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# Presidential Agenda-Setting of Traditional and Nontraditional News Media

MATTHEW ESHBAUGH-SOHA

*The president's ability to influence the news agenda is central to the study of American politics. Although there is a large literature that examines presidential agenda-setting vis-à-vis traditional news sources, such as newspapers or broadcast television networks, there is little research that explores the effects of presidential agenda leadership of nontraditional media whether online or cable television. This study remedies this state of affairs by examining the relationship between the president's daily agenda and traditional and nontraditional daily news agendas. I argue that although the president should find similar space on all news for topics he raises in his speeches, nontraditional sources are more likely to cover other stories that reference the president. Analysis of 748 stories on the presidency for 63 days in early 2012 from 7 traditional, cable, and online news sources provides support for my argument, with cable news providing the most presidential news coverage. I conclude with some implications about what my findings mean for presidential leadership of nontraditional media.*

**Keywords** president, agenda-setting, media

Presidential leadership of the media is central to the study of American politics. For decades, scholars have explored the effectiveness of presidential news management (Grossman & Kumar, 1981; Kumar, 2007). Studies have assessed the effectiveness of presidential leadership according to several strategies, whether through national speeches (Baum & Kernell, 1999; Peake & Eshbaugh-Soha, 2008), by targeting local audiences (Barrett & Peake, 2007), or through continuous attention to their policy priorities (Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake, 2011). Others examine whether presidents have been effective in influencing the amount (Barrett, 2007) or tone (Cohen, 2008) of news coverage (Baum & Groeling, 2010). This body of literature points to a mixed degree of presidential leadership, at least as it concerns influence over traditional news outlets. Much of this research also shows presidents are highly responsive to news agendas (Edwards & Wood, 1999).

Recent and important changes in the media environment may alter our expectations for presidential leadership of the news agenda. A growing sentiment holds that the proliferation of new media has affected news coverage in American politics (Bennett, 2009; Tewksbury & Rittenberg, 2012). Much of this research centers on the impact of new media technology on audience preferences. With more viewing and reading options, audiences self-select and prefer consonant sources of news (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Sunstein, 2001; Wicks, Wicks,

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& Morimoto, 2014; but see, for example, Bimber & Davis, 2003; Stroud, 2007), if they even watch the news (Prior, 2007). Fragmenting audiences have caused traditional news sources to lose readers and viewers to partisan news (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008), soft news (Baum, 2003), or faux news programs (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006). Although it appears that the power of agenda-setting by traditional media has not waned in the post-broadcast age (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2013), very little research examines the prospects for political leadership of the news and whether our expectations for media responsiveness to the president's agenda should change as media technology has advanced (the work of Baum and Groeling [2010] is an exception).

This is an important consideration. Just as increased competition for viewers may alter the standards for what is considered to be newsworthy across different media (e.g., Groeling, 2010), it may also affect the ability of presidents to guide the news agenda. Since nontraditional forms of news—or news not presented through newspapers, newswires, or network television broadcasts—appeal to smaller and more ideologically homogenous audiences than broadcast news had, and because news programming should respond to audience preferences, traditional and nontraditional media may respond differently to the president's efforts to influence the news agenda.<sup>1</sup> Despite this possibility, scholarship has been slow to incorporate newer media into its analysis or differentiate its effects from traditional news sources (see Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). Thus, we simply do not know whether presidential leadership of the news agenda varies by type of medium.

This article explores two possible answers to this vexing question. The first is that there is no variation between news sources in their coverage of the president. The president is and shall remain newsworthy according to norms of professional journalism and so will remain newsworthy regardless of medium. This perspective holds that the myth of digital democracy will persist for the presidency, much as it does for elite influence over Internet-based media (Hindman, 2009). Presidential leadership of the news agenda may remain consistent across news sources, even as research shows significant variation in news coverage by several factors including partisan slant (Baum & Groeling, 2008), the impact of different news media on an audience's perception of political issues (Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2007), and tone (Pew Research Center, 2012). The second possibility is that audience preferences and the profit incentive to appeal to niche audiences means that the ability of the president to influence the news agenda will vary by different news sources, and presidential news, in general, will be more prominent on cable and online than on traditional news media.

I have sampled daily news reports from three categories of media: traditional broadcast (*NBC Nightly News*) and wires (AP wire reports), cable news—both conservative (*Special Report with Bret Baier* on Fox News Channel) and liberal-leaning (*Hardball with Chris Matthews* on MSNBC)—and Internet news sites and blogs (foxnews.com, huffingtonpost.com, and drudgereport.com). This original database covers 63 days and includes 748 stories on the president. I examine two kinds of presidential stories: those that mention the president or administration and those that reference a specific presidential remark. It is the latter that will determine whether the president dictates the news agenda. The findings are divided into two parts. First, I describe and compare the types of presidential stories that make the news. Second, I predict whether presidential speeches increase the amount of news coverage, and whether traditional and nontraditional news sources vary in their coverage of the presidency. I find that although presidential agenda leadership does not vary considerably across media, presidential news generated irrespective of a presidential speech is more prominent on nontraditional news media.

This article has important implications for presidential leadership and news coverage. First, it expands our understanding of presidential news management beyond the confines of traditional media. As Kumar (2007, p. 3) observes, Americans no longer “gather around the network campfire every night.” This has not only changed the president’s media outreach strategy, it should have also affected the ability of presidents to lead the news agenda. Just as the end of the golden age of presidential television affected presidential leadership strategies, so too should the rise of nontraditional media politics reveal important consequences of these changes. Second, it reflects on recent research, which argues that the Internet revolution has not produced a diversified and democratized new media environment (Hindman, 2009). Presidential news is still elite driven, according to this article, regardless of whether the president’s speeches make the news. Third, this study examines agenda-building, or what affects the media’s agenda (see Scheufele, 2000), not agenda-setting, or the media’s impact on what the public thinks is important.<sup>2</sup> Most research focuses on the latter, and so this article adds to the important topic of whether the president can affect the media’s agenda. Although this article stops short of examining whether presidential leadership of the news agenda translates into leadership of the public’s agenda, the strong link between media and the public (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987) virtually ensures that if the president cannot influence nontraditional news media, he will not also influence the public that consumes those media.

### **Presidential Leadership of the News**

Presidential leadership of the news is a topic central to American politics. As part of their permanent campaign for public support (Blumenthal, 1982), presidents constantly speak and hold public events. To reach the public, presidents must lead not only traditional broadcast and print media, but also reach audiences that prefer cable television, Internet blogs, or other online news sources. Presidents must target these media daily, as the 24-hour news cycle has the potential to move rapidly from one news story to another (but see Boydston, 2013). To begin exploring the prospects for presidential leadership of new media, I cover briefly what the literature concludes concerning presidential news leadership strategies and their effectiveness.

#### ***Presidential Leadership Efforts***

Presidents strive tirelessly to influence the news media. They have long-attempted to lead traditional forms of mass media, including broadcast television (Baum & Kernell, 1999), newspapers (Grossman & Kumar, 1981), and radio (Hart, Childers, & Lind, 2013, Chapter 5; Horvit, Schiffer, & Wright, 2008). Presidential strategies vary by media target and available media technology. Whereas Franklin Roosevelt mastered the radio to set the news agenda and reach the American people, John F. Kennedy preferred the televised press conference to communicate his agenda to the media and public. Nationally televised addresses afforded presidents even greater opportunity to lead news coverage during the 1970s and early 1980s, what some have called the golden age of presidential television (Baum & Kernell, 1999). Campaign-styled bus tours and other travels to localities, deemed “going local” (Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake, 2006), followed as presidents targeted local media to generate news coverage with the intent of persuading the local public or influencing the national news agenda, stop-by-stop, and outside of the more critical gaze of the Washington Press Corps.

Presidential communication strategies have continued to evolve to capture diversified audiences scattered throughout the new media landscape. Some recent examples include Bill Clinton's interview with MTV during his second year in office (Kumar, 2007, p. 146), George W. Bush's appearance on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and Barack Obama's visit to *The View*. Presidents have attempted to incorporate lessons learned from social media and the Internet as presidential candidate (Hendricks & Denton, 2010) into strategies to master new media as president (Kurtz & Tumulty, 2010). These include using the White House Web page (Farnsworth, 2009) and Twitter to reach news media and engage the public. Although presidents invariably develop new media outreach strategies and targets as media technology evolves, it remains uncertain whether advances in the president's media environment change his going-public strategy (Heith, 2012) or will have no impact on the upward trend in presidential travel (Doherty, 2012).

### *The Effect of Presidential Leadership of the News*

The effects of the president's strategies to lead the news agenda are not as clear as how a president uses them. At first, scholarship expected presidents to be able to lead the news agenda. As the dominant agenda-setter in American politics (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Kindgon, 1995), presidents are in a strong position to dictate the topics covered by the national news media. On this point, Graber (2006) (bolstered by Cohen [2008], who uses several news sources) evinces that the president is most newsworthy of all government officials. This is not surprising to those who predict news coverage as a function of audience preferences, many of whom prefer news on the president to other political actors (see Hamilton, 2004).

Yet, testable evidence of presidential leadership of the news agenda paints a much more complicated picture. Although presidents may influence the media agenda on some domestic policy issues, their influence over foreign policy issues (Edwards & Wood, 1999; Wood & Peake, 1998) and the economy (Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake, 2005) is more suspect. Presidents have also attempted to use national television to affect the news media. The president's State of the Union address only marginally affects the media's agenda (Wanta, Stephenson, Turk, & McCombs, 1989), however, with only about one-third of national addresses on the economy increasing media's monthly attention to economic policy (Peake & Eshbaugh-Soha, 2008). Presidents are also responsive to media in their discretionary national addresses because it is the media who decide when the president will receive air-time to speak to the nation in the first place (Edwards, 2003; Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake, 2011). In all, the *New York Times* or *Washington Post* report on fewer than half of the president's legislative appeals (Barrett, 2007).

The strategy of going local appears to have the most impact on overall news coverage. Barrett and Peake (2007) report that local newspaper coverage of the president is more voluminous and positive than corresponding national news reports. Nevertheless, this coverage may not assist the president in either legislative or public leadership since local news coverage of the president's visits tends to be more descriptive than substantive (Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake, 2006). It may not even matter if the president visits an area because more speeches, regardless of location, increase the amount of presidential news coverage across a wide range of local newspapers (Cohen, 2010, Chapter 5). Similar effects exist for tone (Cohen, 2010, Chapter 6).

Studies of presidential leadership of the media stop short of examining presidential influence over nontraditional media. Notwithstanding Baum and Groeling's (2008) and Groeling's (2008) comparisons of Fox News with traditional news sources, much research

that explores leadership of news media in the post-broadcast age looks almost exclusively at presidential election campaigns (Edgerly, Bode, Kim, & Shah, 2012), provides only good descriptive data (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2012), or examines these media's influence over the public (see Boulianne, 2009). Even Cohen's (2008) impressive study on presidential leadership of the news in the era of 24-hour news is restricted to an analysis of traditional media, albeit during what he calls the era of new media. Given the limited research that has examined the president's leadership of nontraditional media, the topic of presidential leadership of these media is clearly ripe for additional exploration.

## Theory

The preeminent theory that frames presidential leadership of the traditional news agenda often balances the sometimes conflicting tendencies for media to cover the president due to professional journalistic norms and to satisfy audience preferences to sustain a profit. Presidents also try to shape the incentives of media to cover their agendas by delivering speeches and engaging in other public activities. In this section, I theorize why media are likely to cover the president's agenda and build upon recent scholarship to argue how nontraditional media may respond differently from traditional media to presidential leadership.

### *Why Media Cover the President's Agenda*

Two primary motivations influence the tendency for news media to cover the president's agenda. First, the profit incentive of news producers drives the content of political news coverage. As a business, news media will appeal to their customers (Dunaway, 2008; Hamilton, 2004; Leighley, 2004). News organizations that create content that appeals to audience preferences will generate viewer interest and higher ratings. This allows them to charge more for advertising, which generates higher profit margins. One way to optimize the number of viewers of political news is to cover a particularly newsworthy politician, such as the president, frequently and consistently (Cohen, 2010; Graber, 2006). Thus, the revenue side of the profit equation should encourage presidential news coverage. News media can also reduce the cost of producing news by relying on readily available and prepackaged reports, or by taking advantage of existing news coverage routines that journalists rely on to report the news. The White House beat, for instance, provides a steady source of news on the president. Thus, the need to produce news in a relatively costless fashion should encourage news coverage of the president's agenda, which is readily available.

Second, that which is newsworthy follows from journalistic norms (Cohen, 2010, p. 84; Graber, 2006; Leighley, 2004). Journalistic norms dictate that newsworthy stories will have a strong impact on viewers or society, involve conflict or scandal, are familiar to viewers, are proximate, and are timely and novel (Graber, 2006, pp. 106–109). At base, presidents are considered to be newsworthy because, as Shoemaker and Resse (1996, p. 106) note, "actions of the powerful are newsworthy because what the powerful do affects the general public." Thus, professional norms promote coverage of the presidency.

The norm of journalistic professionalism encourages all news organizations to cover the president's agenda. Even nontraditional news sources have some adherence to journalistic norms because nontraditional sources, like Fox News and *Huffington Post*, have members in the Washington Press Corps. Moreover, both organizations buy access to AP news feeds, which are generated according to contemporary standards of journalism. Even much of Internet blog postings are links to traditional news stories available online. So long



as the norm of professional journalism permeates both traditional and nontraditional news sources, there will be little variation across media—whether nontraditional (cable or online news) or traditional—in the tendency of presidential speeches to make the news.

Presidents are well aware of these two motivations of journalists and strive to benefit from them. To generate news coverage and appeal to the profit incentive and journalistic norms of news production, presidents attempt to manage the news through a variety of strategies and techniques (Kumar, 2007). These might involve private acts by the president or White House staffers, such as “sweetening” the beat (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2011), strategic leaks, or trial balloons, but also include strategically delivered presidential speeches, the focus of this article. A presidential speech could signal something novel, familiar, or important to the viewing public, thereby increasing the incentive of news media to cover the topic of that speech for profit. It could also be a high-profile or otherwise important speech that appeals to journalistic norms.

Although all presidential activities increase the amount of presidential news coverage (Cohen, 2010, Chapter 5), some speeches may be more newsworthy than others. Nationally televised addresses provide the definitive platform for presidential leadership of the public and news media. Despite research that shows a limited impact of these addresses on the news agenda (Peake & Eshbaugh-Soha, 2008; Wanta et al., 1989), it is possible that a national address will influence the news agenda given its obvious appeal to journalistic norms. Press conferences are interactive events that allow reporters to ask questions during the event and encourage coverage of the president on the news. Although press conferences do not lead to more coverage in a sample of regional and local newspapers (Cohen, 2010), solo, but not joint, press conferences tend to make national television broadcast news (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2013). Fundraisers are commonplace during presidential election years and may also be newsworthy during a presidential campaign. Although presidents may choose to deliver speeches strategically to enhance the likelihood of news coverage, all speeches should increase the amount of presidential news coverage whether because speeches are relatively costless to cover as news or because they easily satisfy journalistic norms to cover important topics.

### ***Why Nontraditional Media May Be Different***

Although it is possible that the same motivations that encourage traditional media to cover the president will also motivate nontraditional media to do so, the literature presents little evidence about the extent to which different media cover the president. The best study on this subject may be Cohen’s (2008) examination of presidential news coverage in the age of 24-hour news. His theory predicts that in the new media age, all mainstream and national news coverage of the president will decline. Simply, increased competition for viewers and greater reliance on soft news and entertainment to appeal to audiences reduces the amount of presidential news relative to all other news.

Cohen (2008, p. 61) offers one very important distinction in presidential news coverage based on a comparison of traditional and new media eras.<sup>3</sup> Like Kumar (2007, p. 197), who observes that cable news provides presidents with direct access to viewers of cable news, Cohen notes that it is likely that niche audiences interested in hard political news are more likely to encourage cable news (and presumably other, similarly focused media) to offer more hard news political coverage. That is, Cohen’s (2008) expectations concerning the decline in presidential news coverage should (and do) affect national news coverage, such as broadcast networks and the *New York Times*. The reason for this is that national news organizations attempt to reach large, national audiences by diversifying news content



beyond hard news stories typically unappealing to most Americans. Niche audiences, alternatively, encourage nontraditional media to rely more on news coverage of the president because news-based new media (e.g., CNN or foxnews.com) are trying to target those interested in political news to begin with.

Thus, Cohen's (2008) inferences based on trends in national news coverage lead to an important expectation relevant to this article: Nontraditional media should be more likely to cover presidential news overall relative to traditional news sources. This is due to the profit incentive of news organizations to appeal to their audiences, with nontraditional media being more focused on appealing to a politically interested and engaged audience. Of course, not all nontraditional media have the same presentation of news or the same type of audience. Mainly, cable news programs and online news sources may differ in fundamental ways, which may alter the amount of presidential news content each produces. Specifically, presidential news is even more likely on nontraditional media that focus singularly on politics, such as cable television news programs, rather than online news sources that may cover politics in addition to celebrity and other nonpolitical coverage. Thus, although nontraditional news sources should cover the president more frequently than traditional news sources, cable news programs should be even more focused on the president than other online news sources.<sup>4</sup>

## Data

The broad parameters of the data set follow. I have collected stories from 63 weekdays and over three months from January 18, 2012, through April 13, 2012. This time frame approximated the active part of the Republican presidential nomination season, from the day before the South Carolina presidential primary to just before former Senator Rick Santorum dropped out of the race, effectively ending the race. I selected this time frame for not only practical but also for scholarly reasons. Since one cannot control for a variety of factors in a daily analysis, this time frame safeguards coincidental presidential news stories that are by-products of a slow news day. Because a slow news day encourages reliance on predictable and easily accessible news like a presidential speech, collecting data during the Republican primary season means that the president is in a highly competitive news environment in which he may make the news but, on any given day, there is likely to be an even more compelling story from a more timely campaign event.<sup>5</sup> Although the generalizability of this article's findings is limited absent significant variation in the political context, that it targets one type of political event implies that the results should be generalizable to other similar scenarios. This is not unlike picking a well-defined area of presidential politics, such as the war in Iraq, to analyze.

Practically, collecting an original data set of news coverage over three months and across seven news sources—three of which are online sources collected in real time—takes a considerable amount of work.<sup>6</sup> This is likely one reason why scholarship has been slow to study daily presidential news coverage and to compare traditional and nontraditional media. A lack of resources limits the size of the data set and the range of news sources. Still, a data set that covers three months and seven sources is on par with recent research in the field, which has examined four months and five sources of news coverage (Baum & Groeling, 2008).

I followed several decision rules to compile my database of news stories. Nontraditional news stories fall into two camps. First, I downloaded cable news transcripts (found on LexisNexis) from two programs (*Special Report* and *Hardball*) for every day in my sample. Determining what constituted a story is not as obvious as determining

newspaper or traditional broadcast stories, so I relied on the format of each program to guide what constitutes a story. For example, *Hardball* features interviews and panels with speakers, with the topic being led by the host, Chris Matthews. When Matthews introduced a new topic, a new panel, or a new interviewee, I counted a new story. *Special Report* reflects more traditional reporting, relying on a correspondent's reports and video packaging, which provided for clear indications of a new story. Commercial breaks also mark the end of one story and the beginning of another. I read each story, scanning each transcript for keywords including "Obama," "president," "presidency," or "administration" to discern whether the story focused on the president.<sup>7</sup>

Second, I collected online news from foxnews.com, drudgereport.com, and huffingtonpost.com. This sample of Web sites provides a mix of online news sources that vary by ideological slant (to mirror the partisan slant of new media), available resources, and presentation. For example, both Fox and Drudge lean right, Fox and *Huffington Post* have reporters in the White House press corps, and *Huffington Post* and Drudge rely much on other Web sites' reporting or videos. Because these are some of the most prominent partisan online news sources, they do not, by themselves, reflect the larger variation in online blogs or other partisan news sources. Moreover, foxnews.com may reflect some of the motivations of the television channel and, so, may not be solely an online source of news, as Drudge is. In all, this sample approximates only one aspect of the online media environment, but covers the range of variation in online news sources currently available.<sup>8</sup>

To make sense of the sheer volume of stories to be found on foxnews.com and huffingtonpost.com, I compiled a list of top stories, based on the following visual selection procedures. For foxnews.com, I selected presidential news stories from those stories located at the top of the main Web page, which includes the main banner story and any related stories immediately beneath the banner, the three second-tier headline stories, their related stories, and the bold headlines in the "Latest News" section. For huffingtonpost.com, I collected presidential news stories from the top-10 stories listed on the page, determined to be the banner story and the headlines in the main-center column of the Web site. Since drudgereport.com lacks any clear prioritization of stories beyond its center-headline link, I simply counted the number of links to stories pertaining to the president, being diligent to count each story only once (because Drudge has a tendency to link the same story multiple times with different titles).<sup>9</sup> For comparison purposes, data in the Appendix illustrate the broad demographic characteristics of these blogs.<sup>10</sup>

Collection of traditional news stories centered on news reports from daily top-10 lists of Associated Press (AP) wire stories and news stories broadcast on *NBC Nightly News*.<sup>11</sup> Selecting one television news broadcast and the foundation of most traditional print news approximates what is likely to be found on traditional media's daily news agenda. Although it is true that a news audience is unlikely to read the AP sources directly from the Web page, AP wires are distributed to 1,400 newspapers, which approximate the likely priorities of most newspaper coverage.<sup>12</sup> I read each story to determine whether it was about the president or his administration. Once I collected all traditional and nontraditional stories, I catalogued each by date, and coded whether the main thrust of the story (discernible from the first paragraph in the story) covered international issues, the 2012 presidential election, economy, budget, or health care.<sup>13</sup>

I collected all presidential speeches for every day during the sample time period, noting whether the president delivered a speech, how many speeches he gave, the type of speech (e.g., fundraiser or press conference), and the topic of the speeches.<sup>14</sup> Speeches are available in the *Public Papers of the Presidents* archived most conveniently at american-presidencyproject.org.<sup>15</sup> The number of speeches range from 0 to 5 per day, with an average

of 1.76 and a standard deviation of 1.38. I model these contemporaneously, too, to account for the 24-hour news cycle.<sup>16</sup> This count of presidential speeches comprises my measure of the president's agenda. I then determined whether a news story referenced the content of the president's speech, whether by quoting the president or paraphrasing his remarks. These are considered to be speech stories. All other stories that are about the president but do not reference a speech delivered the day of or day before the news story are considered to be non-speech presidential news stories.

The unit of analysis is the news source day and the dependent variable is how many stories each source covered the president on a day. I use the day as the unit of analysis for several reasons. First, news coverage of American politics in the new media age follows a 24-hour news cycle. This has not only had profound consequences for the content of news coverage; analyzing daily data mean that this study more closely approximates the ebb and flow of news coverage in the new media age. This, alone, is an improvement over previous research that has examined presidential-media interrelationships at the week (Baum & Groeling, 2010; Edwards & Wood, 1999), month (Boydston, 2013; Peake & Eshbaugh-Soha, 2008), or more aggregate time points (Cohen, 2008). Most importantly, a daily analysis allows for a specific examination of whether presidential speeches, and which types of speeches, affect the daily news agenda of traditional and nontraditional media.<sup>17</sup>

The drawback to using daily data and a focus on presidential speeches is twofold. First, daily data do not allow for consideration of variation in the larger contextual environment, such as the state of the economy, wartime, or election years. In effect, all of these potential effects are held constant, thereby limiting the inferences one can draw concerning them, leading us to only assume that they influence daily news coverage as other studies have demonstrated that they are relevant to more aggregate examinations of news coverage (Cohen, 2008). Second, this research design does not allow for consideration of presidential responsiveness to the news agenda, which is possible in weekly counts of presidential and media attention to policies areas (e.g., Edwards & Wood, 1999).

In addition to modeling the president's specific efforts to lead the news by accounting for the number of different types of speeches each day, the models include several controls. First, I approximate the president's larger political environment by modeling the president's daily approval ratings. These data are Gallup's daily tracking approval data.<sup>18</sup> I model these both in levels and as a daily change measure in each model. Second, location matters to the ability of presidents to affect news coverage and for the media to find it profitable to cover the president (Cohen, 2010; Eshbaugh-Soha, 2008). I model whether or not the president was in Washington, DC, on a day to see whether the president's location affects news coverage.

## Findings

I present two sets of findings, both of which confirm variation in news coverage of the president's agenda by medium. First, I describe the amount of presidential news coverage by news medium and illustrate some variation by policy topic. Second, I model the impact of several variables, including the president's speeches, on the likelihood that traditional and nontraditional news media cover the president's daily agenda.

### *Descriptive Comparisons*

The initial descriptive comparison examines stories on the president derived from my sample of top daily news stories. To begin, I counted the number of days of presidential news

coverage across each source in two ways. First, speech stories consist of stories that explicitly reference the president's speech held that day or the day before. One example includes President Obama's remarks on April 4, 2012, when he encouraged the Supreme Court to rule in his favor on health care reform. If the news covered this speech, this is indicative of the president leading the news agenda. Second, non-speech stories are those that mention the president but not in relation to a speech. On March 27, 2012, for example, foxnews.com speculated about the Supreme Court's ruling on the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. This story was not a response to the president trying to lead the news agenda on health care reform for that day, even though it was clearly a story about the president's policy.

The descriptive results presented in Table 1 reveal modified support for this article's expectations. First, there is some but not substantial variation in the number of days when the news covers a presidential speech. The number of days ranges from 18 (for foxnews.com and huffingtonpost.com) to 44 days for *Special Report*. Proportionally, cable news programs cover a presidential speech most frequently, on 57% (*Hardball*) and 70% (*Special Report*) of the days in my sample. Associated Press prioritizes a presidential speech for 39% of the days in the sample, followed by Drudge at 37%, NBC at 32%, and Fox and *Huffington Post* both at 29%.

What is striking about these data is the break in news coverage by medium. Whereas both traditional and nontraditional online news sources cover presidential speeches on roughly the same number of days, cable news programs cover presidential speeches much more regularly, with an average of 40 days between *Special Report* and *Hardball*. One reason for this is the almost exclusive focus of these programs on political news to the exclusion of soft news coverage, which is scattered throughout traditional news sources and nontraditional news Web sites. In all, traditional news sources tend to be slightly

**Table 1**  
Number of days covering the president

News source	Speech stories	Non-speech stories	Total
Associated Press	24	9	33
<i>NBC Nightly News</i>	20	16	36
Traditional news average	22	12.5	34.5
<i>Special Report</i>	44	60	104
<i>Hardball</i>	36	60	96
Cable news average	40	60	100
<i>Drudge Report</i>	23	58	81
Foxnews.com	18	32	50
<i>Huffington Post</i>	18	30	48
Online news average	19.7	40	59.7
Nontraditional news average	27.8	48	75.8
Total average	26.1	37.9	64

*Note.* President Obama delivered a speech on 54 of the 63 days in the sample of data, for a total of 111 speeches, and a maximum of 5 speeches in one day. Days are the number of days on which the news source covered at least one story on the president. "Speech Stories" are those that reference a specific presidential speech. "Non-speech Stories" comprise those stories that cover the presidency but do not cover a presidential speech. Nontraditional News Average is the average of all cable and online news days of coverage.

more responsive to presidential speeches in their daily news agenda when compared with nontraditional online media, yet cable shows' near-exclusive focus on politics encourages a much larger amount of news coverage of the president's agenda on these programs.

The data show much more variation in news coverage of the president that does not cover a presidential speech. Whereas cable news programs report on the president without prompting by a speech almost every day, traditional news sources—the Associated Press and *NBC Nightly News*—offer fewer presidential stories unrelated to a speech. This is especially so for the Associated Press, which covered non-speech stories on 15 fewer days, for a difference of 25% less coverage. Foxnews.com and *Huffington Post* are much more likely to cover the president irrespective of the president's public statements. Fox offers non-speech coverage on 32 (or just more than half) days in comparison with 18 days covering a speech (28% more coverage), and the *Huffington Post* follows with 12 more days or 19% more coverage. Although *Drudge Report* is more consistent with foxnews.com and the huffingtonpost.com on speech coverage, it approximates the nearly daily coverage of other presidential news stories found on cable television, generating an increase of 55% more daily coverage of non-speech than speech-driven news coverage. Regardless of this subtle difference, all nontraditional news media in my sample offer more coverage of the presidency overall given that they appeal to niche audiences of political-news junkies, not the broad middle coveted by traditional news outlets.

Dividing the percentage of coverage into several issue areas reveals less systematic but even more niche variation. As Table 2 shows, most news sources offer a fairly similar proportion of coverage on all issues, with a couple of outliers per topic. For example, the percentage of presidential economic news coverage is relatively low for all sources (at less than 6%) except for the AP and cable news programs, which devoted 12% to 14% of their coverage to the economy. Not surprisingly, coverage of Obama's role in the 2012

**Table 2**  
Percentage of all presidency stories by issue area and news source

News source	International	Election	Economy	Budget	Health care
Associated Press	11	26	14	2	7
<i>NBC Nightly News</i>	14	14	2	2	16
Traditional	11	17	7	2	10
<i>Special Report</i>	22	38	14	9	19
<i>Hardball</i>	9	71	12	6	14
Cable	16	53	13	8	17
<i>Drudge Report</i>	9	32	6	10	15
Foxnews.com	8	25	4	5	26
<i>Huffington Post</i>	8	25	4	3	8
Online	8	28	5	7	17
Nontraditional	12	40	9	7	17
Total	12	37	8	6	16

*Note.* Numbers in parentheses are percentages of news coverage out of all presidential news coverage. Total number of stories on the presidency: AP (43), NBC (44), *Huffington Post* (76), foxnews.com (106), MSNBC (138), Fox News Channel (171), and *Drudge Report* (171). These categories are not exhaustive and so do not add to these totals.

presidential election drove much of the daily news agenda across sources, at about one-third of coverage for most sources. *Hardball*, in particular, devoted 71% of its coverage to the campaign, very much in line with MSNBC's own claim of being "the place for politics."

Coverage of other issues follows this pattern. Given Americans' general lack of interest in foreign affairs relative to domestic issues, coverage of international issues is minimal. Traditional news covers international issues related to the president slightly more frequently than most other news sources except *Special Report*, which devoted 22% of its coverage to international issues. Some, but not all, of this international coverage on Fox focused on perceived mistakes by President Obama in Afghanistan or Iran, which are clear coverage winners for conservative audiences and indicative of how news sources have discretion to drive presidency news coverage irrespective of and well beyond the president's own policy decisions or public speeches. Another favorite topic of conservative media was health care reform. Stories on foxnews.com and *Special Report* focused predominately on the Affordable Care Act not only in terms of the impending Supreme Court decision, but also regarding the debate surrounding the requirement that religious organizations provide contraception coverage to employees.

In all, the descriptive evidence paints a mixed picture of presidential leadership of the news agenda. On the one hand, the president makes the news frequently on each of these sources, having received coverage on average and across sources for about 51%, with a maximum coverage of 95% of days on cable news programs. On the other hand, a presidential speech only dictates the news agenda, on average, for 26 days per news source, with cable news programs, once again, being the favored outlet for presidential speech coverage. The extent of presidential coverage is more limited if it is placed in the context of all daily news coverage. *NBC Nightly News*, as one representative example, devoted only 3.1% of its entire coverage during this sample period (739 total stories) to presidential remarks and only 6% in reference to the president. Even though total presidential news coverage on foxnews.com and huffingtonpost.com both hover at a higher average of 12% of all news coverage, these descriptive data support two primary points: Presidents have little influence over the daily news agenda, yet nontraditional media—and especially cable news—are more likely to cover news related to the president, given their niche audiences' interests in political news content.

### *Explaining Presidential News Coverage*

Table 3 explains the number of daily news stories as a function of the president's speeches, news media type, and the larger political environment represented by the president's daily job approval ratings. The dependent variable is the number of stories per day and, as there is over-dispersion in these counts, Table 3 presents a negative binomial regression. Moreover, this is a panel data analysis given its time (63 days) and cross-sectional components (7 media sources), which uses random effects to model the impact of media type (traditional, cable, or online) on daily news coverage.<sup>19</sup>

The results confirm several primary findings. First, presidential speeches increase the tendency of all news sources to cover the president's agenda, by about 16% per speech, for a maximum possible increased likelihood of 82% for 5 speeches.<sup>20</sup> An average speech day for the president (about 1.76 speeches) increases the likelihood of one additional story by 28.9%. Solo press conferences also have an impact on news coverage, leading to a 143% increase in coverage. In context, the only solo press conference in my sample led to one story on Drudge, two on *Hardball* and NBC, and three stories on *Special Report*. Although being in Washington, DC, theoretically makes it easier for Washington-based media to



**Table 3**  
Panel negative binomial regression models of presidential news stories

	Speech stories		Non-speech stories
	Model 1	Model 2	
Approval	-0.05 (0.05)	-0.05 (0.05)	0.002 (0.03)
Approval Δ	-0.02 (0.05)	-0.02 (0.05)	-0.05 (0.02)* [-4.9]
Speeches	0.15 (0.08)* [+16.4]	0.15 (0.08)* [+16.4]	
SOTU	1.72 (0.33)* [+461]	1.72 (0.33)* [+460.9]	
Fundraisers	-0.40 (0.26)	-0.40 (0.26)	
Solo press	0.89 (0.37)* [+143.4]	0.89(0.37)* [+143.4]	
Joint press	-0.54 (0.46)	-0.54 (0.46)	
Washington, DC	0.14 (0.19)	0.14 (0.19)	0.13 (0.08)* [+14.3]
Traditional	-0.41 (0.28)		
Cable		0.64 (0.27)* [+92.0]	1.37 (0.18)* [+293.1]
Online		0.22 (0.26)	0.89 (0.17)* [+144.4]
Constant	18.03 (328.34)	16.67 (345.61)	15.18 (385.61)
Wald $\chi^2$	65.04*	69.33*	66.85*
Days per source	63	63	63
N	441	441	441

*Notes.* Likelihood ratio tests that alpha = 0 is statistically significant in each model. Standard errors in parentheses and percentage change for significant variables in brackets. Random effects. SOTU = State of the Union address.

\* $p < .05$ .

cover the president, this location does not matter significantly to the daily news agenda that covers the president’s speeches. It is significantly more likely to increase overall coverage of the presidency, nevertheless. The State of the Union address also increases considerably news coverage of the president the day after the address, although the effect is not significant in relation to stories generated the day of the speech. Although lower approval ratings do not significantly affect speech stories, a negative change in the president’s approval ratings contributes to more non-speech stories, consistent with past research (Groeling & Kernell, 1998).

Table 3 reveals several additional points. First, there is no significant difference in presidential speech coverage according to traditional (AP and NBC) and nontraditional (foxnews.com, drudgereport.com, huffingtonpost.com, and cable) sources of news, consistent with my expectations that these media will offer similar coverage of the president’s agenda. Second, however, the traditional and nontraditional distinction is incomplete, given the political focus of the cable news programs I examine, and as supported by the



descriptive evidence in Table 1. In other words, when separating into two types—cable and online news—and then analyzing these nontraditional news sources in reference to the baseline category of traditional news, cable news is statistically significant. On cable television news, that is, the president has a greater opportunity for coverage of his speeches, amounting to a 92% increase in the expected count of stories on the president's speeches.

To build upon this point, the final column in Table 3 presents a model of cable and online news sources and their impact on non-speech presidential news stories. Although online news is no more likely to cover presidential speeches than traditional news sources, it is—along with cable television—significantly more likely to cover stories on the president that do not reference a speech. This reduced-form model reveals that both sets of nontraditional news sources, cable and online news, lead to a 293% and 144% increase in the expected count of news coverage relative to traditional news sources to cover non-speech presidential news stories. These results confirm my descriptive findings (and my theoretical expectations) that the president is more likely to make nontraditional news reports given the politically interested niche audience these sources serve.

Of course, one might claim that these results are but a function of the amount of space available to cover the news, with newer media having more space to do so than a traditional broadcast. Although identifying comparable agenda space for new media is difficult, the data collection attempted to minimize these differences, when possible, by using similar decision rules in determining agendas across news sources. The limited impact of variable agenda space is borne out statistically, too. Reducing the dependent variable to whether or not a source covered the president per day accounts for the uneven variation in the space available to traditional and nontraditional media. A probit regression based on these dependent variables produced results comparable to those presented in Table 3. Thus, it is unlikely that these findings are driven simply by space, although future research should investigate the advantages that nontraditional media have to more easily offer coverage of a variety of topics, or any one topic in greater detail.

## Conclusion

Presidential leadership of the news agenda is a topic central to the study of American politics and political communication. Without leadership of the news agenda, it is unlikely that presidents can build public support for their policies and administrations, or to initiate and maintain influence over the national policy agenda (Cobb & Elder, 1983). Although scholarship understands the relationship between presidents and traditional media quite well, the changing state of news media requires further investigation of presidential influence over newer media outlets. This article has undertaken a systematic examination of the changing nature of presidential leadership of news agenda of nontraditional media by offering a comparative study of daily traditional and nontraditional news coverage of the president to ascertain whether presidential speeches affect the news agenda of traditional, cable, or online news reports and what characterizes this coverage.

The findings reveal several important conclusions. First, presidential speeches influence daily news coverage. If the president makes a speech, he is likely to generate some news coverage of that speech, even though the president's overall agenda-setting impact may be muted given the universe of other stories covered across news media. The president's biggest agenda impact is on cable news, where both *Hardball* and *Special Report* covered the president's speeches somewhat more than other news sources. Second, nontraditional news sources offer much more presidential news coverage than traditional media given the profit incentive of news-driven media to appeal to their readers who are

intense consumers of political news. This is especially true of cable news programs that cover politics almost exclusively, even in comparison with the politically driven online news sites in my sample of media. Third, the variation in policy coverage overall implies that each news source has the discretion to prioritize an issue area and frame the presidency in that context, whether in relation to a presidential speech or not. This was especially so for foxnews.com, which emphasized health care reform in much of its presidential news coverage.

The implications of this study are several. At once, presidential speeches—the president's targeted efforts to affect the day's news—continue to influence the daily news agenda. Nevertheless, nontraditional media are more likely to report on the president in other contexts. This reinforces the idea that presidents have to do much more in the new media age to encourage media to cover their daily agendas. Without question, the president is a major draw for nontraditional news sources, but greater competition for consumers implies, increasingly it seems, that the president has less control over the volume of presidential news stories. The president's efforts at media outreach must continue to evolve for presidents to maintain their relevance in an increasingly noisy news media environment. The tendency for nontraditional news sources to cover the presidency irrespective of the president's speeches suggests an even greater likelihood that presidents will be responsive to these media, much as presidents have been responsive to traditional media on foreign affairs issues (Edwards & Wood, 1999). This conclusion fits with the idea that the Internet has not produced a truly open informational environment, but one in which a few use the Internet to engage in political news that is ultimately driven by "online social elites" (Hindman, 2009, p. 133).

There are several limitations to this study that future research may work to alleviate. Primarily, future research should look to widen the sample of news coverage in two ways. First, the findings are based on data selected from the first four months of a presidential election year. It is possible that presidents will generate more news coverage during other periods of their administration, such as during their honeymoon periods or at times of national crisis. Second, even though network news often reflects the agenda of the *New York Times* given its primacy in setting the national news agenda, the absence of a major broadsheet in this analysis limits the breadth of the current research design. Although the findings that presidential speeches generate roughly the same amount of coverage on traditional and nontraditional news sources, yet more overall presidential news on nontraditional news outlets, should hold for different sample news periods and for a wider array of sources, future research should at least explore whether this article's findings are limited in their generalizability to other political contexts and news sources.

Moreover, I restrict the analysis to presidential influence over media agenda-building—or what the media consider to be important—and do not include how they cover those stories. Given recent research that explores the partisan slant of Fox News and other partisan media (Baum & Groeling, 2008; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008), it is likely that the bulk of Fox's coverage of the president would be more negative than either that of huffingtonpost.com (which should prove to be more positive) or traditional news outlets. Indeed, examination of a selection of stories in this sample of data reveals some support for this conclusion, although a more thorough theoretical and empirical examination of political tone is beyond the scope of this article on presidential influence on the daily news agenda.

Finally, this study stops short of examining social media and an even broader array of cable and online news blogs. Social media have a large and growing presence on news programs of varying types, and Internet reporting sites may also dictate news online and in traditional formats. Concerning the president, this article indicates that because

nontraditional media are more likely to cover non-speech stories on the president, then it is most likely that it is these news stories that will drive social media activity on the president. We might expect a more balanced influence on speech-related news—or on efforts by the White House to distribute information specifically on social media—but this may be unlikely if users of social media are more likely to follow nontraditional news Web sites while online.

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## Notes

1. Whereas new media is defined as electronic interactive media, like the Internet and other postindustrial forms of telecommunication (<http://www.dictionary.cambridge.org>), old media is considered to be media in existence before the arrival of the Internet, such as newspapers, books, television, and cinema. There are multiple problems with this distinction, not the least of which is that much of what may be considered to be traditional news may now be viewed online. Moreover, social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, are reported on cable and broadcast television stations. Some restrict new media to include only that which is generated online, such as blogs or social media (Haynes & Pitts, 2009). The Pew Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism categorizes traditional media as all media except social media, such that new media includes Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and when coded, YouTube. I make yet another distinction that I think is most accurate given the significant and measurable intervention that cable news has had on American politics (Baum & Groeling, 2008; Young & Perkins, 2005): the difference between traditional media (that which existed before the rise of cable news and the Internet) and nontraditional media (that which came after).

2. Political scientists, such as Edwards and Wood (1999), also consider presidential leadership of the news media agenda "agenda-setting." The term "agenda-building" is more prominent in communications research, but the difference appears to be only a matter of semantics.

3. Cohen (2008, p. 15) indicates only that the "new media age" began somewhere during the "mid to late 1970s", concomitant with the rise of CNN. Others note that the "golden age" of presidential television ended in 1986, and occurred between 1963 and 1985 (Young & Perkins, 2005). No matter the cut point, this study clearly occurs in the new media age and follows from the definition in Note 1 about what is considered to be nontraditional media.

4. This is a function of show sampling, not network selection. For instance, if one were to select a Sunday morning program, like *Meet the Press*, and not *NBC Nightly News*, we are likely to see more presidential news on the former program since it is unlikely to cover soft news stories found on the evening news.

5. Shoemaker and Reese (1996, p. 259) note that slow news days are likely to give more influence over the day's news to "public relations practitioners," which is a reasonable description of the contemporary White House.

6. In response to a reviewer, I used the Wayback Machine to collect data on the *Drudge Report* for these days two years after they would have been posted "live."

7. I report Krippendorff's alpha (intercoder reliability coefficient) for several data sources, comparing about 30% of the days in a sample with the primary counts. *Drudge Report* generated an

alpha = 0.804 (for speech stories) and alpha = 0.868. Fox News Channel produced alpha = 0.744 (for speech stories). I had a second coder analyze about 10% of the daily sample for other news sources, NBC, *Huffington Post*, and foxnews.com, which produced agreement with the original coder 87% of the time.

8. Coders selected stories from all Web sites in the early afternoon, central time. This strategy may have missed some stories that became prominent later in the day, but this appears to have been a rare event for our sample of stories. I have saved each main page and each story for replication purposes. I do not differentiate by the source (in house or wire) or content of the story, but collected all stories that follow these decision rules. I collected the *Drudge Report* using the Wayback Machine, coding those “snapsnots” posted closest to midday.

9. Although imperfect, these decisions are replicable and produce a manageable data set, and without the advantage of an external source, breitbart.com, which previously tallied top-10 stories from blogs like the Daily Kos and Free Republic (Baum & Groeling, 2008).

10. Hindman (2009) also provides demographic data for a wide array of Web sites. Unfortunately, the sources that he relied on to build his database either no longer exist or are now proprietary sources.

11. Although I collected news stories from the nbcnews.com Web page, I verified that these stories matched the broadcasts by reading *NBC Nightly News* transcripts available from LexisNexis Academic. Although the Web listing includes stories that were only broadcast online, I exclude the online-only stories from our database to preserve the traditional format of the *NBC Nightly News* broadcast. *NBC Nightly News* boasted an average audience of 8.75 million viewers in 2011.

12. <http://www.ap.org/company/faqs> (see “Who Hears or Reads News from the Associated Press”)

13. Although it is true that AP wires are not a traditional news source in the way the *New York Times* or *NBC Nightly News* are, about half of the *New York Times*’ front-page stories (approximately six stories) match what is found on the AP wires and on *NBC Nightly News* for a selection of days in my sample. Moreover, since the agendas of network news often reflect the agendas of the *New York Times* given that the *Times* is a primary agenda setter in the daily news cycle, excluding the *Times* should not affect the conclusions generated herein.

14. Following the *Public Papers of the Presidents* misses some potential news events, including non-speech events, such as the screening of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which made *NBC Nightly News* the day after, on April 6, 2012. I did not include interviews with media. Although previous administrations had published interviews in the public papers, the Obama administration does not. Thus, knowledge of an interview comes from a news story about that interview, meaning that if I were to include these interviews, it would amount to selecting on the dependent variable. This slightly understates the president’s presence on the news, but not by much. Excluding interviews amounts to a loss of only nine stories; three of these occurred on traditional and six occurred on nontraditional news.

15. I restrict my definition to actual speeches, and do not include all public remarks, such as letters to Congress, executive orders, or other written statements. This differs from previous research that counts every entry in the *Public Papers* per day as a “speech” (Cohen, 2010, p. 112). The difference is not insignificant. For example, on January 19, 2012, the *Public Papers* list five separate public remarks or speeches along with four more statements, including an executive order, a notice, statement on a legislator’s decision not to seek reelection, and a letter to Congress related to the president’s notice. An analysis of all public remarks reduces the likelihood of a relationship between speeches and news coverage, mainly because many of these written remarks are not particularly newsworthy.

16. An example helps to explain why I did not lag speeches in the context of the 24-hour news cycle. The president’s only press conference in the sample was held on Super Tuesday. He received no news coverage in the AP or foxnews.com on this; but there was a story the previous day on a presidential speech. Thus, if lagged, there would be a strong, positive relationship between press conferences and stories related to the president’s speech. This would be erroneous, of course.

17. Some may be concerned that stories reporting on the president’s speeches might vary in their emphasis. That is, some stories may lead with the president and others may bury the president’s remarks later in the story. To examine this possibility, I randomly selected 10% of all stories that

reported on a presidential speech and no story buried the president's remarks. These stories follow the standard pyramid model of journalism, whereby the topic of the story (also found in the headline) is underscored in the very first paragraph of the report.

18. [http://www.pollingreport.com/obama\\_job1a.htm](http://www.pollingreport.com/obama_job1a.htm)

19. Although fixed effects is considered to be the more conservative choice for panel data, random effects allows for consideration of the impact of media types on stories. Moreover, the coefficients for all other variables in a fixed effects model approximate the coefficients in the random effects models presented in Table 3, providing further evidence that random effects are appropriate.

20. Cohen (2010) shows a curvilinear relationship, with the prospects for more news coverage declining after about seven speeches, statements, or other entries in the *Public Papers*. A speeches squared variable is negative, but statistically insignificant, using my data.

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## Appendix: Web Site Traffic and Cable News Viewer Demographics

	Women	Caucasian	35 years+	College+	Visitors/Viewers
<i>Huffington Post</i>	46	85	68	70	43.2
<i>Drudge Report</i>	11	95	74	75	13.3
Fox News Channel	52	—	81	57	1.85
<i>Hardball</i>	47	—	93	72	0.818

*Note.* Pew did not offer data from viewers of *Special Report*, only data for Fox News Channel. Visitors/Viewers are in millions, with number of visitors per month for each Web site, and College+ includes those with at least some college. Web traffic data unavailable for foxnews.com. For context, Alexa ranks foxnews.com 37 in Web traffic, *Huffington Post* 23, and Drudge at 90 for domestic traffic. Drudge is considered to be the third highest-ranked conservative Web page, behind foxnews.com and the *Wall Street Journal* OpinionJournal.com.

*Sources.* Drudge statistics taken from Quantcast and Intermarkets. Cable data retrieved from <http://www.people-press.org/2012/09/27/section-4-demographics-and-political-views-of-news-audiences/>