Chapter 15
Presidential Rhetoric and News Rhetoric

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of U.S. presidents as a news source in the media agenda shaping process. DICTION text-analysis software was used to analyze transcripts of U.S. presidents' state of the union addresses and related news coverage from 1981 to 2007. DICTION software calculated scores for five major dimensions of content in the addresses and related news stories. Results revealed that the addresses and related news coverage contained dissimilar rhetoric, suggesting that, overall, the presidents had little influence on independent media outlets in that regard.

INTRODUCTION

Agenda-setting research is now well into its fifth decade of existence and evolution. Starting from its second decade of development, as more and more evidence accumulated about the agenda-setting influence of the mass media on the public, a group of scholars asked instead, who sets the media's agenda? As Maxwell McCombs identified and as generally agreed to in the field, there are three fundamental layers that influence media agenda as a core: one is "news norms," such as social norms and traditions of journalism; the second one is "the other news media," such as the interactions and influence of the various mass media on each other; and the third one is "news sources," such as the president of the U.S., routine public relations activities, and the efforts of political campaigns.

The objective of this study falls into the latter "news sources" layer — it examines the relationships between U.S. presidents and the media. At any given time in America's history, the number one political figure has been the president, and media scholars have been interested in the potential influence of the position (and the person serving in that position) on the media's agenda. Does being the focus of media attention provide the president with significant opportunities to set this agenda? While most previous research presumed that presidents influenced media coverage in certain ways, the findings were mixed. Some studies seemed to suggest that presidents had great influence on news coverage while others indicated that they had little influence in the agenda-setting process. These mixed findings suggest, then, that the relationship between U.S. presidents and the media is complex.

Previous agenda-setting research on presidential State of the Union addresses has focused on the topics of the addresses (i.e., Level 1 or traditional agenda setting) — in other words, the objects agenda. This study moves the research to Level 2 agenda setting concerning the attributes of presidential messages compared with the attributes of related news coverage; it represents a significant extension of the research on State of the Union addresses.

In this study, we focus on the comparison of presidential rhetoric and news rhetoric. The approach is innovative because (1) it includes nearly 30 consecutive years of data instead of data for only one or two presidencies, and (2) it utilizes innovative semantics-based text analysis software to examine longstanding questions about presidential influence on news reporting. The project is based on the annual State of the Union addresses and related media coverage from 1981 to 2007. The project is an exploratory, descriptive study making use of the linguistic analysis capabilities of DICTION text-analysis software to identify similarities and differences in the words spoken by U.S. presidents and related media coverage of the addresses. The advantage of this traditional content analysis is that the method is reliable and objective; it avoids human coding errors and biases. Roderick Hart's DICTION text-analysis software calculated scores for five major dimensions of content from addresses and related news stories: Certainty, optimism, activity, realism, and commonality. Results indicated that rhetoric was dissimilar for the addresses and related news stories. Therefore, we concluded from the analyses that independent media outlets, like *The New York Times*, were not easily influenced by the presidents.

BACKGROUND

Who Sets the Media's Agenda?

As evidence accumulated about the agenda-setting influence of the mass media on the public, scholars in the early 1980s began to determine who set the media's agenda. To distinguish the first phase (media agenda as effect) of the agenda-setting process from the second phase (media agenda as cause), some scholars have called it "building the media's agenda" or "shaping the media's agenda" (Lang & Lang, 1983; McCombs, 2004). Agenda building, or agenda shaping, is concerned with influences on the media agenda.

McCombs (2004) has used an "onion" metaphor to illustrate who might set the media's agenda (Figure 1). At the core of the onion is the media agenda; the concentric layers of the onion represent the numerous influences at play in the shaping of the agenda. There are three fundamental layers: The layer immediately surrounding the core (i.e.,

Figure 1. A metaphorical onion: Who sets the media's agenda?
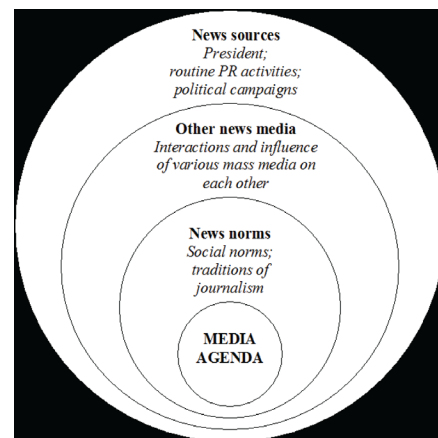
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