

**From Network News to Cable Commentary:  
The Evolution of Television Coverage of the Party Conventions**

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Modern national party conventions are not what they once were. Before the late 1960s, party leaders dominated the nomination process. They controlled the party delegates and brokered the deals that ultimately determined the party's presidential nominee. However, after the defeat of Democrat Hubert Humphrey to Republican Richard Nixon in 1968, Democrats adopted reforms to their nomination process. The Democratic Party created the McGovern-Fraser Commission, which recommended that the presidential nomination process become more democratic and open to rank-and-file party members. To achieve that goal, the Democrats reformed their nomination rules so that primaries and caucuses became more important in determining the party's presidential nominee. Under the new rules, presidential candidates who won the primaries and caucuses earned "pledged delegates" and could secure the nomination before the actual convention took place. Shortly after the McGovern-Fraser reforms, the Republican National Committee established the Delegates and Organization Committee, which also recommended a more democratic nomination process. By 1976, both political parties had effectively transformed their nomination process (see e.g., Polsby 1983; DiClerico and Uslander 1984; Crotty and Jackson 1985; Reiter 1985).

While the reforms created a more democratic system, they also eliminated the suspense of multi-ballot voting during the convention that once determined the nomination winner. With the nomination battle now effectively determined *before* the party convention, there is less conflict and infighting on the convention floor and virtually no suspense or conflict to report. As a consequence, some in the mass media argue that the party conventions deserve only minimal coverage because they contain such little news value. In the words of former CBS anchor, Dan Rather, "The people who run the conventions have given the networks every reason to pass up the full coverage of the past by squeezing out any real news" (Lewis and Carter 2004).

In addition, the party itself is no longer the focus of its own convention. Party conventions now promote an image of party cohesion and unwavering support for the presidential nominee. The preordained candidate takes center stage in the dual effort of mobilizing the party base and attracting possible swing voters, leading some critics to charge that the party conventions resemble highly controlled television “infomercials.” As the party conventions have evolved into what some television network executives consider little more than made-for-television propaganda devices, media coverage from the big three broadcast networks (i.e., ABC, CBS, NBC) has steadily declined (Karabell 1998).

While the networks have largely turned away from the conventions, the cable news channels have picked up much of the coverage. CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News committed all of their prime time hours to covering each night of the conventions, and their increase in the ratings was substantial. MSNBC’s ratings doubled from 2000 to 2004, and Fox News’ audience increased by more than four fold (Kurtz 2004a). These increases are noteworthy because while many pundits and scholars have discussed the waning interest of the broadcast networks in covering the conventions, few political observers have given attention to how the cable channels have swept in, and how their coverage differs from that of the major networks.

This study offers an analysis of cable news coverage of the party conventions in 2004 and compares it to past and present network coverage. Our findings indicate that the parties’ attempts to control their public image by presenting the conventions as tightly choreographed “infomercials” has somewhat backfired in today’s cable news environment. Unlike the seldom-watched C-SPAN, which covers the floor speeches without interruption, CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News often forgo coverage of speakers and instead showcase analysis and debate among pundits, journalists, and politicians in a talk-show format. We will demonstrate that this type of

analysis is not always complementary and often riddled with political banter that would only appeal to those who are the most politically interested and partisan. This type of coverage also runs the risk of embittering and alienating swing voters.

### **Party Conventions on Network Television**

Philadelphia was host to the first televised party convention in 1948 (Jarvis 2004). However, the impact of television coverage was small, as only 350,000 people owned television sets at the time. It was four years later, in 1952, when television began to make a major impression on the process and the public. In total, the networks televised over 128 hours of both conventions, and the average household actually viewed more than 10 hours of the coverage (Karabell 1998). According to network estimates, somewhere between one-third and one-half of the American public watched at least some portion of party conventions on television (Lang and Lang 1984). The news media had closely covered the party conventions before, but the combination of audio and visual coverage brought the spectacle to life for the public in an unprecedented manner. Zachary Karabell observed that:

Radio allowed people to witness, albeit aurally, what was transpiring in the convention hall. But television added a dimension that radio could not. By transmitting both sound and pictures, television helped transform the convention into a spectacular event, one part political process, one part circus, one part down-home revival meeting (1998, 4)

It was also in 1952 that the parties began to alter their convention proceedings to account for the presence of television cameras. Both parties chose Chicago to allow for prime time viewing across time zones, and both parties carefully considered which issues its speakers would discuss in full view of the cameras (Karabell 1998). This practice of designing and organizing the convention to accommodate television and its viewers continued throughout the following

decades. Television producers and the parties entered into an era of “cordial concurrence,” where the shared goal of cooperation was to create a television product that was newsworthy and entertaining, but still allowed the parties to convey the appropriate image (Smith and Nimmo 1991; Rosenstiel 1993). In short, party conventions were being curtailed in terms of length and production style to become “made-for-TV” events.

For television broadcasters, the media buzz and public anticipation surrounding the conventions turned the events into “the Olympics of newscasting” (Karabell 1998). The convention proceedings themselves were only part of the televised spectacle. Through the 1950s and 1960s, the networks capitalized on the high ratings and national exposure to showcase their human and technological talents. The exposure possibilities gave news anchors and floor correspondents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to become household names.

As the efforts to showcase these talents became more obvious, the networks abandoned coverage of the more mundane procedures to provide journalists and commentators more time for analysis and discussion. The networks were amidst heated ratings battles, and it became clearer to news producers that focusing on the conflict and drama of the conventions was the most effective manner of capturing and maintaining a viewing audience. Mundane procedural coverage, it seemed, drove viewers away (Smith and Nimmo 1991; Karabell 1998). This situation led party leaders and the nominees to become increasingly wary that control over their image was at risk. Their response was to move away from cordial concurrence and toward a more scripted event.

Additionally, the networks’ search for more captivating happenings was not entirely a ratings-driven endeavor. Following the debacles of the 1960s (the Republicans in 1964 and the Democrats in 1968) where the networks aired deep intra-party division and controversies to the

entire electorate, each party instituted even tighter control over how it transmitted its image and that of its presidential nominee to the public. The Democrats still encountered difficulties controlling the 1972 convention, as delegates actively debated controversial issues such as abortion and homosexuality, and the party's eventual nominee, George McGovern, endured sharp criticisms as an ideological extremist from other Democrats during the convention proceedings (Paletz and Elson 1976). By the mid-1970s, however, both parties had become better at controlling internal party debates and disagreements at the convention. The parties, for example, increased security to thwart protestors both inside and outside the convention halls, and strongly discouraged so-called "party mavericks" from speaking at the convention. Under this more controlled and choreographed environment, television journalists began to turn away from happenings on the floor and focus coverage on more newsworthy events transpiring behind the scenes (Schudson 1996).

Procedural reforms further contributed to the lack of any "real news" coming from the convention proceedings. While the convention delegates officially voted for the party's nominee at the convention, the primaries process ensured that, in almost all cases, the winner of the nomination was a forgone conclusion before the convention convened. Also, the Democrats eliminated their two-thirds majority rule for the nomination in 1936 and adopted the Republican rule of a simple majority (Davis 1983; Patterson 2002).<sup>1</sup> As a result, no party had gone past the first ballot since 1952. By altering the process, a once deliberative process became part coronation, part pep-rally. The dramatic political spectacle of vote swapping and multiple

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<sup>1</sup> The Democrats decision to move away from the two-thirds rule was mostly in response to the 1924 convention in New York City. The northern delegates favored New York Governor Al Smith, while those from the south supported William McAdoo, son-in-law of former president Wilson (Patterson 2002; Murray 1976). After 102 ballots, delegates were eventually released and John W. Davis won on the 103<sup>rd</sup> ballot.

ballots that characterized so many conventions before essentially vanished from the modern scene.

Since the 1970s, broadcast journalists and the public have grown increasingly tired of what has become the quadrennial infomercial. The amount of airtime devoted to convention coverage has decreased precipitously, as have the ratings. The thirty plus hours of gavel-to-gavel coverage provided by each of the networks in the 1960s has disintegrated to a miniscule three hours over four nights in 2004.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the average ratings have been almost halved from 30 points in 1960 to barely 15 points in 2004 (Patterson 2004). Several network journalists have publicly condemned the lack of newsworthiness at conventions. Ted Koppel and the crew of ABC's "Nightline" actually left the Republican National convention in 1996 after the second day of coverage, claiming that they were "bored and had better things to do" (Broder 1996). During the Democratic convention of 2004, CBS anchor Dan Rather summed up his views on the modern day conventions:

I wish I could take a stronger argument to my bosses (for more coverage). But it's basically an infomercial....I understand it's a public service, but most would need a speed-yawning course to get through it (Lewis and Carter 2004).

NBC's Tom Brokaw echoed a similar sentiment. While covering the last night of the Republican convention, the last of his career, he complained that, "These events are managed down to the last semicolon. That's why I find it hard to climb those stairs and get into the anchor chair anymore" (Carter 2004). Both during and after the Democratic and Republican National Conventions in 2004, there was significant speculation among pundits and journalists that at least one of the big three networks may chose not to cover the 2008 conventions at all. Dan Rather

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<sup>2</sup> The networks did not cover the second night of the Democratic National Convention, nor did they cover the first night of the Republican Convention. During each of the other three nights, one hour of coverage was slotted on each network from 10pm-11pm.

himself noted that CBS executives were considering reducing the already paltry three nights of coverage to two (Carter 2004).

### **Cable Coverage of Party Conventions**

As the networks have deemed the party conventions to be both uninteresting and lacking newsworthiness, the cable news channels have been more than happy to fill in the coverage gap. Before the 2004 Democratic National convention in Boston, more than one-in-three (36 percent) Americans reported that they were interested in following what was going to happen there (Pew Research Center 2004). While this is a stark drop from 53 percent in 1992, the level of interest displayed in 2004 still had the potential to translate into significant increases in the ratings for the cable news networks in comparison to their regular prime-time lineups. Indeed, this turned out to be the case. During the Democratic convention, CNN averaged 2.3 million viewers during the prime-time hours of 8 pm-11 pm, Fox News averaged 2.1 million viewers, and MSNBC averaged 1.3 million viewers (Kurtz 2004a).

While these numbers do represent a significant boost for the cable news stations, they should be placed in context of the network coverage. For example, on Tuesday night of the Democratic convention, there was no network coverage, and the average *total* cable convention audience was an estimated 6 million. That same night, CBS captured over 9 million viewers for the reality shows “Big Brother” and “The Amazing Race” (Ostow 2004). During the Republican convention in September, however, the competition turned in favor of the cable networks, particularly the Fox News Network. Fox News made history by drawing in a larger audience than ABC, CBS, and NBC during each of the three nights the networks covered it. Table 1 outlines the average ratings for each news station during the Republican convention. While all



stations showed an increase in ratings across each night of the convention, Fox's rise was the sharpest and the highest each evening.

[Table 1 here]

The unprecedented success of Fox during the Republican convention marked a major victory over chief rival CNN in a ratings war that has been ongoing since the late 1990s (see Auletta 2003; Collins 2004). CNN did beat Fox during the Democratic Convention, but the overall victory was only by a few hundred thousand viewers. During the keynote hours of 10pm-11pm, CNN averaged 4 million viewers while Fox averaged 2.6 million and MSNBC averaged 2.2 million. This victory was much smaller than Fox's domination during the Republican convention. Furthermore, CNN came nowhere near competing with the networks during the Democratic convention.

The war over cable news ratings and the apparently imminent withdrawal of the broadcast networks from covering the party conventions has led to an interesting dynamic on the cable news stations. Each of the cable news networks now aggressively covers the convention. In the weeks preceding the conventions, Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC heavily touted their upcoming coverage. This onslaught of advertising was similar to how the cable stations publicized their upcoming coverage of the invasion of Iraq during the military buildup in 2003. Each station was, in essence, jockeying for position by convincing viewers that their coverage would be the most entertaining and compelling.

Furthermore, the cable news stations now use the convention setting to showcase their talents and new technological innovations. Each station anchored their prime-time coverage around their most compelling and colorful journalists. Fox News' Bill O'Reilly aired his program, "The O'Reilly Factor," live from the convention halls, and CNN and MSNBC gave

viewers Larry King and Chris Matthews respectively. Instead of anchoring their coverage of the convention in a traditional sense, O'Reilly, King, and Matthews turned their forum into pseudo talk show environments that featured pundits, other journalists, elected officials, and entertainment celebrities as guests. While there was some coverage of the happenings at the podium, the cable news coverage would often cut off speakers for commercial breaks or for the journalists to interject discussion and analysis of ongoing or upcoming events. For example, on the Tuesday night of the Democratic convention (when there was no broadcast network coverage), Bill O'Reilly continued his discussion with actor Ben Affleck rather than show Senator Edward Kennedy's speech at the podium. "The good speech is coming up," O'Reilly said referring to upcoming keynote address by Barack Obama. "You're not missing anything" (Manuel 2004). The night before, O'Reilly also chose to ignore all but a few minutes of Al Gore's speech as well.

This new approach of Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC in covering the conventions came under fire. One of the critics was the Democratic presidential nominee himself, John Kerry, who noted that after two days of coverage, "It's a shame they don't cover these things more.... The talking heads keep talking, and you can't hear anything" (Memmott 2004). Writer Peter Ames Carlin was much harsher in his criticism:

Lots of airtime here (on cable news stations), but the vast majority of it was devoted to the usual squads of commentators, spinners and speculators, all of them trying to drown out the others by sheer force of tongues and stubbornness. Often, you could hear familiar voices echoing through the hall—isn't that the patrician roar of Ted Kennedy?—but only in the background, because Tim Russert, Chris Matthews, Brit Hume, et al., were so busy pontificating about what they thought might happen later today, tomorrow or in 100 years. Either that, or they were talking to Ben Afflack, Bono, or Art Alexakis, as if the most pressing issues in the nation needed their importance affirmed by the presence of an entertainer (Carlin 2004).

Fox's style of coverage at the conventions drew even more criticism than its cable news competitors. Critics pointed out that Fox's analysts were overly critical of Democrats and too friendly with Republicans. Following Teresa Heinz Kerry's address, for example, Fox commentator Fred Barnes characterized the speech as "Eccentric, bordering on the bizarre... Extremely self-indulgent," while fellow commentator Bill Kristol mused that, "I think she got this (time) slot because she demanded it" (Kurtz 2004b). Also, on the first night of coverage of the Democratic convention, Fox's O'Reilly engaged in a screaming match with documentary filmmaker Michael Moore that ultimately ended in a draw when Moore refused O'Reilly's request that he apologize for calling President Bush a liar, and O'Reilly refused Moore's request to say he would sacrifice his own child to secure the city of Fallujah (Carlin 2004).

Beyond the tendency to ignore the podium and business on the floor, the nature of the dialogue that characterized the cable news coverage of the convention was troublesome as well. Often, the hosts and their guests engaged in rants and shouting matches that had little or nothing to do with the party or the convention business at hand. One of the most infamous moments of 2004 was Chris Matthews' altercation with Democratic Senator Zell Miller, who was the keynote speaker at the Republican convention. Miller appeared on Mathews' show, "Hardball," following his Wednesday night address. Matthews' infamous aggressive interviewing style worked Miller into such an aggravated frenzy that he barked insults and threats such as, "I don't even know why I came on this program," and "I wish I was over there, where I could get a little closer up in your face" (they were speaking by remote television connection), and finally, "I wish we lived in the day where you could challenge a person to a duel" (de Moraes 2004).

When the coverage was not oriented around talk show banter, it seemed to focus heavily on frivolous topics and events. In the days preceding his acceptance speech, John Kerry's visit

to NASA received significant coverage because pictures of Kerry wearing a germ-free suit made him look strange, if not ridiculous. There was also a great deal of coverage and subsequent punditry over Teresa Heinz Kerry's altercation with a Pittsburgh newspaper reporter where she was caught on camera telling him to "shove it." During the Republican conventions, analysts ridiculed the twin daughters of President Bush as coming across as "ditzes" at the podium (Stanley 2004).

The implications of cable news' approach to covering the party conventions should not be understated. National conventions are a rare opportunity for the major parties to present themselves and their vision of the future to the mass public. These are historic events that define the modern national party organization and date back to 1831 (Shafer 1983). Certainly, fewer Americans watch the conventions on television than in decades past, but the fate of parties and their candidates still hangs in the balance. As Figure 1 demonstrates, 15 percent of the electorate made their decision on whom to vote for during one of the conventions in 2004. This is a significant decline from a high of 31 percent in 1960. Nevertheless, the 15 percent in 2004 is the highest since 1988 and only marginally lower than the percentages from the 1970s and early 1980s. Furthermore, 15 percent is more than enough to influence the outcome of most presidential elections, which are usually decided by much smaller margins.

[Figure 1 here]

Given that so many voters do not make their decision on whom to vote for until after the convention, it is little wonder that the parties wish to keep the conventions so tightly scripted. However, the parties' tight control over the conventions has pushed away the major networks. In a twist of irony, the parties' desire for tighter control of information may have actually given

them less control over the flow of information as cable news networks have filled the vacuum with their brand of sensational, conflict-oriented coverage.

While the preceding discussion has presented an array of anecdotal evidence about the nature of today's cable news coverage of the national party conventions, empirical corroboration is necessary. Our analysis looks beyond anecdotal evidence by analyzing transcripts of cable and network coverage of the conventions. Based upon the reasoning outlined above, we expect that cable news coverage of the conventions will contain higher degrees of conflict, sensationalism, and negativity than traditional broadcast coverage. We also expect that this approach will focus less on issues of public policy. Furthermore, we expect to see that the cable news coverage has become more journalist-centered in nature. While overall news coverage of politics has become much more journalist-centered in recent years (Patterson 1994; West 2001), we expect to see that the wide-open environment surrounding the conventions provide cable news journalists and their guests free reign to spout off speculation and pontification that is grounded very much in subjectivity.

### **Content Analysis Design**

To test our expectations, we conducted a content analysis of transcripts of the Democratic and Republican conventions obtained from Lexis-Nexis. Through this database we conducted a search of all Fox News and CNN transcripts during the eight nights of coverage devoted to the conventions in the summer of 2004 during prime-time viewing hours (8pm-11pm, 48 hours of coverage total for both channels). MSNBC was excluded from the analysis because of its inability to compete with CNN and Fox News in overall ratings, as well the lack of available transcripts in Lexis-Nexis. In order to provide an example of traditional convention coverage for

comparison to cable, we also analyzed network coverage of the 1992 Democratic and Republican conventions on CBS. This was the last convention before the dawn of the new cable-news media age. We also analyzed the very limited coverage offered by CBS news in 2004 (only 52 transcript pages).

To make our search criteria as broad as possible, we obtained all Fox News and CNN transcripts that mentioned the nominee of that convention (Bush or Kerry) at least once. This search yielded over 1,900 pages of prime-time transcripts. Because the structure of the coverage is less defined than typical television news (i.e., there is no defined beginning or end to a story), there was no defined unit of analysis. Thus, we employed commercial breaks as the determinant of a single unit. We employed a similar approach with the transcripts provided by CBS, although their coverage was less likely to be interrupted by commercial breaks. CBS did, however, break up the transcripts by segment, and we thus used those segment breaks as determinants of a single story.

To test our hypotheses, our content analysis focused on the content and tone within the transcripts. To analyze content, we searched for the frequency of several keywords and phrases in the transcripts. For example, to test how much CNN, Fox, and CBS covered the Swift-boat Veterans for Truth controversy regarding Senator Kerry's service during the Vietnam War, we counted the number of times that any variation of the term "swift-boat" was mentioned on each channel. Because each news source had a different number of transcript pages (CNN=866, Fox News=676, and CBS=52), we mathematically adjusted the word counts accordingly.

To analyze the tone of coverage, we coded the transcripts line-by-line. To complete this task, we sampled half of the total segments from each news source by analyzing every other segment. Coders read each line and made a determination of whether the line contained certain

characteristics, including negativity, an adversarial argument, discussion of political strategy, or mention of specific policy issues. We also coded for the speaker of each line and determined if the speaker was a journalist, a guest, or a speaker at the convention podium.<sup>3</sup> Statements from the podium (or the floor during roll call) were not coded for tone or content. Only the comments made by the media were coded.

### **Findings**

The cable news environment has indeed affected media coverage of the party conventions. First and foremost, very little of the happenings at the podium are actually covered during prime-time cable news coverage. Less than 7 percent of the coverage on CNN and Fox News actually contained material directly from the convention podium. Additionally, a great deal of this coverage was not live podium coverage, but instead played as video clips that showed only a few dozen seconds of sound bites. This was in stark contrast to CBS's 2004 coverage, which devoted 80 percent of its airtime to live coverage of what was going on at the podium. While some of this difference is an artifact of CBS's decision to air only three hours of coverage per convention (thus focusing primarily on times when key speakers are addressing the delegation), this stark difference is indicative of a larger trend in television news in which cable news coverage resembles a talk show format and the networks provide just skeletal coverage of key addresses. While several scholars have argued that broadcast network coverage of presidential politics is increasingly journalist-centered and less apt to cover candidate sound bites (Fallows 1996; Hallin 1992; Patterson 1994), it appears that this tendency does not apply to

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<sup>3</sup> Reliability between coders was tested via percent agreement on 5 percent of the sample. For each variable used in the analysis, the percent agreement was acceptable (above 80 percent). In addition to these variables, coders also analyzed each line for positive statements about the candidate or the party. Unfortunately, the inter-coder reliability on this variable was well below the minimum acceptability of 80 percent, and thus dropped from the analysis.

convention coverage. Thus, there is little time for discussion and banter among the journalists covering the event for the networks.

The talk show environment, however, dominated on Fox News and CNN. Each night of coverage on Fox News began with Bill O'Reilly, and was then followed by *Hannity & Combs* and *On the Record with Greta Van Susteren*. CNN's coverage was primarily *Andersen Cooper 360*, and *Larry King Live*. It was through this lens that cable television conveyed the party to the voters. And, it was this lens that distorts the image of the party and their nominees into something very different than the convention planners intended.

What is the image that comes through on cable? Compared to network coverage of past and present, we find several unique variations. As we have already demonstrated, very little of cable's convention coverage follows what is happening at the podium. The individuals who dominated the screen were the journalists/hosts and their guests. It is the journalists/hosts themselves, however, that received the majority of airtime. Journalists/hosts spoke 53 percent of the lines in our entire cable news sample, while guests or interview subjects spoke 40 percent of the total lines. This is in stark contrast to network coverage on CBS in 2004, where only 19 percent of the lines came from the host and other corresponding journalists, and with much of that total coming from short introductions and bios for speakers at the podium. Take, for example, how Rather introduced John Edwards's daughter, Cate, before she spoke at the podium:

DAN RATHER, host: Now here's what's going to happen. Cate Edwards, the oldest of three Edwards children living; they lost a son in 1996. Cate Edwards will introduce her mother Elizabeth, who in turn, will then introduce Senator John Edwards. That's going to be the play here. The hall is absolutely packed. It has not been for every hour of every day of this convention. But as is the usual case in conventions, when the vice presidential nominee delivers his acceptance speech, the hall fills up. Cate Edwards with her entrance. Recent graduate of Princeton University, 22 years old.

Ms. CATE EDWARDS: Hi. Hi. I'm Cate Edwards...



Rather's only additional comment during the Edwards speeches was to provide similar information on Elizabeth and John Edwards as they were introduced:

RATHER: Elizabeth Edwards married John Edwards in 1977. This month they celebrated their 27th wedding anniversary. She is a graduate of the University of North Carolina Law School where she met her husband. She's appreciated for her down-to-earth, real neighborly qualities. She is 55 years old.

RATHER: John Edwards was born in South Carolina, grew up in the Piedmont area of North Carolina, town of Robbins. High school football running back, son of a mill worker, proud graduate of public schools, graduate of North Carolina State and the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill Law School. He is a Protestant Christian, worships at Methodist churches. The roll-up to John Edwards' address is the song "Higher and Higher." Edwards' mom and dad are here tonight, Wallace and Bobbie. You've seen them in the shots there several times.

This benign commentary constituted a much smaller portion of the cable news coverage.

Instead, the journalists/hosts were more long-winded and less objective, as were their guests.

Although the talk show environment dominated cable news' coverage of the convention, this extended coverage did not focus much on policy issues. In total, cable news spent less than 4 percent of the lines discussing where the party or the candidates stand on specific issues of public policy. Issues of political strategy, on the other hand, were more common. On average, cable devoted 17 percent of the lines to discussion on the political strategies the parties or the candidates should employ to win the White House.

Table 2 demonstrates the tendency of the cable channels to give issues of public policy short shrift in their coverage. In hundreds of pages of transcripts, neither the journalists nor the guests on Fox News nor CNN mentioned the issues of Medicare or Social Security more than a handful of times. Other issues or events, such as the standings in the polls, the Swift-Boat Vet controversy surrounding John Kerry's past anti-war activities, and Teresa Hines Kerry's

confrontation with a reporter (during which she told him to “shove it”), garnered much more attention.

[Table 2 here]

Beyond the topics discussed, the cable news environment took on a tone that was interesting as well. Not only did the talk show environment provide for pontification and speculation, but it also allowed individuals on the programs to engage in discussions that sometimes became adversarial. Our examination of the CBS news transcripts from the conventions in 2004 and 1992 uncovered no adversarial arguing/conflict between the journalists and/or invited guests, but more than 30 percent of the segments we sampled from cable news contained at least some adversarial conflict, and 15 percent of the lines contained clear negative statements about the party and/or candidate. Moreover, in many instances, the conflicts were quite rancorous. Consider the exchange during the Republican convention between Fox News’ Sean Hannity and Tad Devine, a senior advisor for the Kerry Campaign:

HANNITY: Joining us now, senior adviser to the Kerry campaign, Tad Devine. Tad, I've got to tell you, I find it laughable, for all you Democrats to be so outraged over the truthful outlining of the record of John Kerry, when for a year, your leadership, Ted Kennedy and Howard Dean and the friends of John Kerry have accused this president of lying, misleading, of hyping, advancing theories he knew about 9/11 ahead of time, concocting war for political gain. You know, let's be real with the American people. You're not outraged over the remarks. You're trying to score political points, correct?

TAD DEVINE: No, that's wrong Sean. Listen, last night's performance by Zell Miller was outrageous. And for Dick Cheney to do what he did, to question John Kerry's fitness to be commander in chief is an outrage. I mean, this is a guy, Dick Cheney, who got five deferments during the Vietnam War, questioning John Kerry who served heroically.

HANNITY: I thought you weren't going to -- I thought we weren't allowed to bring that up, Tad?

DEVINE: I just brought it up, Sean. Did you hear it? You know, let me tell you, Dick Cheney is the last guy in America who should be questioning John Kerry,

OK? The last guy.

HANNITY: Well, excuse me. He has a history of leading America through two wars, while your guy was against the Cold War. Your guy didn't want the death penalty for terrorists. Your guy voted against every major weapons system we now use. And after the first Trade Center attack, he didn't show up for intelligence meetings, and he wanted \$6 billion in cuts. That means he's made the wrong decisions throughout his career, which makes him unfit, doesn't it?

DEVINE: No, it doesn't, Sean. Let me tell you about Dick Cheney's history. His history is that the company he led, Halliburton, is now under federal -- three separate federal investigations. That's Dick Cheney's history. His history is...

HANNITY: Halliburton. Here we go...

Often, these types of arguments became so heated and uncivil that the individuals were simply talking over one another. When such incidents occurred, the voice recognition in the transcription computer could not accurately record what was said, and would simply denote the presence of “crosstalk” on the transcript.<sup>4</sup> An analysis of the cable news transcripts found that “crosstalk” was noted 146 times over the eight days of coverage. An analysis of the CBS News transcripts from 2004 and 1992 uncovered not a single incident of crosstalk.

While adversarial exchanges were not commonplace, they were frequent enough to possibly leave a lasting negative impression with passive television viewers who may be idly watching just a few minutes of coverage. This type of adversarial talk show coverage on television is often more entertaining than typical coverage (Forgette and Morris 2003), which explains why Fox News decided to place two of its most notoriously adversarial programs into the 8pm and 9pm time slots. It further explains why Fox was not shy about advertising this type of coverage. However, research has also shown that such hostile negativity can also influence

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<sup>4</sup> The Lexis-Nexis transcripts denoted such incidents with “(CROSSTALK).” This notation was easy to identify as it was in capital letters and placed within parentheses on its own line of text.

how viewers perceive politicians, parties, and the electoral system as a whole (Forgette and Morris 2003; Mutz and Reeves 2005).

While cable news was more likely than network news to focus on sensationalism, we did not find support for the claim that sensational events or personalities dominated coverage. For instance, cable did not mention Teresa Heinz Kerry more frequently than the much less controversial Laura Bush.<sup>5</sup> Another sensational topic of discussion, the Bush twins' speaking role at the Republican convention, was certainly covered by cable news providers, and the twins were lambasted by a number of commentators. Consider the following comments made regarding the twins::

JEFF GREEFIELD (CNN): I think charity would suggest that we pass -- quickly pass the Bush twins' attempt to be humorous. I think both in the hall and outside the hall, that was the one note that they would have an erasure. They would probably let them do -- have a do-over on that one, Aaron.

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KONDRACKE (Fox News): Now, I would add that if there's a first children's contest, I would think that Vanessa and Alexandra Kerry whopped the two Bush girls by miles. I mean they came off frankly as ditzes and you wonder how, you know, whether they should have been on the program at all.

MARA LIASSON (Fox News): Yes, I think the Bush twins were trying to poke some fun at themselves and at their image. They seemed to confirm it tonight, their image of giggling teenagers who were more interested in clothes and rock concerts than they are in anything serious.

These are certainly critical comments, but they were relatively infrequent. Our analysis found that the Bush twins were only mentioned in 13 percent of the cable transcripts we sampled.

There were other comments on the Bush twins that were more balanced, and even positive:

CHRIS WALLACE (Fox News): Brit, I have to say that I want to be fair and balanced tonight on behalf of the Bush Twins. In fact you can have Schwarzenegger, and you can have Mrs. Bush. If I were going to invest in a growth stock tonight, I would guess that it would be Jenna and Barbara Bush. I've

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<sup>5</sup> Teresa Heinz Kerry was mentioned 132 times on Fox and CNN, and Laura Bush was mentioned 115 times.

thought for sometime that they were maybe God's revenge on George W. Bush, that just as he created endless headaches for his parents growing up; that the Bush twins created endless headaches for their parents growing up. But I have to tell you tonight, and the way they played here to this crowd. They were bright. They were sassy. They were funny. They were intelligent.

The only controversial figure that we found to get frequent coverage was filmmaker Michael Moore, whose anti-Bush documentary film, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, appeared in theaters that summer. Moore attended both conventions, but had no major role in the proceedings. Nevertheless, he was mentioned 85 times on CNN and Fox News, but not at all on CBS. Take, for instance, the following news clip from Aaron Brown's coverage on CNN during the Democratic convention:

BROWN: John Kerry would be the first to admit it: He's not Mick Jagger or even Michael Moore. The first doesn't seem to be a problem. Ah, but the second.

Here's CNN's Tom Foreman. (BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Michael! Michael!

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Michael! Michael!

TOM FOREMAN, CNN CORRESPONDENT (voice-over): All over Boston, ever since the convention started, it has been Moore, Moore, Moore.

MICHAEL MOORE, POLITICAL ACTIVIST: You're supposed to be able to believe the president. You're supposed to.

FOREMAN: Michael Moore's relentless attacks on President Bush with his film "Fahrenheit 9/11" and now in person have earned a hero's welcome. He was even seated with former President Jimmy Carter who is not talking publicly about it, while Moore is saying plenty.

MOORE: He said to me, "I can't think of anyone I would rather have to sit with me tonight than you," and...

FOREMAN (on camera): How do you feel about that?

MOORE: I was so blown away.

FOREMAN (voice-over): Moore says he's an independent, not a Democrat, and some top Democrats don't like all the attention he's getting, but he has struck a chord, railing against the war, Republicans and the media.

MOORE: We need you to ask the questions! Demand the evidence. Demand the evidence. Don't ever send us to war without asking the questions.

FOREMAN: That said, he has no plans to endorse John Kerry.

MOORE: When John Kerry becomes president on January 20th next year, on January 21st, that camera lens of mine is going to be pointed at him, because that's my job done.

FOREMAN: Are you going to go to the Republican convention?

MOORE: I already have my credentials for the Republican convention and so do my 25 bodyguards.

FOREMAN: But Moore dropped plans to attend the latest premiere of his film, a short distance from President Bush's ranch in Texas. Despite his courting of the media here, Moore says he does not want the story to be all about him. Tom Foreman, CNN, Boston.

Related, there is a growing tendency for the cable stations to invite entertainment celebrities to appear on their programs during the convention (as Michael Moore did). This would qualify as another aspect of sensationalism. We found, however, that this tendency was not as frequent as some observers had argued. Our analysis found that cable featured entertainment celebrities as guests on only 8 percent of the news segments. This is certainly an increase from the number of celebrities featured on the networks, which was zero, but celebrities constituted a relatively small fraction of the talk show guests, who were mostly pundits, journalists, and party officials.

### **Fox News versus CNN**

While our discussion focused mostly on cable news as a single entity, there has been a great deal of speculation regarding how Fox News and CNN approach their political coverage (see Collins 2004; Morris 2005; Pew Research Center 2004b). Claims of bias are frequent, especially against Fox News (see Kitty 2005; Brock 2004), but also CNN (see Bozell 2004). The

perception is that Fox News is friendlier to conservatives, while CNN is more favorable to liberals (Pew Research Center 2004b). While there is limited empirical evidence on liberal or conservative biases in the media (see Niven 1999, 2003), our analysis did uncover cause for concern. First, as Table 3 demonstrates, overall negative coverage of the candidates was not especially frequent on either Fox News or CNN. But the overall coverage of John Kerry on Fox News was significantly more negative than that of Bush ( $p < .01$ ).<sup>6</sup> Fox News was also more negative in general. On average, 29 percent of the lines in a segment were negative on Fox News compared to 6 percent of the lines on CNN ( $p < .06$ ). Additionally, Fox News offered significantly more coverage ( $p < .07$ ) from the podium during the Republican convention (11 percent of lines), than the Democratic convention (2 percent of lines), thus giving the Republican Party more of an opportunity to voice its message than the Democrats. There was no such variation on CNN. Finally, we found that Fox News was more likely to highlight high-profile leftward-leaning Democrats than CNN. Even though Fox News had fewer overall transcript pages of total coverage, they still were much more likely to mention controversial Democratic figures such as Michael Moore and Ted Kennedy. Michael Moore was mentioned 60 times on Fox News, but only 25 times on CNN, and Ted Kennedy was mentioned 34 times of Fox News, but only 8 times on CNN.

[Table 3 here]

Survey data collected in the week following the Republican convention also indicate the possibility of specific attitudinal correlates with exposure to Fox News versus CNN. As Table 4 demonstrates, exposure to the Republican convention was significantly higher among individuals who get most of their news from the Fox News channel (controlling for party identification and demographic factors). No such relationship exists for the CNN audience, and the association is

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<sup>6</sup> One-tailed difference of means test.

actually negative for the network news audience, which is not too surprising given the sparse attention networks gave to the convention.

But how does this exposure to the convention via Fox News or CNN relate to overall attitudes toward the candidate and the parties? Unfortunately, the data do not allow us the opportunity to directly test how cable news coverage of the conventions influences attitudes toward the parties. Table 5, however, demonstrates that, even when controlling for party identification and other factors, exposure to Fox News is associated with candidate attitudes more than CNN. Those individuals who closely followed the 2004 Republican convention (very closely or fairly closely) and relied on Fox News as their primary source of news displayed greater favorability toward George W. Bush and less favorability for John Kerry. Exposure to CNN (or network news), however, was not significantly related to favorability of either candidate. Furthermore, the Fox News watchers were more likely to agree that John Kerry changes his mind too much, and that the election of Kerry would put the U.S. at a greater risk of future terrorist attack. Again, exposure to CNN or network news had no such association. Finally, it can also be seen from Table 5 that the use of Fox News was significantly associated with how closely an individual followed the story surrounding the Swift Boat Vets' criticisms of John Kerry. Exposure to CNN and network news, on the other hand, was negatively related to following the story.

[Tables 4 and 5 here]

### **Conclusion**

On Wednesday night of the Democratic convention on CNN, media critic Howard Kurtz observed that, "...with the lack of hard news here, any little controversy, we the 15,000 journalists assembled here at the Fleet Center are going to jump on it." His colleague Jonah



Goldberg agreed, saying that, "...when you have everything so minutely controlled and micromanaged that the slightest thing that goes off script just consumes the media to a big degree. But basically, what I don't like about this convention is that it's so fake. It's an infomercial. They should be selling steak knives." Our study suggests that Kurtz and Goldberg certainly have a valid point. The age of television ushered in the era of the controlled party convention, where all intra-party conflict and debate has been hidden from the cameras. It is this environment that has prompted the broadcast networks to almost completely pull away from covering the conventions at all. Cable news stations, however, have been more than willing to step in and provide exhaustive coverage throughout the entirety of prime-time viewing hours. Unfortunately for the convention planners, cable news' coverage does not necessarily put a friendly face on the party.

A talk show environment has come to dominate cable news coverage of the conventions. The public hears very little directly from the parties and their selected speakers, and journalist commentary occupies the majority of airtime. This commentary is not oriented around policy or the qualifications and background of the nominee. On the contrary, policy discussion is almost non-existent in comparison to banter on topics such as public opinion polls and political strategy. Heated arguments are as frequent as policy discussion, and overall negativity persists. Additionally, our survey data evidence suggests the possibility that exposure to the highest rated cable news channel, Fox News, is associated with a greater tendency to believe candidate stereotypes perpetuated in the coverage, and to rate Bush favorably and Kerry unfavorably. These relationships remained significant even when controlling for party identification.

The parties have made strategic errors by turning their conventions into empty infomercials. This approach was successful in keeping broadcast networks from covering intra-

party disputes over nominees and the platform, but cable news has proven they can fill the news cycle without such fuel, and the parties have little-to-no influence over the topics of discussion. In this respect, the parties have created a situation that has put their image, and perhaps their electoral fate, in the hands of political talk show hosts on cable. Outside the realm of conventions, the effects of ideologically-charged, conflict-ridden talk shows are mitigated by the fact that most viewers are watching the programs as supplements to news obtained by more traditional means (primarily newspapers and anchor-based television news coverage). During the conventions, however, the cable news stations have decided to showcase these talk shows as the primary sources of news during prime-time hours. The talk show circus is not tempered by traditional coverage, and thus the parties' images among the mass public (many of whom are not accustomed to political talk show theatrics) are at the mercy of endless spinning and arguing between pundits and politicians.

It would appear that the lesser-known presidential candidates are put at a particular disadvantage by cable news' convention coverage. In 2004, for example, the Democratic Party went to great pains to highlight the record and accomplishments of nominee John Kerry, who was not nearly as familiar to the voting public as President Bush. While the Democrats were persistent in selling Kerry as a distinguished Senator and war hero, the message was largely lost as pundits and journalists endlessly critiqued every conceivable aspect of the convention and Kerry himself. In 2008, both parties may likely run up against a similar dilemma, as there will be no incumbent president or vice-president seeking the White House for the first time since 1952. With the American voting public evenly divided by party identification, the outcome of the general election may very well hinge on which party does a better job presenting their candidate to the television audience during the conventions. The most successful party will be

the one that devises a message strategy that accounts for the fact that millions of swing voters will be watching the convention through the prism of the cable talk show melee on Fox News and CNN. It would behoove both parties to devote greater resources toward sharpening their message on the talk shows as opposed to the stage and the podium.

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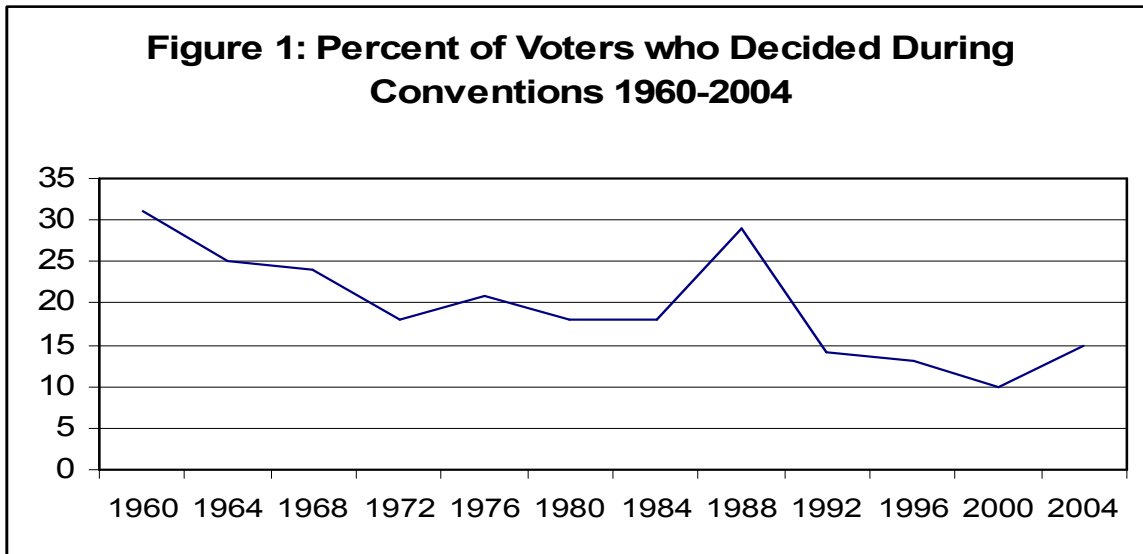
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## Tables and Figures

**TABLE 1: TV Ratings for Republican Convention**

Channel	Average Viewers per Night (in Millions from 10pm-11pm)			
	Night 1 8/30	Night 2 8/31	Night 3 9/1	Night 4 9/2
Fox News	3.9	5.2	5.9	7.3
CNN	1.3	1.5	1.2	2.7
MSNBC	0.8	1.6	1.2	1.7
ABC	NA	4.3	3.3	5.1
CBS	NA	4.4	2.6	5.0
NBC	NA	5.1	4.5	5.9

Source: Nielsen Media Research.



Source: The National Election Study and Thomas Patterson (2004)

**Table 2**  
Transcript Content

Issue/topic	Number of times issue/topic was mentioned in transcripts (excluding podium speeches)	
	CNN	Fox News
“Medicare”	4	2
“Social Security”	2	7
“Swift-Boat”	67	34
“Shove it”	14	9
“Polls”	77	49

**Table 3**  
Negative Overall Tone

	Station	
	CNN	Fox News
Percent of Segments with Overall Negative Tone Toward Kerry	13%	32%
Percent of Segments with Overall Negative Tone Toward Bush	10%	13%

**Table 4**  
Exposure to the Republican National Convention  
(Ordered Probit Analysis)

Variable	Attention Given to Republican Convention <sup>a</sup>
CNN Primary Source of News	.053 (.090)
Fox News Primary Source of News	.492 (.087)**
Network Primary Source of News	-.197 (.066)**
Party ID (7 point) <sup>b</sup>	-.196 (.013)**
Income	.022 (.013)
Education	.072 (.019)
White	-.209 (.081)**
Male	.144 (.056)**
Age	.006 (.001)**
Constant 1	-.707
Constant 2	-.076
Constant 3	.709
LR Chi-Squared (9)	387.72**
N	1607

\*p<.05, \*\*p<.01 (one-tailed test). Standard errors in parentheses.

<sup>a</sup> 1=followed not closely at all; 2=followed not too closely; 3=followed fairly closely; 4=followed very closely.

<sup>b</sup> 1= strong Republican... 7=strong Democrat.



**Table 5**  
Candidate Attitudes among Registered Voters Who Watched the Republican Convention Closely<sup>a</sup>  
(Ordered Probit Analysis)

Variable	Overall favorability toward Bush <sup>b</sup>	Overall favorability toward Kerry <sup>b</sup>	Believe Kerry changes his mind too much <sup>c</sup>	Believe Kerry would make the US more vulnerable to a terrorist attack <sup>c</sup>	Followed the story about the Swift Boat Vets' criticisms of Kerry <sup>d</sup>	Believe Bush is too partisan and divisive <sup>c</sup>	Believe Bush is more like a real person than a politician <sup>c</sup>
CNN Primary Source of News	.049 (.180)	.031 (.168)	.203 (.211)	.157 (.242)	-.334 (.136)**	-.201 (.243)	.326 (.224)
Fox News Primary Source	.413 (.144)**	-.374 (.134)**	.757 (.192)**	.287 (.167)*	.221 (.108)*	-.346 (.167)*	.303 (.171)*
Networks Primary Source	.083 (.133)	.098 (.128)	.144 (.168)	-.069 (.162)	-.276 (.101)**	-.162 (.161)	-.176 (.162)
Party ID (7-pt)	-.462 (.023)**	.393 (.022)**	-.335 (.034)**	-.273 (.034)**	.010 (.109)	.283 (.034)**	-.291 (.034)**
Income	-.021 (.021)	.034 (.021)	-.012 (.033)	-.040 (.035)	.005 (.020)	-.040 (.034)	.018 (.035)
Education	-.022 (.030)	-.013 (.029)	.020 (.050)	-.071 (.046)	.014 (.028)	.001 (.047)	-.143 (.047)**
White	.027 (.124)	-.189 (.123)	.009 (.214)	-.053 (.219)	-.127 (.126)	-.033 (.215)	.169 (.211)
Male	-.200 (.085)**	.090 (.082)	.125 (.134)	.034 (.130)	.161 (.080)*	-.018 (.128)	-.024 (.130)
Age	.002 (.002)	.000 (.002)	.004 (.004)	.003 (.004)	.012 (.002)**	-.003 (.004)	.008 (.004)*
Constant 1	-3.043	.505	-2.220	-2.004	-.470	-.531	-2.265
Constant 2	-2.252	1.590	-1.270	-1.195	.123	.575	-1.552
Constant 3	-1.128	2.930	-.313	-.336	.983	1.651	-.398
LR Chi-Squared (9)	524.18**	426.52**	153.39**	97.41**	53.10**	108.28**	130.33**
N	768	750	328	305	779	306	320

\*p<.05, \*\*p<.01 (one-tailed test). Standard errors in parentheses.

<sup>a</sup> Those registered voters who reported following the Republican convention “very closely” or “fairly closely” were retained for this analysis. Those who reported watching the convention “not too closely” or “not at all closely” were excluded.

<sup>b</sup> 1=very unfavorable; 2=mostly unfavorable; 3= mostly favorable; 4= very favorable.

<sup>c</sup> 1=completely disagree; 2=mostly disagree; 3=mostly agree; 4=completely agree.

<sup>d</sup> 1=not at all closely; 2=not too closely; 3=fairly closely; 4=very closely.