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Polarization, Media Bias, and General Opinion

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Polarization, Media Bias, and General Opinion
By Knole Ihle

Abstract

This article researches the relationship between three different spheres of influence: party identification, issue selection process in media, and the following changes in public opinion. This relationship was examined through a random sample of news organizations based on a specific issue. The number of articles was then documented for each newspaper and measured against the articles produced apropos to that issue in the previous year. The discrepancy in articles produced is then compared to contemporary policy to determine whether or not there is a correlation between these two relationships. Regarding the relationship between Ukraine-Russia War media and proceeding U.S. policy, it was concluded that these two spheres are correlated, considering the \$13 billion that has been provided as direct budgetary support to Ukraine by the end of 2022.

Introduction

How do ascendant issues maintain salience? This issue has long bothered many sociologists and political psychologists since the 1970s, as the primary political parties (Republicans and Democrats) in the United States have slowly shifted policy towards the opposing ends of the spectrum. Bureaucracy has subsequently shifted to a more stagnant influence as contemporary political fallout and deadlock weaken the government's ability to effectively pass policy. Even though the 2022 midterms are an exception to current political culture, power has routinely shifted between parties each election cycle, making it much more difficult for a president to have the support of the legislatures for only half of their term. While politics plays an integral role in maintaining salience, media is the catalyst of its ascendancy; consequently, political parties spend massive amounts of resources to circulate their agenda—This is known as the issue selection process, which parties have been increasingly focusing on to make their issues seem the most important as polarization (Yamaguchi, 2022). An example is statistics on the 2004 election voter pool's policy priorities: 86% of voters who answered that “terrorism” was the most critical issue were Bush voters, compared to 14% of Kerry voters. Conversely, 73% of voters who answered that “Iraq” was the most crucial issue were Kerry voters, compared to 27% of Bush voters (Yamaguchi, 2022). This illustrates how American voters will choose a candidate based on the issue they support the most in our two-party system. An analysis of how practical, specific issues from around the world compel public thought and, therefore, the policy would help discern a deeper understanding of how the mass public operates; furthermore, these results can facilitate effective collective action in the application. This research paper aims to portray the corrosive relationship between politics and media while illustrating its effect on general opinion and progressive policy.

Ascendancy is captivating since it considers the public's sociopolitical consensus while incorporating its unique cultural values and anticipated change. For example, this year's 2022 midterm elections are projected to spend at least 9.3 billion in ad campaigning for Senate and House races from both parties (Giorno, 2022). It is a record for midterm elections and represents a 32% increase from 2018—a very sharp uptake, representing the media's importance when educating the public. Most forms of entertainment can be accessed through media, whether that may be leisure or academic based. Maintaining a persistent media presence also keeps the public educated on real-world issues; however, there are multiple forms of media bias, especially with the seemingly exponential growth of social media (Yerlikaya & Aslan, 2020). Bias could be ideological, where owners, editors, or journalists present stories that support particular viewpoints. Bias could also be partisan, where the same employees publish stories

to support the policies or causes circulated by political parties or interest groups. Bias could also be due to the fabrication of information, which has been perpetuated through Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. In theory, bias should be filtered out by educated citizens who view biased news and register it as biased. Upon revisiting this news outlet, they are more skeptical and, therefore, likely to disregard its information. In the United States, most news media are owned by corporations, implying the control market would incentivize these media to maximize profits rather than perpetuate misleading personal views. However, viewers could demand news/entertainment that only adhere to their political and social viewpoints. If the public loses interest in a news team's recent agenda, they may revert to a different agenda/topic to capture a larger audience (Chong & Druckman, 2007). While this relationship is generally effective when educating the public, the public can lose interest in a particular topic over time. A primary example of this is the Ukraine war against Russia, where Russia invaded the Western portions of Ukraine under the premise of security. Although most Americans are aware this war is currently carrying over to its first anniversary, fewer of these Americans are aware of specifics that have happened in the war. This is the most significant conflict since the second world war and signifies the devastating consequences of Russia's military brutality, propaganda, and careless regard for international authority. It is essential to keep the public updated on the Russia-Ukraine war, but public interest appears to decrease as devastations in Ukraine worsen. This observation has allowed me to formulate my hypothesis: If media strategies invoke political partisanship, those media corporations will generate more interest from their viewership.

Quantitative Literature Review

Validity of Evidence

This investigation requires a comprehensive search and selection to ensure variability. While this may initially seem condescending, further research will illuminate how this meta-analysis is a prerequisite when considering the polarization of the United States public opinion; however, the link between media and politics must be established first. The growing relationship between media and politics is clearly underscored through the term *technological convergence*: when the boundaries between different technologies become blurred. Essentially, formerly separate networks slowly coalesce into a massive conglomerate of information (Cuilenberg & McQuail, 2003).

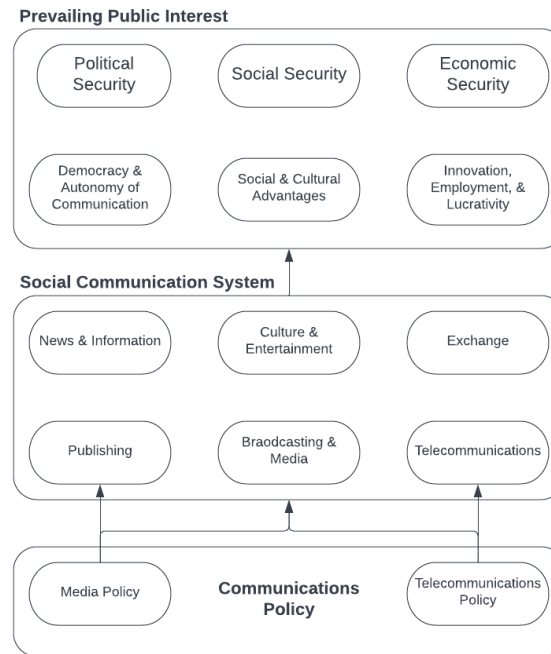


Figure 1: Elements of a National Communication Policy

The convergence of these fields allows corporations access to terabytes of personal data that constructs an online persona of an individual. This persona outlines likes and dislikes, tendencies, potential moods, and many more personal intimacies we consider private. It may seem obvious how politicians may want access to this data. Still, it is even more surprising to see what lengths politicians have already taken to manipulate public opinion. The Cambridge Analytica scandal of 2014 alleged that President Trump used the psychological Facebook profiles of tens of millions of users to appeal to their voter base (Confessore, 2018). The link was established through President Trump's appointment of John Bolton as National Security Advisor. The New York Times alleged that Cambridge provided Mr. Bolton with early versions of its facebook-derived profiles in 2014; however, Cambridge denies giving access to President Trump. It is essential to note how this relationship works both ways—politicians undergo an *issue selection process* that determines the best way to frame an argument (i.e., the way to capture the most extensive voter base). Intuitively, these arguments can be framed to make people more susceptible to their cause (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Considering the continuance of polarization in the United States House and Senate, political parties' access to the media becomes even more important, which refers us back to the 2014 Cambridge Analytica Scandal.

Shipan & Lowry highlight the current polarization in the United States over the past three decades (from 1920-1999) by accounting for intertemporal variability within the League of Conservation Voter scores (LCV). Regarding the issue of environmental safety, these researchers illustrate how Congress and the House are slowly becoming more partisan, diverging on average 25 points of LCV scores over the course of 29 years. With the understanding that the three spheres of influence—politics, media, and general opinion—are inextricably linked, it is now possible to examine the extent of this relationship. How effective is the issue selection process regarding the manipulation of public opinion?

Search and Selection Strategies

This meta-analysis requires two selection strategies since multiple fields were examined. The first selection strategy is derived from data I collected from 20 sources as additional evidence to corroborate my claim that media corporations will be more lucrative if they cultivate a political base. With this in mind, it is essential to draw data from various news corporations—Democrats and Republicans alike. However, these media companies must be prominent to affect national sentiment, or much of the data is irrelevant. A local newspaper will never have as much influence over general opinion compared to a notable, trustworthy news corporation. I chose to draw from 6 different newspaper organizations: *NYTimes*, *CNN*, *Washington Post*, *Fox News*, *CBS News*, and *ABC News*. These organizations are trustworthy sources and vary across the political spectrum; moreover, they were explicitly selected due to their bias rating from independent sources. The study to determine the polarity of each media source was determined by multitudes of people across the political spectrum. Blind Bias Surveys of Americans, Editorial Reviews by expert panelists who look for common types of media bias, independent reviews, and third-party data were used to evaluate bias behind each news outlet. It is essential to mention that this media bias chart only documents online content, not radio or television content; however, the online content is rated by a growing list of over 1,400 media bias ratings (Media Bias, 2022).

Far Left	Leans Left	Center	Leans Right	Far Right
-Alter Net -Buzzfeed News -CNN Online -MSNBC	-ABC -Associated Press -Bloomberg News -CBS News -NYTimes -NPR News Online -Politico -Guardian -Washington Post	-Axios -BBC -Newsweek -Wall Street Journal	-Fox News Business	-Breitbart News -Daily Mail -Daily Wire -The Federalist -Fox News Online

Moreover, the website community continually evaluates all these ratings. This data was collected using a rapid search model. While all of these articles were screened from a designated period under the specific phrase “Ukraine War,” not all were verified as apropos to the analyzed issue. All that being said, these articles were scanned between May 18, 2022—November 18, 2022. The number of pieces, n , produced from each news station was then measured against n 's value from the preceding year. Both n values will then be compared to the policy changes correlated to n 's issue space. The data from 2022 was first split into different sections to conclude whether or not the articles were all somewhat relevant to the Ukraine War and the United States' interests. Consequently, they were divided into two sections to see if the retrievable data was most relevant.

<p>Articles Written—United States Section</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>News Organization</th> <th>Articles Written</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>NYTimes</td> <td>~500</td> </tr> <tr> <td>CNN</td> <td>~200</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Washington Post</td> <td>~20</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	News Organization	Articles Written	NYTimes	~500	CNN	~200	Washington Post	~20	<p>Figure 2: Articles written for each news organization were measured to estimate the relevancy of the articles measured. The sum of this section was added to the “World” section to estimate the number of relevant articles.</p>		
News Organization	Articles Written										
NYTimes	~500										
CNN	~200										
Washington Post	~20										
<p>Articles Written—World Section</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>News Organization</th> <th>Articles Written</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>NYTimes</td> <td>~2500</td> </tr> <tr> <td>CNN</td> <td>~700</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Washington Post</td> <td>~400</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	News Organization	Articles Written	NYTimes	~2500	CNN	~700	Washington Post	~400	<p>Figure 3: This is the second graph used to acquire the figure to discern the relevance of articles.</p>		
News Organization	Articles Written										
NYTimes	~2500										
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Washington Post	~400										
<p>Articles Written—Total Relevance 2021</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>News Organization</th> <th>Articles Written</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>NYTimes</td> <td>~10</td> </tr> <tr> <td>CNN</td> <td>~65</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Wash. Post</td> <td>~5</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Fox</td> <td>~2</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	News Organization	Articles Written	NYTimes	~10	CNN	~65	Wash. Post	~5	Fox	~2	<p>Figure 4: This graph was measured against the number of articles published in 2022, so it could be determined whether or not there was an increase in articles published. Without this relationship, it would be impossible to connect media to politics.</p>
News Organization	Articles Written										
NYTimes	~10										
CNN	~65										
Wash. Post	~5										
Fox	~2										

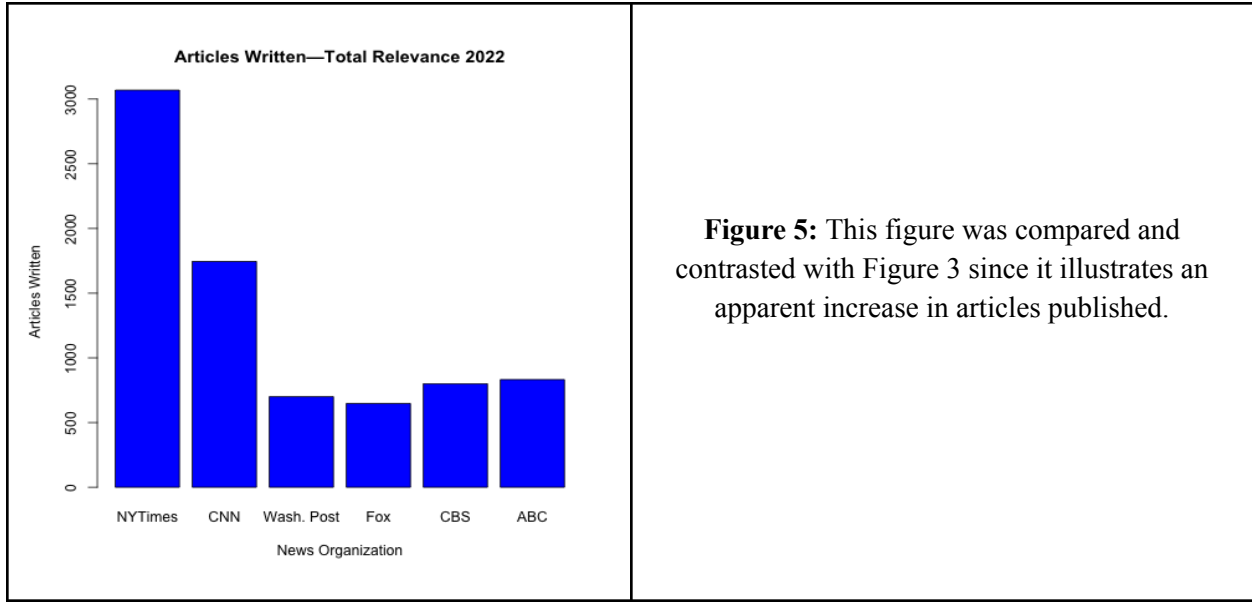


Figure 5: This figure was compared and contrasted with Figure 3 since it illustrates an apparent increase in articles published.

Results

By observing the data between May 18, 2021—November 18, 2021, and May 18, 2022—November 18, 2022, it was possible to distinguish a clear difference between the articles produced each year. Regarding the period of 2022, it was first split into different sections to see how relevant the articles were to the Ukraine War. The articles were subsequently separated into two sections: “United States” and “World”. Unfortunately, some newspaper outlets selected were unable to filter results by section, such as CBS and ABC, so their results are only available for the “Total Relevance” graph in 2022 because CBS and ABC cannot filter by dates either.

Regarding the United States and World filters for 2022, these results illustrated promising relevance. Of the articles written, including the United States’ interests, the New York Times published 549 articles, CNN published 193, and the Washington Post published 31. Of the articles written, including world interests, NYTimes published 2511 articles, CNN published 677, and the Washinton Post published 415.

Media: Specified Relevance Versus Total Relevance

Newspaper	NYTimes	CNN	Washington Post
Specified Relevance	3069	1745	700
Total Relevance	3060	870	446
Difference	9	875	254

Compared to the total amount of articles published for each newspaper, I calculated these differences between the total of both the United States and world articles and the total articles: NYTimes had a difference of 9, CNN had a difference of 875, and the Washington Post had a difference of 254. The discrepancy between each newspaper outlet's total relevant articles and specified relevant articles helps identify how many of these apply to the United States' sociopolitical status, which a vast majority of voters read. Moreover, even if some articles are not relevant for certain news organizations, they still illustrate how many of these news organizations are being accessed by millions of daily users for information, thus gaining paramount influence. It is also essential to mention that each newspaper website contains different algorithms to sort their articles, and variance is impossible to determine without this data.

In consistency with my hypothesis, the increase in media coverage of Ukraine can also be correlated with an increase in United States policy regarding Ukraine. As of November 22, 2022, the United States, through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and with cooperation from the U.S. Department of the Treasury and the Department of State, is contributing an additional \$4.5 billion in budgetary support to the Government of Ukraine—this makes a total of \$15.1 billion since Russia's invasion in February (Welt, 2022). Compared to a total of \$679.7 million in 2020*, this marks an unprecedented amount of military assistance to Ukraine, with a 2,221% increase in government aid from the United States (Foreign Assistance, 2022).

Discussion

From these graphs, there is a clear illustration of a correlation between events with U.S. relevance and the media. From the year 2021, there has been a significant decrease in articles regarding Ukraine and the United States; however, after Russia invaded in February, there has been a flood of reporting on the atrocities committed in Ukraine by Russian troops, along with the potential ramifications of the United States and Europe's national security. While it may seem straightforward that the media would mass report on the status of Ukraine out of worries about national security, ascendancy is often fickle, and maintaining salience is extremely difficult. Ascendant public opinion can emerge when two conditions exist in other issue spaces. First, proponents must successfully frame or define a new problem as apropos to a particular issue. Second, the new problem must rise in salience compared to older concerns on the issue's agenda (Konisky & Mullin, 2022). The second part of achieving a rise in salience is the most important and complicated step, which underscores how even though parties may disagree on specific issues, a solution will never come unless ascendant public opinion takes control.

Regardless, there is still an identifiable relationship between business and politics to influence the media: lobbyists. Lobbyists in the U.S. government hold a close relationship with corporations and politicians; therefore, these people can influence policy in ways that benefit corporations rather than the people's interests (Browne, 1985). However, it is essential to note that not all lobbyists operate this way—a gap in government control allows this corrosion to occur if lobbyists choose to do so, which often varies from policy to policy. This lack of supervision will enable lawmakers to alter specific policies in exchange for favors—such as donations towards the next campaign cycle that maintains a bureaucratic hegemony. Understanding the relationship between these spheres of influence and the issue selection process allows readers to further understand each media source's characteristics and inherent value by dissecting the presented information in each article.

This research would be interesting to pursue in the future since it illuminates the media and the government's subversive relationship with the general public. Regarding the initial hypothesis of media

corporations invoking political partisanship to spark viewership, I would argue that this would statistically likely happen in various issue spaces. However, this would not be true in all scenarios since ascendancy is unique to each scenario, although it may follow simple guidelines.

It is essential to mention in this paper that there was an obvious lack of samples and sample sizes during this study. Many news organizations require a subscription to access their articles, which further restricts the screening process. Moving forward, this was only a study of one specific scenario in which the hypothesis was proven right. There are multitudes of other events that could disprove this hypothesis or expand upon it differently. This study aimed to provide a methodical deconstruction of media, policy, and general opinion and evaluate these ideologies applied to contemporary society. Research done in the future may disprove these results, but that simply underscores how much more there is to know and investigate regarding media, policy, and general opinion.

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