preceding the election. We document the local television news response to this recommended "5/30 standard," measuring the amount of candidate-centered discourse, as opposed to his or her statements being summarized by a reporter, broadcast in the Twin Cities metro market.

Other codes require more explanation. Our interest was not only in constructing an inventory of candidates and issues studied, but also in the subtler aspects of the way in which stories were presented. While more subtle, features of stories such as the tone in which they are presented are extremely powerful influences on the way in which citizens think about a campaign (Hetherington, 1996; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Mendelsohn, 1996; Robinson, 1976). With this end in mind, our team of assistants coded all stories for the tone of the frame of the story and for the tone of its content. We mean by the tone of the frame of the story the valence of the manner in which the station *presented* the story. There were four possible codes: positive, negative, balanced, or neutral. Positive or negative codes were given to stories that contained a positive or negative frame for only one of the candidates; in a balanced frame the station made equal time for both candidates, whereas a neutral frame contained no valence at all. For example, the 2000 Senate election in Minnesota included some controversy over Democratic challenger Mark Dayton's ownership of drug stocks. A hypothetical positive framing of this story might begin "In the race for the U.S. Senate today, Republican candidate Rod Grams

continued lively questioning of the appropriateness of Mark Dayton's ownership of drug stocks . . . "; a negative framing of the story might say "In the race for the U.S. Senate today, Republican candidate Rod Grams continued to call Mark Dayton a liberal hypocrite for his ownership of drug stocks . . . "; a balanced frame might begin "In the race for the U.S. Senate today, Republican candidate Rod Grams continued to call Mark Dayton a liberal hypocrite for his ownership of drug stocks. Dayton responded that Grams is just trying to shift the debate from the real issues . . . "; and a neutral framing might simply say that the candidates continued to debate Mark Dayton's ownership of drug stocks. Coding the framing of the story involved considerations beyond the introductory material, but this example illustrates how the same story can be given a very different spin by the news station.

We also considered patterns in the presentation that attributed judgment or meaning to content as well as the topical focus of a story, which could also be considered positive, negative, neutral, or balanced. Topical content pertained to the subject matter of a story and the kinds of campaign news on which the television media were focused. In conjunction with tone of frame, it is also an indication of whether media presentation of stories tends to be a product of the tone of the story itself (Just et al., 1996) or whether Minnesota television stations work harder to separate the two.

News media have a tendency to focus on politics as a battle of strategies rather than a debate about ideas (Iyengar, 1991; Jamieson, 1992; Patterson, 1993), and "conflict" and "horse-race" framing have been associated with declining feelings of interest and efficacy on the part of voters.[2] We therefore paid particular attention to these themes, coding instances in which a story focused on conflict in the campaign, for example the trading of accusations between candidates, or on some other aspect of the campaign such as the implications of the election for public policy or a candidate's ideas. Finally, when television stations did cover issues, we were interested in whether their presentation of the issue was "episodic" or "thematic." These concepts, which are associated with the work of Iyengar (1991), concern the framing of a news item or issue as a single "episode" or event, in contrast to presentations that place an event or issue in the context of broader themes or more complete, and often abstract, notions of causation. According to Iyengar, "episodic framing depicts concrete events that illustrate issues, while thematic framing presents collective or general evidence" (p. 14). For example, the issue of winter heating costs in Minnesota may be presented with a "thematic" frame by placing a given event in the context of a broader debate about issues of energy policy. Instead, a story by KARE, which focused on the single case of how a school bus driver would cope with much higher costs, illustrates the episodic framing we observed as the predominant approach taken by the Twin Cities stations in their election news coverage. Indeed, as other studies have shown, episodic framing is far more common than thematic presentation styles in American television news. The consequence of episodic framing, according to Iyengar, is that viewers are less likely to attribute responsibility for their current status to public officials, meaning that public officials are held less accountable for their actions.[3]

We devoted considerable time to perfecting the coding instrument and to training our team of assistants. We developed a clear set of codes that were well understood by our coders. Training included hours of watching, coding, and discussing examples of stories as a group and with individual coders. For example, we spent three 2-hour sessions discussing the framing codes alone. When we were satisfied with the levels of understanding, we allowed real coding to begin with four teams of three coders who independently viewed and coded stories, comparing their judgments. The coding teams

also independently assessed a subset of 5% of each other's coding judgments. Levels of agreement were extremely high. Overall, there was disagreement on *any* code for only 20% of stories. Disagreements were resolved by discussion and majority decision among the authors and members of all groups. For the five key variables in our content analysis, the raw agreement scores ranged from 86% for episodic versus thematic coverage to 100% for coverage of issues. The lowest value for Scott's (1955) pi (a measure of intercoder reliability that accounts for the possibility of chance agreement between coders) was .79 for the episodic versus thematic focus of a story. This is an acceptable level of agreement by conventional standards (Leng & Wheeler, 1979; Shyles, 1984), and the pi values for three of the five measures were much higher.

In addition to coding all local evening news broadcasts from August 13 until the day of the election, we sought the opinions on local news of Minneapolis and St. Paul metro area residents by conducting a series of seven focus groups during the 2000 campaign. Three took place in Northfield and one in Owatonna, small towns at distances of 50 and 75 miles, respectively, from the Twin Cities. Two focus groups were held in Minneapolis and one was held in Apple Valley, a southern suburb in the 7-county metro area. We chose these locations in an effort to obtain opinions representative of differences among urban, rural, and suburban places in the Twin Cities media market. Groups varied in size from 6 to 12. Discussions were guided by trained facilitators using a protocol standardized by the researchers, who observed the group sessions on closed-circuit television. The discussions ranged over a variety of topics; all groups included discussion of local news in Minnesota, in particular the following core questions: Who watches local news at 5 or 6 o'clock or 10 o'clock? How satisfied are you with the news that you're getting? What is the role of local television news in a campaign—and what should it be? We also showed excerpts of local news coverage of the presidential and Senate campaigns and asked subjects in a deliberately open-ended, unstructured way for their reactions.

Findings

We divide our findings into four sections reflecting the main aspects of news coverage represented in our data. First, we examine the amount of coverage of the campaigns, both in total and by level of office. In the second section, we look at the content of this coverage evaluated in terms of how much of it was issue oriented, focused on the candidates, or concerned with the horse-race aspect of the campaigns—polls rather than policy. If these stories mentioned the candidates, we also ask how much of the story involved the candidate, rather than the anchor or reporter, talking about the story's subject matter. Third, we explore the *tone* of news coverage, both the frame and the content, in general and for specific candidates. Finally, we ask what drives the coverage of individual news stations and the extent to which stations take their cues from their competitors as much as from the status of the campaign.

Amount of Coverage

Minnesota television stations devoted about one twelfth of their "news hole" to campaign news. Figure 1 displays coverage for all of the evening newscasts of the four channels, where Day 1 on the *x* axis is August 13 and the *y* axis is the total number of seconds of news devoted to the campaign. Each point on the *y* axis represents 5 minutes. *In all three newscasts combined*, each station spent no more than 10 minutes of

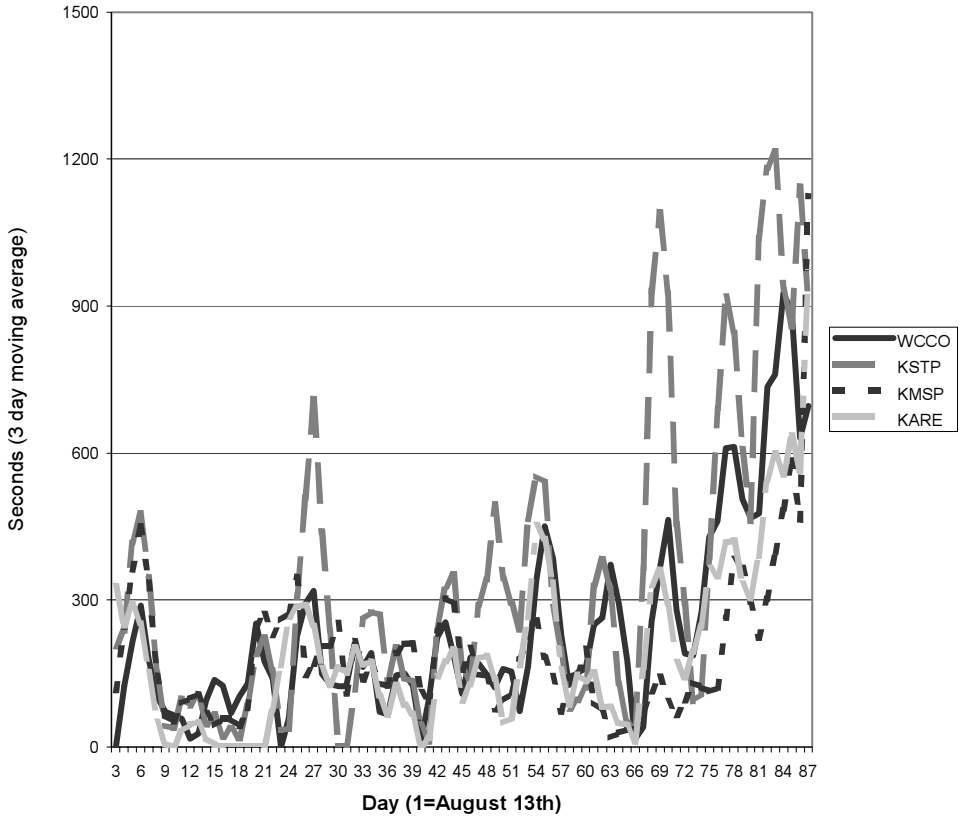

Figure 1. Overall coverage of campaigns (in seconds).

news on the campaign. If we assume that the news hole for each program is 10–14 minutes for a 30 minute newscast and 12–17 minutes for a 35-minute newscast, 10 minutes among four stations represents one twelfth of possible news time. Coverage increased slightly as the Democratic primary approached (Day 31) and again toward the end of the campaign. Although the channels were similar in this dimension of their coverage, KSTP (ABC) offered significantly more time to campaign news coverage, perhaps because it permitted local candidates free airtime on various occasions during its second broadcast of the evening.

The candidates in the 2000 presidential campaign devoted a significant amount of resources to their campaigns in Minnesota. Having voted for the Democratic candidate in every election since 1972, Minnesota was used to being ignored. For most of 2000 it was business as usual—as little as 5 weeks before election day, polls showed Democratic presidential candidate Albert Gore with a 7-point lead in the state—but in the last month the race grew much tighter, bringing Gore and Republican vice-presidential candidate Richard Cheney to the state and leading to the airing of several presidential ads. As a result, we might expect to see an increase in the attention given the presidential race by the local news stations in October. Simultaneously, the Minnesota race for the United States Senate was heating up, as were three highly contested congressional races. Given the rhetorical commitment made by the stations to inform citizens, and the existing high levels of attention paid to presidential elections, we might expect to see a

"division of labor" between national networks covering national news and local stations covering elections for the state's representatives in the United States Congress (and campaigns for state and local offices). If local news is representative of citizen interest in local matters, the documented interest of Minnesota citizens in politics, particularly in their own communities, also warranted our expectation of local election news coverage.

Figure 2 shows the offices with which the campaign stories that were aired were concerned. Because the trends in coverage were very similar for each station, we present the average number of stories per day for all four stations combined (as a 3-day moving average). Figure 2 illustrates that stories about the presidential race far outnumbered other election coverage throughout the period of analysis and that coverage of the campaign for president increased over time. Meanwhile, the stations did not focus nearly as much on the United States Senate race between incumbent Republican Rod Grams and his Democratic challenger Mark Dayton, even though the polls also showed that race to be tightening with about a month to go, meaning that the difference in the amount of coverage of the presidential and Senate races also increased over time. Indeed, sustained coverage of the Senate campaign peaked just before the Democratic primary in early September. In short, on local news the presidential race trumped Minnesota's Senate race. Treatment of the House races was even more striking. Despite the potential switch in the balance of power in the House, and the close races in Minnesota's second, fourth, and sixth districts, House campaigns received less than one tenth of the attention of the presidential race. Candidates and races for state and local office received even less coverage. In short, coverage of the campaign by local news stations was scarcely local.

Content of Coverage

Our first question about content of coverage concerns the proportion of campaign stories that involved issues and the extent of coverage of the issues mentioned. The results of our analysis are presented in Figure 3. This figure shows two levels of coverage

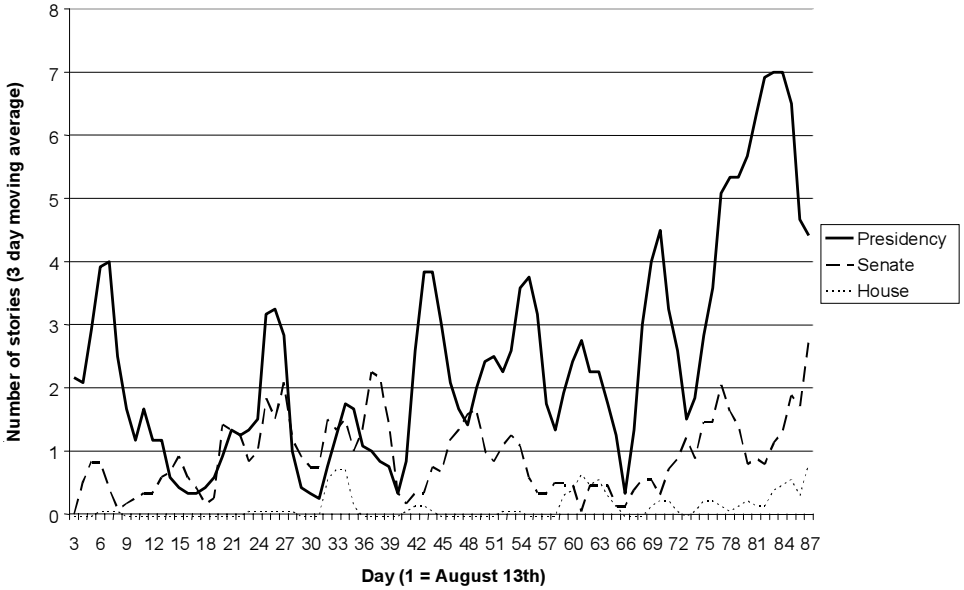

Figure 2. Office involved.

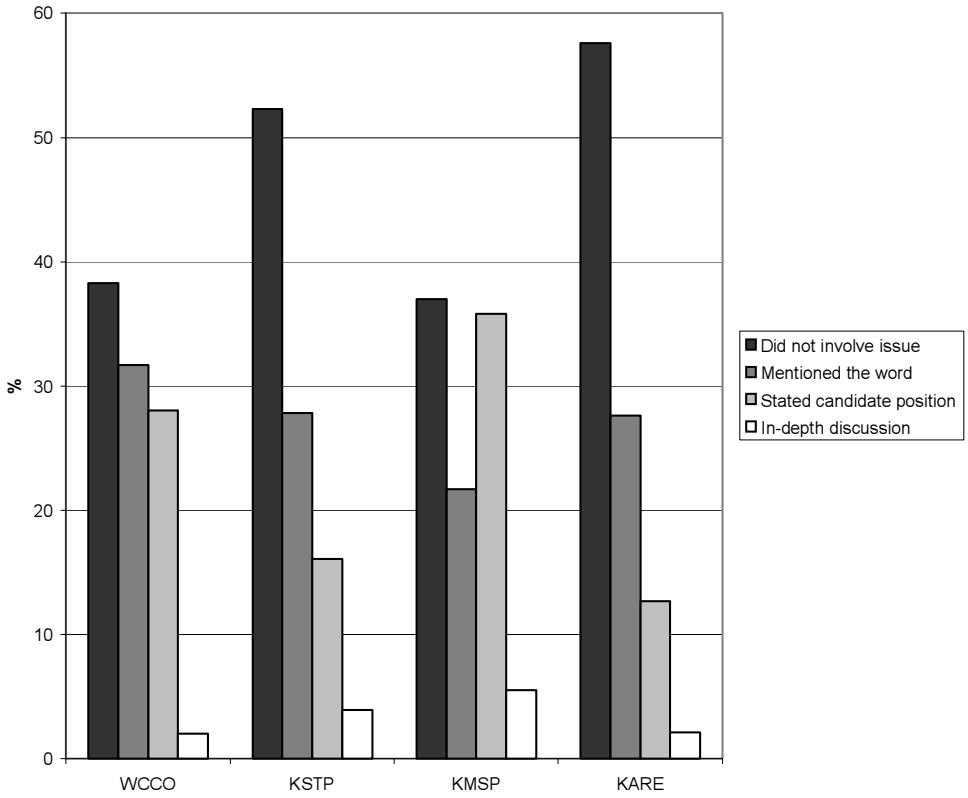

Figure 3. Coverage of issues.

among the four stations. In the stories of WCCO (CBS) and KMSP (Fox), issues were an aspect of the story more than 60% of the time, whereas this was the case in fewer than 50% of campaign stories covered by KSTP (ABC) and KARE (NBC).

As Figure 3 indicates, there was very little in-depth discussion of issues by any of the stations—fewer than 6% of stories in which issues were featured offered in-depth analysis. Citizens who wanted to know more than the merest details about candidates' stances on the issues would have to search elsewhere. However, Figure 3 also shows clear differences among the four stations. KSTP (ABC) and KARE (NBC) paid less attention to issues than the other stations, while KMSP (Fox) featured the candidates' positions on issues a bit more than the other stations did.

In our focus groups, we presented citizens with examples of the kinds of campaign stories being aired. On the topic of issue coverage, we heard citizens express frustration both with its superficiality and with the attempt by the stations to make it appear more substantive:

> *Respondent 1*: You get 30 or 45 seconds of hype for going "beyond the sound bites."
> *Respondent 2*: Yeah, but it's so quick.
> *Respondent 1*: It's self-promotion. Do it; don't tell me you're going to do it.
> *Respondent 2*: It comes on, you know, but then it's just two little things. I

> thought they'd go a little deeper. And I keep waiting for the next part, but then it spins off again.

Figure 4 presents another aspect of issue coverage: the extent to which stations discussed issues episodically or thematically (defined above). This aspect of the presentation of issues matters because issue framing has been correlated with attributions of responsibility for public problems and public policies. Episodic framing contributes to the belief that the causes of a given public concern (e.g., poverty) may be found in the particular circumstances of an individual life rather than in broader institutional or systemic sources. Such beliefs may affect not only sense of civic obligation but also the content of civic activities in which citizens choose to engage. Figure 4 shows that all stations presented a majority of their stories with an episodic rather than a thematic frame. Indeed, for KARE (NBC) it was the vast majority; WCCO (CBS) and KMSP (Fox) were the most likely to cover issues with a more complex thematic frame.

Our analysis of election coverage framing also raises a related question: In stories involving candidates, to what extent were the candidates seen and permitted to speak for themselves as opposed to a reporter summarizing their statements? In the minds of many voters, knowing how candidates look and sound is crucial to appraising their potential as elected officials. Indeed, some have argued that even minor actions or statements by the candidates can be extremely revealing in terms of providing clues about the kind of

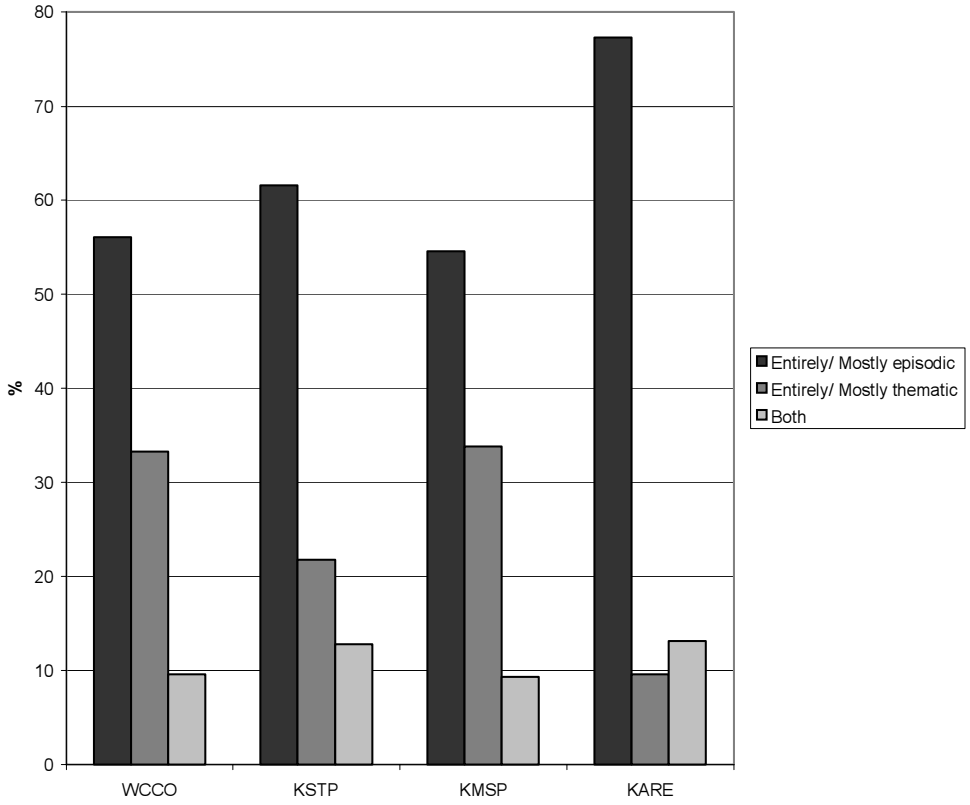

Figure 4. Episodic and thematic coverage of issues.

public official a candidate would make (Popkin, 1991), and citizens are frustrated with "excessive media commentary" pushing aside direct access to candidates (McGill et al., 1997).

Correspondingly, we looked at the amount of candidate-centered discourse aired by local news stations. By candidate-centered discourse, we mean stories in which the candidate was heard to speak in his or her voice, as opposed to a reporter or anchor presentation about the campaign. When candidates speak, they must "say *something,*" and when journalists convey candidate discourse they must scrutinize its claims (Just et al., 1996, pp. 237–239). As we have indicated, either approach may serve voters well; neither alternative emerged in our data as the favored mode of campaign coverage. We calculate candidate-centered discourse as the average number of seconds of candidate discourse for each story that mentioned one or more candidates. Sometimes these stories contained no segments in which the candidates were heard; at other times, as in KSTP's (ABC) allowance of free airtime for local candidates, there were several minutes in which a candidate was seen and heard. Despite this apparently generous coverage, we were surprised to find that the average length of candidate discourse on KSTP was only 16.53 seconds, marginally better than KARE (NBC) at 12.52 seconds and WCCO (CBS) at 9.96 seconds devoted to candidate-centered discourse. This finding suggests that, excluding free airtime, in stories that mentioned the candidates these three channels actually showed them speaking for an average of about 10 seconds. We should also point out that these 10 seconds often involved discourse from more than one candidate. KMSP (Fox) again offered more, with average candidate-centered discourse at 20.39 seconds, an eternity compared to the other stations but still scarcely enough time to hear a candidate say very much.

When candidates did not speak at length on their own behalf, how often did a reporter summarize their positions, showing footage of the candidate speaking while providing a voiceover?[4] Figures 5 and 6 show the patterns for stories mentioning the

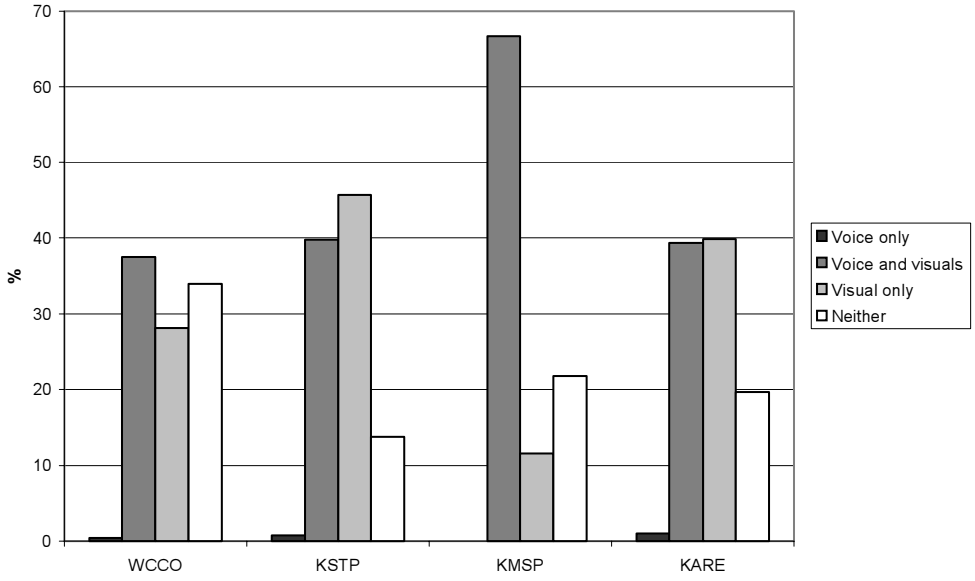

Figure 5. Candidate voice and visuals: presidency.

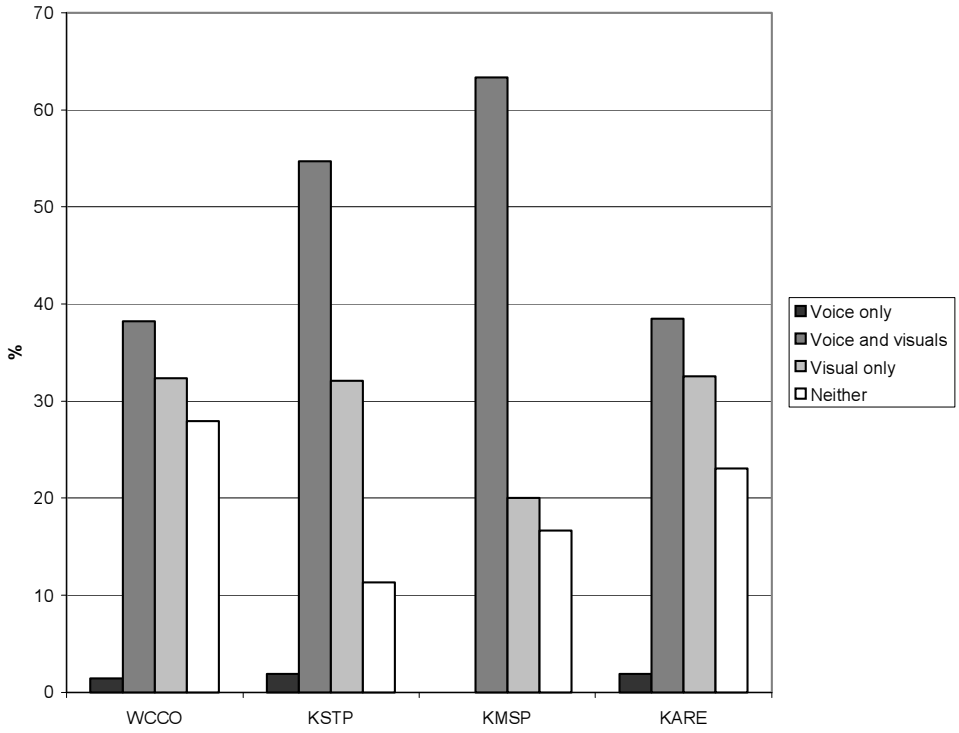

Figure 6. Candidate voice and visuals: Senate.

presidential and Senate candidates. Findings are similar across channels for both levels of office, although KSTP (ABC) was more likely to let the Senate candidates speak more than the presidential candidates.[5] This finding offers a rare instance in which local candidates received more consideration from local media than national candidates. However, for three of the four stations fewer than half of the stories that referred to the presidential *or* Senate races included the candidates speaking for themselves. Most consisted of a reporter talking over film of the candidate, particularly for the presidential race, or simply the reporter speaking about the candidate (i.e., no pictures at all). The exception was KMSP (Fox), which in its hour long newscast was more likely to allow candidates to speak for themselves.

These findings beg the following question: When the stations were not focusing on, or at least mentioning, policy issues or the candidates, what *were* they talking about? A plurality of stories on all channels, according to our data, were concerned with the horse race—polls, who was up and who was down, and second guessing campaign strategies, including the rationale for the candidates' itineraries and other choices along the campaign trail. Previous studies (e.g., Just et al., 1996) have shown that this kind of story does little to inform or stimulate citizens. In our study, the stations also devoted few resources to ad watches that, in aiding citizens in the interpretation of candidates' advertising, may better inform their choices than knowledge of the latest poll standings (Jamieson, 1992).

Citizens who participated in our focus groups indeed criticized these aspects of local news, particularly the empty promises of detailed coverage. These patterns in

Minnesota television news broadcasts lowered respect for and trust in these information sources. As one subject explained, the news stations seemed to exaggerate small details rather than offering substantial information to voters:

> It doesn't last a minute and the next day you can't find it in the paper unless you look through to page 16, [or] page 12 in the B section, and think, "Wait a minute, the channel on the TV [that] I was watching last night had this as the big hook to get me to watch the 10 o'clock news, and it's this far buried and it's only 3 paragraphs." It just feels like you can't trust what they say are big stories on the 10 o'clock news . . . so now that you're talking about political "news," can you trust that either?

Tone of Content of Coverage

Our focus groups not only voiced their discontent with the amount and content of campaign coverage, but also raised concerns with the cynical or negative tone of many local campaign news stories. We therefore looked at the tone of election 2000 coverage in two ways. First, we considered the frame of the story and the substance of the story, focusing on whether the stations presented campaign stories in a positive or negative light and how such tonality varied by candidate and office.

In addition, we were interested in the relationship between a story's frame and content. Did the tone of frame and content correspond? Or did news anchors and reporters frame their stories with a tone that differed from that of the story's content? Differences in content and tone may reflect journalists' or news producers' efforts to distance themselves from the campaigns, to be more objective. In all, it is not only the sheer amount of campaign coverage but also such factors as the amount of candidate-centered discourse and the relationship between tone and content that indicate how well local news stations covered election 2000.

Our data show that the stations varied little in the relationship between the tone of the frame and content of stories. In the overwhelming majority of stories, over 85% for all stations, they were the same. If a story's subject matter was negative, local news stations did not distance themselves (and therefore the viewer) from the story in terms of how it was presented but rather adopted the negative tone promoted by the candidate. That being the case, Figures 7 and 8 combine tone of frame and tone of content of coverage for each station and take the average of the two, first for Bush and then for Gore, beginning after September 12, the date of the Democratic primary in Minnesota. In our preprimary analysis of tone, we failed to distinguish stories that were neutral in tone from those that were balanced. Our initial analysis and focus group discussions indicated, however, that this was a distinction with a difference, leading us to return to the data to recode this variable. As the figures indicate, the distinction between a story that contained equal amounts of positive and negative elements and a story conveying a neutral tone is, indeed, an important one.

The tone of frame and the tone of content of stories were similar for the two candidates. The stations again divide into two groups, with WCCO (CBS) and KMSP (Fox) differing from KSTP (ABC) and KARE (NBC). Overall, most stories were either neutral or balanced. Stories aired by WCCO and KMSP were more often balanced, while those airing on KSTP and KARE were more often neutral. Neutrality may be a function of superficial coverage. For example, we coded as neutral the framing given to a KSTP story about the presidential race that began "The presidential candidates are turning into quite

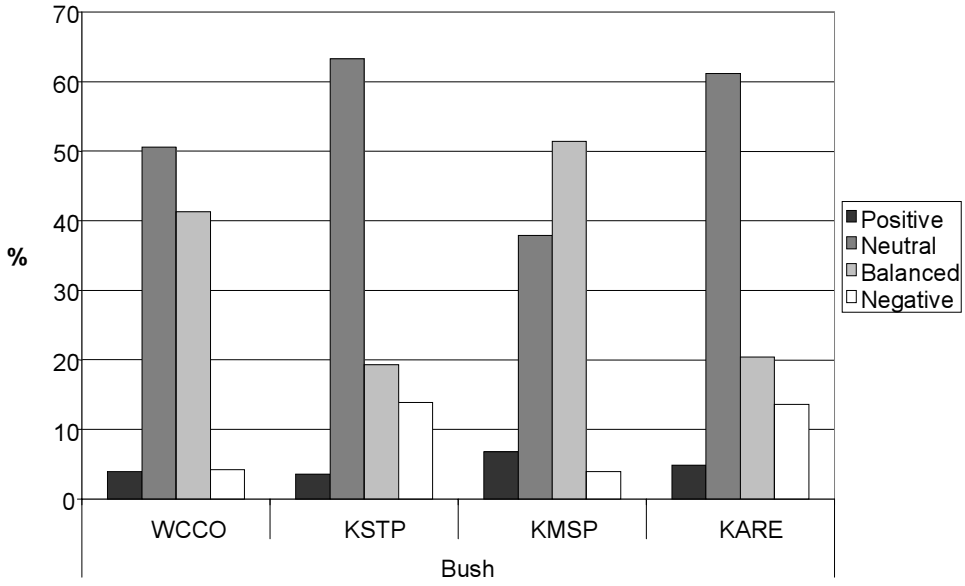

Figure 7. Tone of frame and content of stories involving Bush (after September 12).

the frequent fliers. All told, both Gore and Bush hit seven swing states today. . . . " In fact, neutrality may be a function of the lack of depth in much of the KSTP and KARE coverage, which gave neutral accounts of the candidates' daily itineraries and categorical representations of candidate issue positions, establishing neither a positive nor negative valence to frame or tone. Similarly, "balance" does not imply a positive tone. Efforts to analyze or balance candidate claims often resulted when journalists supplied a negative frame to story content. For example, one station's story about a controversial campaign leaflet in the 6th district race between two male candidates finished by saying "The 'he said, she said' will finally end election day when *all* is said and done." As these figures show, we found that KSTP and KARE were more often negative in their coverage of stories when there was more depth. Given their greater propensity to provide their own commentary over pictures of the candidates, this finding implies that at least some of this negativity came from the stations.

Our data (not shown) revealed similar patterns for the Senate race coverage. Although WCCO (CBS) and KMSP (Fox) were less neutral and less negative than KSTP (ABC) and KARE (NBC), all of the stations were more negative in their coverage of local candidates than they were in their coverage of the presidency.

What Drives Campaign Coverage?

One hypothesis explaining the changing quantity and quality of coverage during an election campaign is that news media (like campaigners) follow the polls (e.g., Jamieson, 1992). When a candidate is leading or gaining, he or she receives more coverage, and more positive coverage, than if he or she is losing or slipping in the polls. Another factor influencing a given news broadcaster's campaign coverage, however, may be what the other stations are doing. News stations are often portrayed as so competitive that they

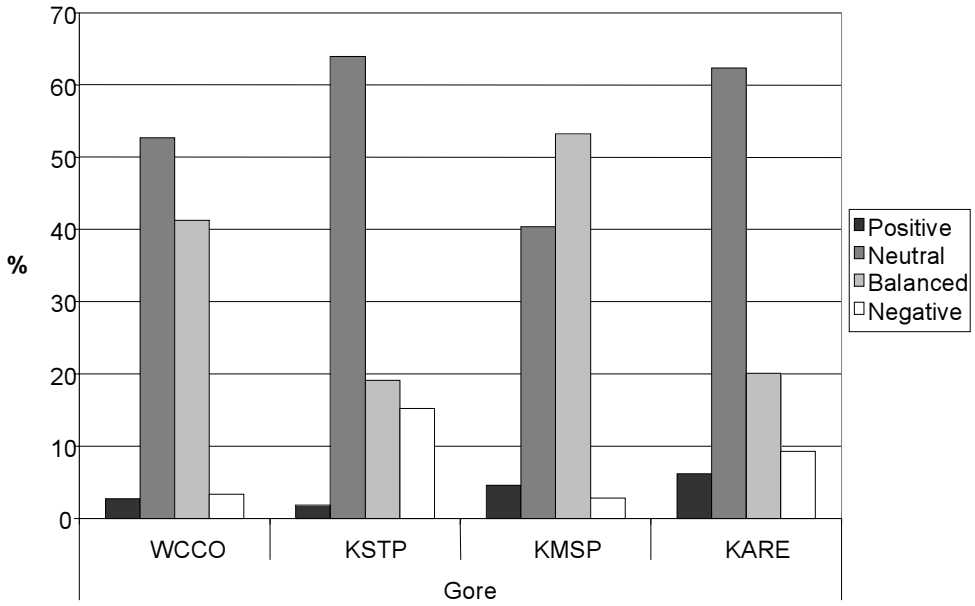

Figure 8. Tone of frame and content of stories involving Gore (after September 12).

are constantly monitoring each other and forming their perceptions of the world from inside their own offices, where "the only windows on the outside world are TV monitors, bringing in the signals of the competing news organizations."[6] While this possibility is frequently mentioned, to our knowledge it has not been tested empirically. Time series data for all four stations along with daily trial-heat polls from the presidential race allow us to compare the relative importance of polling information with other stations' programming choices as possible factors influencing a given station's election coverage. Our data indicate that local news was dominated by the presidential race, suggesting that coverage of election 2000 was influenced by the status of this national race and lending validity to our claim that the trial-heat polls suffice for this comparison.

We began with no expectations about the amount of coverage devoted to the campaign by different stations or of the appropriate lag length for changes in amount of campaign coverage. We therefore used a vector autoregression (VAR) model with Granger causality tests to estimate these factors (Freeman, Williams, & Lin, 1989), regressing each variable in the model on past values of itself and on past values of the other variables in the model. *F* tests of each block of variables then show whether one or more variables are a leading indicator of another. These relationships could be reciprocal, for example if two stations track each other's coverage.

In our model, we looked at coverage per newscast of the campaign on WCCO (CBS), KSTP (ABC), KMSP (Fox), KARE (NBC), and the presidential polls in 2000. We also controlled for any systematic differences in coverage due to the time the newscast was aired and for weekends.[7] We therefore modeled WCCO's amount of campaign coverage as a function of WCCO's prior (see below) amount of campaign coverage, KSTP's prior amount of campaign coverage, KMSP's prior amount of coverage, KARE's prior amount of coverage, and prior presidential polls; KSTP's coverage as a function of prior coverage by KSTP, WCCO, KSTP, KMSP, and presidential polls; KMSP's coverage

as a function of prior coverage by KMSP, WCCO, KSTP, KARE, and presidential polls; and so on. Block *F* tests then indicated whether changes in coverage by one station were significantly related to changes in coverage by another.

The first step was to calculate the lag length. Likelihood ratio tests, beginning with a lag length of 15, or 5 days of evening newscasts (3 per day), indicated that 6 lags worked best. In concrete terms, this lag period means that an issue receiving increased attention because of a particular event results in a ripple of successive related news stories on subsequent days. For example, when a video of George W. Bush rehearsing for the presidential debate was lost, the story rippled across news broadcasts over a 2-day period. Using this lag length, we then looked at the relationships between changes in coverage among stations and the polls. Figure 9 presents our findings. A curved arrow signifies that a station's past amount of coverage was related to its later coverage. The direction of all of the relationships is positive.

Figure 9 shows that the amount of coverage of the campaign on local news stations was not substantially influenced by the polls. Only KMSP's (Fox) attention to the campaign appears to have varied, increasing when the race became closer and decreasing when the race appeared in the polls to be one-sided. The model shows that for some stations the campaign coverage of another station was a factor in their production decisions. This was particularly true of KSTP (ABC) and KMSP. To be sure, these particular findings do not say anything about the quality of coverage, but they do indicate that stations were, in some instances, taking their cues from their competitors about what was newsworthy. WCCO (CBS) and KARE (NBC) were very influential in this sense, both affecting the amount of coverage on their two rival stations.

For example, one of the campaign issues raised in September concerned rising oil prices and whether President Clinton should increase supply by dipping into the strategic petroleum reserve. Both WCCO (CBS) and KARE (NBC), the clear ratings leaders, covered this story in their first evening newscasts; it was the top story on KARE. (In keeping with the findings reported above, the stations' coverage differed in style. WCCO provided greater detail and footage of the candidates speaking about the issue that day. KARE spent under a minute on the story, showing the candidates campaigning while the anchor summarized their positions, concluding that "regardless [of what position candidates hold], people here at home want some answers before the big bills set in.")

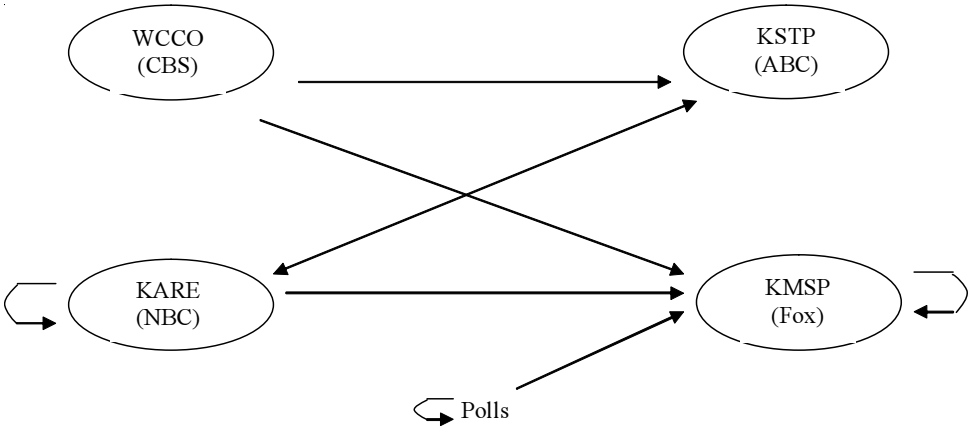

Figure 9. What drives the amount of coverage on local news stations?

In contrast to the market leaders that ran the story in their first evening newscast, KSTP (ABC) had *no* coverage of this or any other campaign story in its opening newscast. In its next newscast, however, KSTP segued from a story concerning Minnesota Senator Paul Wellstone's views on oil prices to show the same footage of Al Gore as the other channels, with commentary from a reporter who said:

> The vice president, meantime, proposed forcing oil prices down by tapping into the U.S. government's emergency petroleum reserve. Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush says using up our reserve would only provide a short-term solution and could risk national security. Instead, Bush proposed the U.S. should spend more on domestic petroleum.

We found very similar patterns in additional VAR models examining coverage of different offices (results available on request). For example, attention to the U.S. Senate race in Minnesota was very much related to what the market leaders, WCCO (CBS) and KARE (NBC), were doing. Interestingly, the two stations whose coverage was poorest by our criteria, KSTP (ABC) and KARE, were also the stations that showed a negative relationship between coverage of the races for the House and the race for the Senate. In other words, these stations limited the time they devoted to races below the presidential level: The more attention they paid to House races, the less they paid to the Senate race, and vice versa. This finding is indicative once again of the secondary status accorded to local races—a result perhaps of a trend (of which local news stations in Minnesota are an example) in which local ownership has given way to national ownership by a diminishing number of corporations (Alger, 1998).

Discussion and Conclusion

We began this survey of Twin Cities news coverage by placing our study in the broader context of Minnesota's high level of civic interest and involvement and current concerns of researchers about the health of American civil society. We return to this context to discuss our results, taking up the insights of Alexis de Tocqueville to which most contemporary studies of civic engagement refer. In 1835, Tocqueville described the power of newspapers in the United States and their general importance to a voluntaristic society:

> A newspaper is a counselor that one does not need to go seek, but that presents itself of its own accord and that speaks to you briefly each day of common affairs without disturbing your particular affairs. . . . [I]n democratic countries . . . many men who have the desire or the need to associate cannot do it, because all being very small and lost in the crowd, they do not see each other and do not know where to find each other. Up comes a newspaper that exposes to their view the sentiment or the idea that had been presented to each of them simultaneously but separately. All are immediately directed toward that light, and those wandering spirits who had long sought each other in the shadows finally meet each other and unite. (Tocqueville, 2000, p. 493)

Tocqueville's "art and science of association" and its critical role in a democracy are sufficiently well known as to require little elaboration. He observed a strong reciprocal relationship among ad hoc collective actions addressing public issues directly, civil and

political associations, and public media. It was not only the existence of a free press or humanity's ubiquitous potential for sociability but the rich ecology formed by numerous newspapers and associations that, in his view, set the United States apart from other postrevolutionary societies. The "decentralization" of informing media and governance enabled citizens to participate politically (in direct collective action as well as in electoral processes as voters, candidates, and officeholders), bringing vital political experience necessary to transform political *information* into the *knowledge* of self-government —in Tocqueville's words, "the new science of politics" (p. 7). Democratic norms would not long prevail, he concluded, if local liberty and local knowledge were lost and the connection between experience and information severed (Tocqueville, 1998, 2000; Allen, 1991; Allen, O'Loughlin, Jasperson, & Sullivan, 1994). Although observations of every measure of civic well-being attest to the health of Minnesota's civil society, our study suggests that the same may not be true of the other variable in Tocqueville's formulation, informing local news media.

Local television news broadcasts can play a critical role in stimulating and informing citizens about local problems, local governance, and local candidates. During the time period of our study of all evening broadcasts on the four Twin Cities channels, the 10 p.m. programs were viewed by almost 70% of people watching television at that time in November 2000. Our evidence suggests that the Twin Cities television news failed in three ways to play the critical role envisioned in democratic theory.

First, local news was not local. Although some attention was accorded to the U.S. Senate contest, little or no attention was given to other campaigns. The balance between the coverage of local and national elections became increasingly skewed as the presidential race tightened in the state, despite the competitiveness of several local elections *and* the highly contested U.S. Senate and House races, with their broad implications for control of the Congress. The national networks pay extensive attention to the presidential race, making their film and analysis readily available to local affiliates. With such assess to network resources, presidential races may be easier for a local station to cover than even a U.S. Senate race. Local news broadcasts may also focus on national elections to probe an important local angle on national affairs. Our data show little evidence that the putative local spin on presidential politics was substantive.

Why does the relative balance between local and national election news coverage matter? According to social capital literature, most people undertake their civic missions in local arenas of governance. By failing to cover local campaigns adequately, local news media signal the relatively greater importance of the nation over the local community, shifting attention from local arenas associated with a variety of "civic virtues" (Galston, 1991). Our data do not permit a complete analysis of the consequences that follow when information about local politics is overwhelmed by the generic portrayal of national events. Nevertheless, the findings of other studies are suggestive. The focus on presidential campaigns can mean that campaign advertising provides more information about local candidates than does television news (Alliance for Better Campaigns, 2000; Kern, 1989; Patterson & McClure, 1976). Indeed, 48% of congressional advertising is aired locally (Goldstein & Freedman, 2000). Although research findings on the content and effect of 30-second campaign advertising are mixed, some studies show that a predominant pattern of superficial, negative advertising fails to stimulate, and may even dampen, political participation (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Lau, Siegelman, Heldman, & Babbit, 1999).

Second, our data reveal that whether stories concerned national or local races, they lacked substance. Despite promises made by some stations "to go behind the sound

bites" and provide at least 5 minutes of coverage a night, Twin Cities viewers could seldom find 5 minutes of coverage among the three evening newscasts combined. Similarly, there was little evidence of going beyond the sound bites in these stories. Coverage was also superficial in the predominance of episodic framing and lack of candidate-centered discourse. In our study, negative framing could appear as a function of the content of the story itself, but often broadcasters added to the negativity, sometimes in an effort to produce "depth." Candidates were not allowed to speak for themselves. They were either ignored entirely or pictured while reporters summarized their remarks, a practice of journalistic analysis that respondents in our focus groups found particularly frustrating given the overall nature of campaign coverage.

Finally, our data reveal a tendency for stations to calibrate their coverage of campaigns to that of the market leaders, KARE (NBC) and WCCO (CBS), which is not local in orientation, rather than to forge an independent path. If KMSP's (Fox) coverage is by some measures "better" and citizens such as those comprising our focus groups recognize such differences, why do they fail to switch from the ratings leaders? One possible answer may simply be that the documented difference in coverage depth and story length is too marginal to make a difference to viewers. Participants in our focus groups described all of the election news coverage as unsatisfactory. Perhaps an increase of few seconds in the average amount of election coverage does not supply sufficient motivation to abandon a favorite meteorologist or sportscaster. What our data do suggest is that following market leaders that provide relatively little local coverage—even if such mimicry results in stories of greater depth—may not serve local citizens' interests well.

Notes

1. Putnam's work on social capital has been the subject of extensive debate over matters such as definition, putative decline (Ladd, 1996), the role of the state as a producer of social capital (Levi, 1996; Skocpol, 1999a), and its relationship to representative democracy (Fiorina, 1999), but rarely on the place of the media (cf. Norris, 1995).

2. Valentino, Beckman, and Buhr (2001) present experimental evidence that horse-race coverage only has this effect on citizens who are least interested in politics, while having no effect on those most interested.

3. Iyengar presents episodic and thematic frames as a dichotomy, but stories may open with an episodic frame, focusing on how a policy affects "people like you" while also assessing the policy at a more abstract level. To account for this, we coded stories as entirely or mostly thematic, entirely or mostly episodic, or equally thematic and episodic.

4. What we are identifying here is mere summaries of candidate speech, summaries that can be misleading. If the story also provided in-depth analysis of the speech, it was picked up elsewhere in our coding sheet. Such instances were rare.

5. A regression of coverage of the candidates on whether the office involved was the presidency or the Senate showed the difference in coefficients for office involved did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance ($p < .14$).

6. The *New York Times,* "The Weight of an Anchor," Frank Rich (May 19, 2002).

7. We included dummy variables for two of the broadcast times and for weekends. Because these are exogenously determined, they are not part of the VAR Granger causality "system."

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