

The Presidency and Local Media: Local Newspaper Coverage of President George W. Bush

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Presidents increasingly bypass the filter of national media and take their message on the road to appeal to local audiences through local news outlets. We examine local newspaper coverage of President George W. Bush in 2003. Presumably, the president would enjoy mostly positive coverage from local newspapers. Yet, we demonstrate substantial variation in local news coverage, with community support for the president being a primary predictor of whether he will receive positive coverage. We also find that stories on the Iraq War contributed to negative coverage, even at the local level. We conclude with commentary on the utility of presidents' local media strategy in light of our findings.

Leading the media, public, and Congress through speeches is at the core of modern presidential governance. But just as the modern political environment requires presidents to appeal for support through speeches, presidents are increasingly unable to cultivate public opinion. Presidents who attempt to lead the nation are faced with a public that tunes out the president's prime-time addresses (Baum and Kernell 1999) and a news

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media whose attention to presidential addresses is fleeting (Peake and Eshbaugh-Soha 2008). When the national news media cover the presidency, the coverage is typically more negative than positive (Farnsworth and Lichter 2005; Groeling and Kernell 1998). As a result, presidents have difficulty setting the media's agenda (Edwards and Wood 1999; Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2005) or moving public opinion (Edwards 2003).

The difficulty presidents face generating positive and frequent national news coverage is not lost upon recent chief executives. Increasingly, presidents have turned from the so-called "filter" of national news coverage to appeal to local and regional media for coverage. This has manifest itself in increased domestic travel (Cook 2002; Cohen and Powell 2005) and efforts on the part of the White House to nurture favorable relations—and presumably news coverage—with local media. Cultivating local media begins with one expectation: Local media are more responsive than national media to the White House's efforts to generate news coverage, whether support for the president's policy or reelection goals. Indeed, presidential administrations target local media for two reasons, argues Martha Joynt Kumar (2007, 97-99). First, "the president generally receives positive coverage when he travels to localities around the country" and that coverage is typically comprehensive. Second, people generally trust their local media more than they trust national media outlets. This, in turn, makes local media the primary source of news for most Americans (Hamilton 2004). Journalists, White House insiders, and some political scientists hold this as conventional wisdom and suggest it is one of the reasons for why presidential administrations since Nixon have targeted local media through domestic travel and other efforts.

Recent research on newspaper coverage of President George W. Bush's trips provides support for this conventional wisdom. In 2001, for example, President Bush's domestic travel led to mostly positive local newspaper coverage (Barrett and Peake 2007). Bush's Social Security reform tour in 2005, which included a significant "going local" strategy, received ample and generally favorable local coverage from local newspapers in comparison with stories in the *Washington Post* (Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2006). Despite these findings, the burgeoning literature on this understudied topic is not definitively supportive of the conventional wisdom. One study of everyday coverage of the presidency—unrelated to specific presidential visits—demonstrates that local newspaper coverage of the presidency is in fact decidedly negative (Eshbaugh-Soha 2008b). Another study, which focused on a broad set of local newspapers and front-page coverage unrelated to domestic travel by President Bush in 2006, produced decidedly mixed findings (Peake 2007).

To further develop our understanding of local media coverage of the presidency, we examine local newspaper coverage of the third year of George W. Bush's presidency. We expect that local news media will cover presidential trips favorably in part due to the unique and rare nature of a presidential visit. Yet, we expect substantial variation in local news coverage across several important variables, including audience support for the president and numerous characteristics of the story itself. What is more, we explore the impact that local coverage of the war in Iraq had on the tone of presidential news coverage to see if President Bush is correct that local media would offer a more favorable perspective of the president and his policies in light of increasingly negative national news

coverage of the war after the fall of Baghdad. Our results suggest, however, that the more a local newspaper story focused on Iraq, the more that story's tone reflected unfavorably upon President Bush.

Local Media Coverage of the President

A typical view of local media coverage of the presidency, including coverage of the president's local visits, is that it should be mostly positive, especially in comparison with the president's coverage by national media (Graber 2002; Kumar 2007). These claims, also supported by journalists and White House insiders, appear valid for several reasons. First, to a local community, a presidential visit is a unique event to local reporters and the newspaper's readers. This alone produces a newsworthy event that should generate numerous local stories related to the president's visit. Second, local media's ability to cover the president differs from that of the national media. Local newspapers lack the resources that national newspapers have (Kaniss 1991). Because of this, local newspapers will rely more on what the White House provides them at staged media events, contributing to more extensive and positive coverage as some research has already demonstrated (Barrett and Peake 2007; Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2006). In addition, local reporters typically have less experience in public policy than national correspondents, which may contribute to a more descriptive, less analytical, take on the president's visit (see Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2006). This, in turn, may produce a story that is less negative than stories that present the pros and cons of a president's policy positions.

Fueled in part by these perceptions, the White House devotes substantial time, energy, and other resources to cultivating a positive image with local news. Kumar (2007) illustrates how the Office of Media Affairs handles local media, in general, and has provided numerous anecdotes to support the significance recent administrations have placed on the local press. For example, the Ronald Reagan administration used interviews with local media to buttress its support for Robert Bork's nomination to the U.S. Supreme Court (Kumar 2007, 173). Sometimes these efforts might be geared to raise awareness of broader policy issues, such as when the Bill Clinton administration invited local news stations' weather forecasters to the White House to attend a speech on global warming after the Kyoto agreement was defeated in the Senate in October 1997. The White House then asked them to deliver weather forecasts for their areas. These actions were designed to reach out to local audiences, particularly those not interested in politics, and generate mostly positive news coverage about an important policy issue (Kumar 2007, 39-40).

President Bush, in particular, made targeting local news central to his media relations strategy and a top priority throughout his tenure. Bush signaled his intentions to bypass the filter of national news media as early as March 27, 2001, during a speech at Western Michigan University when he maintained:

I find it's important to get out of town—at least out of the Nation's Capital—to take my message directly to the people who matter. You see, oftentimes, what I try to say in

Washington gets filtered. Sometimes, my words in Washington don't exactly translate directly to the people, so I've found it's best to travel the country.¹

Even if national and local news outlets differ as President Bush suggests, there still exist numerous differences across local newspapers, which should contribute to substantial variation in how these local newspapers cover the presidency. Limited theory suggests that media, as profit-seeking entities (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006), will want to maximize audience exposure to stories that it sees favorably. Because of this, local support for the president should influence newspapers' coverage of the presidency, particularly its tone of coverage. Qualities of the newspaper itself, such as available resources, corporate ownership, and editorial endorsements may also matter to the content of local newspaper coverage of the presidency. In addition, the attributes of each story, such as its policy content, may impact local newspaper coverage of the presidency.

Audience Support

Profit and other economic factors provide a clear guide for explaining the tone of local newspaper stories. A newspaper wants to maximize readership to increase circulation and, with it, its bottom line. Because of this, a newspaper's coverage of the presidency may be a reflection of the political leanings of its audience, as newspapers give their readers what they want to read. The motivation is clear from an alternative perspective, too: A newspaper in an area that supports the president but that criticizes the president regularly may lead to a decline in its readership, which may undercut its profitability.

Much research supports this contention, and it appears to be a consistent finding across the few studies that examine local news coverage of the presidency (Barrett and Peake 2007; Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006). Indeed, demand for news on the presidency is higher in markets where support for the president is high, with studies showing a positive impact of audience support for the president on the number of words in stories that cover presidential visits (Barrett and Peake 2007) and the likelihood that a newspaper will cover the presidency on a given day (Eshbaugh-Soha 2008a). Media also tend to slant their news reports toward the beliefs of their audience in order to maximize profits (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006), with coverage of presidential trips being more favorable in newspapers serving locales that generally support the president (Barrett and Peake 2007; Eshbaugh-Soha 2008b). As such, we hypothesize a positive relationship between audience support and local newspaper coverage of the presidency.

Related to broad audience support is the type of audience actually in attendance at a presidential speech. Arguably, the more favorable the audience is, the more positive the coverage will be, as much of the local coverage of presidential visits is descriptive and

1. President Bush made a similar claim about a week later during a question and answer session with the American Society of Newspaper Editors (April 5, 2001): "As you know, we've had a series of votes recently on a proposed budget. And that's what I'd like to talk about today. Sometimes the Washington filter makes it hard for me to get my message directly to people. And since I view you as people—[laughter]—I'd like to go directly to you." As we point out later in this article, he continued to make this argument during the early stages of the war in Iraq.

accounts of cheering and appreciative crowds are likely to be positive. White House communications offices in general and the Bush administration's, in particular, look to control audience makeup. As a result, many of Bush's local appearances have the feel of a campaign rally rather than a policy-oriented speech (Edwards 2007). One can assess audience makeup, broadly, by noting the location of a speech or to whom the president spoke. Venues that are predisposed to support the president—such as military bases when he speaks about the Iraq War—should contribute to more positive than negative news coverage.²

Newspaper Support

The editorial leanings of the newspaper may explain differences in local newspaper coverage of the presidency. Some suggest that there has been an erosion of the “wall of separation” between the editorial and news pages in how local newspapers cover politics, despite journalistic norms to the contrary (Page 1996). If editorial endorsements of candidates bleed into political news coverage throughout the rest of the paper, then we would expect to find a relationship between endorsements and news stories' content. Consistent with the profit incentive of newspapers, moreover, it follows that a newspaper would want to signal its support of a president consistent with audience preferences to continue to attract those readers.

Research reveals some support for a link between a newspaper's endorsement of candidates' electoral fortunes and newspaper coverage. Primarily, this has been shown in the context of local and congressional elections (Barrett and Barrington 2005; Kahn and Kenney 2002; Schiffer 2006). Recent research has extended these findings to the presidency in nonelection years. It shows that a newspaper's endorsement affects presidential news coverage, whether in terms of increasing the likelihood of newspaper coverage of the presidency (Eshbaugh-Soha 2008a), influencing the tone of front-page headlines and leads (Peake 2007), or the amount of coverage of presidential visits (Barrett and Peake 2007).

Although the politics of the newsroom appear to color coverage of presidential politics in terms of both the amount and tone of coverage, the evidence is still mixed. There appears to be no relationship between a newspaper's endorsement and the tone of everyday news coverage of the presidency (Eshbaugh-Soha 2008b) or front-page coverage of the president's trips (Barrett and Peake 2007, 18). Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake (2006) also find no relationship between a newspaper's endorsement of President George W. Bush's Social Security reform plan and the president's selection of those locations as places to sell his program in 2005. Even mixed evidence suggests, nevertheless, that there may be an endorsement effect in local newspaper coverage of the presidency.

Newspaper Ownership and Resources

Corporate ownership could tint local news coverage of the presidency, primarily because it encourages editors and reporters to think more about the business and profit

2. Thanks to Martha Joynt Kumar for pointing this out.

side of news coverage than journalistic norms or the quality of stories (Bennett 2003, 110). This may result in more soft and less hard news coverage of policy issues and politicians. What is more, negative news may be more profitable and it has increased over time as corporations increase their share of media ownership (Patterson 2000). If this expectation holds true, corporate newspapers should generate less positive coverage of the president's speeches to increase sales. Yet, independent newspapers—more interested in quality journalistic practices—should produce mostly neutral or at least less negative stories. In other words, corporate newspapers should be more responsive to the conditioning effects of resources and their limits than independently run newspapers, leading to more negative coverage of the presidency.

A newspaper's resources may produce differences in local coverage. On the one hand, local newspaper reporters with ample resources should be able to write more extensively about a visit and analyze the complexities of policies, which may shape numerous aspects of the content of local newspaper coverage of the presidency. On the other hand, local newspapers with fewer resources may rely extensively on the White House's efforts to provide a storyline to reporters. This, in turn, may lead to mostly positive stories about the president. Nevertheless, most research shows limited effects of resources on coverage. Although Eshbaugh-Soha (2008a) holds that a larger circulation leads to more stories on a given news day, it does not increase the length of an individual news story (see Barrett and Peake 2007; Eshbaugh-Soha 2008a). The impact of resources on tone is mixed. Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake (2006, 696) illustrate that small local newspapers were much more positive than large newspapers in their coverage of President Bush's Social Security reform tour in 2005. However, smaller newspapers tend to rely more heavily on national sources of news, such as Associated Press (AP) wire reports, in their everyday coverage of the presidency (not trips), which contributes to more negative stories when compared with newspapers with higher circulation levels (Eshbaugh-Soha 2008b). Below, we focus on President Bush's trips during 2003, and because smaller newspapers will rely more on the White House's perspective, we expect that these newspapers will cover the presidency more positively than larger papers.

Policy Effects

Most presidential speeches involve advocating a policy position or supporting a course of policy action. Because of this, most presidential news stories are framed to focus on one or more specific policy topics. If the nature of the policy area in the story has been motivated by negative events in the real world, then that story may contribute to more negative than positive coverage. Specifically, we test the impact of coverage of the war in Iraq on the tone of local newspaper coverage. The Iraq War clearly dominated news coverage throughout 2003 and was a primary motivation, according to the president himself, to target local media outlets. Other policy issues, such as the economy to which President Bush devoted some attention in his local speeches throughout 2003, may also be influential.

Story Content

Newspaper stories vary in their content, which may influence the overall tone of a story. As such, we examine a handful of variables that may affect the tone of local newspaper coverage of the presidency. First, journalists may apply either a descriptive or an analytical frame in their stories. Analytical perspectives include more of a journalist's own judgments. Because reporters tend to have cynical views of the political process (Patterson 1993), analytical frames should be more critical of the president and contribute to negative coverage (see Barrett and Peake 2007, 16). Second, journalists are likely to rely heavily on the president's own words when they cover the president's speeches. Because the president is unlikely to speak negatively about himself or his policies, stories should be more positive the more journalists report the president's own words in a story. Relatedly, stories that cover the president's visit are more likely than stories that are about the president (but not the visit) to be positive. Recall that presidential visits are unique events over which the White House has substantial control, and this should influence tone positively. Third, if a story is focused primarily on those who protest the president's speech and visit, whether to criticize the president, his policies, or both, the story should be primarily negative for obvious reasons.

National Conditions

The larger national context may affect perceptions of a president's leadership. If a president is unpopular, for instance, Neustadt (1990) notes that a president's enemies are likely to be emboldened and more likely to criticize the president with more frequency and ferocity. This is the same with news media, as network news programs are more likely to report on the president's approval ratings when they decline, rather than when they increase (Groeling and Kernell 1998). Consistent with this logic, local media may reflect national sentiment such that, as the president's national approval ratings go down, so too should the tone of local newspaper coverage.

Controls

We control for a handful of other effects in our analysis. First, the president delivered a speech in New York City before the United Nations, which was covered by the *New York Times*. Because the *Times* is considered a national newspaper (part of the prestige press), we examine what impact these stories, separately, had on the tone of presidential news coverage. Second, stories written by a local reporter or that have a higher quantity of local references should be, according to the conventional wisdom, more positive than negative. Conversely, those stories written by the AP or Washington bureau reporters should be more negative than those written by local reporters.³ Third,

3. We recognize that AP and Washington bureau reporters may offer different types of stories. Yet, there are so few nonlocal reports in our sample that we treat these together, providing a blunt alternative to local reporting. Indeed, our measure captures more differences between local and Washington bureau reporters. Of our nine nonlocal reports, only one is from an AP source.

we control for those stories that are front-page material. Clearly, if front-page stories tend to be more positive than other stories, this could be a boon to presidential visits—readers are more likely to read or see front-page stories than any other. Finally, we control for references to the local community, which may have a modest and positive correlation with tone.

Coding Newspaper Coverage of the President

Our sample of local news coverage extends from January through December 2003. We select newspapers, not only because the availability of local television news programs is limited for which the cost is also prohibitive, but also because newspapers influence the agenda of television media more so than vice versa. Arnold (2004, 246) notes, after all, that local newspapers affect the agendas for all other local media, not the other way around (also see Mondak 1995) and that local television transcripts are not readily available (Arnold 2004, 3). Examining one medium also lends consistency to our findings, something that Shaw and Sparrow (1999, 328) echo in their justification for examining newspaper coverage of the 1992 presidential election campaign.

We focus on the year 2003 for two reasons. First, 2003 is not an election year—although local visits later in the year were often coordinated with campaign events. This is important because, during election years, presidential visits take on a decidedly different character as presidents seek to raise funds for their party's congressional elections and for their own reelections. Second, as we show below, 2003 is a classic "going local" year, where President Bush set out to make his case to the American public, especially on the Iraq war, through local travel and media to circumvent the filter of the national news media. He used a similar strategy in 2005 to push his Social Security reform plan (see Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2006).

As the year began, President Bush made his case for war against Iraq. In January and February, Bush stated his intentions to forcefully remove Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, if necessary, and Secretary of State Colin Powell made his presentation of evidence regarding weapons of mass destruction to the United Nations. Indeed, the United States attacked Iraq on March 19 and took Baghdad on April 9. The president declared "mission accomplished" aboard the aircraft carrier Abraham Lincoln on May 1, yet the war continued. As war casualties mounted and chaos continued throughout much of Iraq, the war, initially supported by the public and a boon to Bush's popularity, proved a drag on the president's relationship with the public.⁴ In September, Bush's approval ratings hit 50% in the Gallup Poll, the lowest point of his presidency up until that point.

4. At the beginning of 2003, Bush's Gallup Poll job approval ratings stood at 63%, fell to 58% prior to the initial attack on Iraq, and then increased to 70% with the beginning of hostilities and the fall of Baghdad to U.S. forces in March and April. Toward the end of the summer, as the war dragged on, his job approval ratings hit 50% in September and November, but rebounded to 63% in December, with the capture of Saddam Hussein by U.S. forces. Bush's approval ratings on his handling of the situation in Iraq follow similar patterns. Gallup Poll data are from <http://www.pollingreport.com/BushJob1.htm>. The question is: "Do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is handling his job as president?"

Additionally, public evaluations of how the war was going turned negative as the year continued.⁵ Public opinion on the Iraq War, then, proved a serious threat to Bush's reelection in 2004. Therefore, the president's "going local" strategy was an important part of the White House's strategy in maintaining support for the war and the president's approval ratings and getting Bush reelected.

Data Sources

We initially created a list of all presidential speeches in locations outside of the Washington, DC, area. These are available through the *Public Papers of the Presidents*, as provided by the American Presidency Project.⁶ Given the distinctive nature of campaign fundraisers—that they are focused primarily on electoral politics, not policy—we exclude trips and speeches associated with a Bush-Cheney reception or fundraisers on behalf of congressional or gubernatorial candidates.⁷ This produced a list of 78 speeches of which 55 produced one or more stories on the president, with the number of stories totaling 133. When speeches did not produce a story it was generally because the LexisNexis (see below) database did not include a newspaper in or close to a speech's location.

We rely exclusively upon LexisNexis as our source guide to local coverage of Bush and the war in Iraq. LexisNexis is an electronic database that archives news coverage from dozens of media outlets. Given its wide availability, other scholars have also used LexisNexis in their research (see Arnold 2004; Vinson 2003). We collected all stories generated from a search of "Bush" in headlines or lead paragraphs on the nearest local newspaper found in LexisNexis for the day after the president's visit.⁸ Some stories were excluded after we read to determine that they had little or nothing to do with President Bush, his policies, or his speeches.

Dependent Variable

To assess comprehensively the tone of local news coverage of the president, we collected data on two attributes to create a dependent variable. First, we code the amount of coverage as the number of paragraphs in each story. We count paragraphs because they

5. Gallup asked the following question: "In general, how would you say things are going for the U.S. in Iraq: very well, moderately well, moderately badly, or very badly?" In June 2003, 70% of respondents stated that the war was going very well or moderately well. That number dropped to 38% by November 2003. Gallup Poll data are from <http://pollingreport.com/iraq8.htm>.

6. The URL for the American Presidency Project is: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>.

7. Bush made several trips that were exclusively related to fundraising, which we exclude from our sample. In many cases, he included a fundraising speech with a speech on policy at a different location. The White House does this so that the government (not Bush's campaign funds) will pick up a portion of the tab for the trip-related costs. For trips that included both a fundraising and policy-related speech, we focus our coding on articles that address speeches unrelated to the campaign. When the newspapers covered both addresses in the same story, we coded the story. Martha Joynt Kumar noted to us that President Bush explicitly did fundraisers "off the record," limiting any reporting of them. The Clinton administration, in contrast, opened fundraisers to reporters. This typically led to good stories given the credit-claiming nature of the president's fund-raising speeches.

8. In the few instances where the nearest local newspaper did not print a story about the president the day after his trip, we searched the largest newspaper in the state. This added a handful of stories to our database.

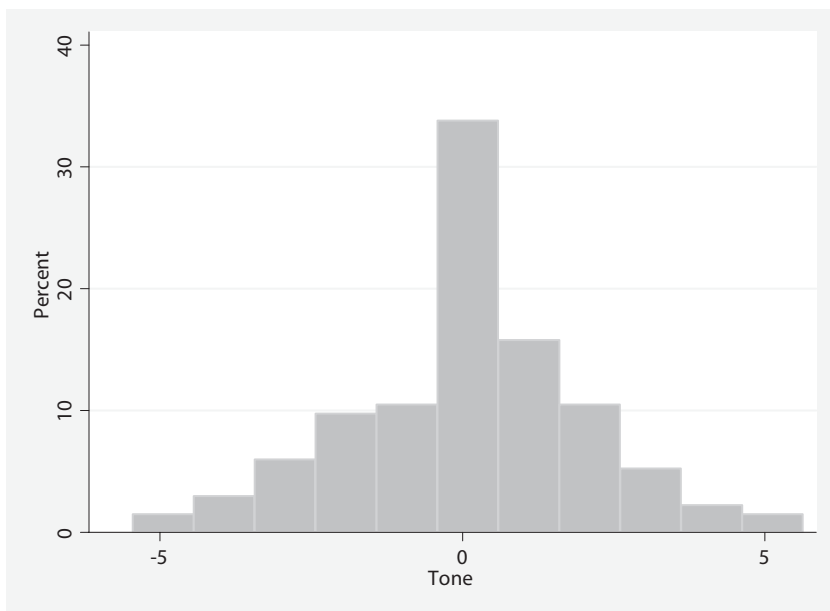


FIGURE 1. Distribution of Tone.

are easily identifiable and require no subjective interpretation by coders. We simply rely on the newspaper's distinction of what constitutes a paragraph. Some paragraphs may contain more than one idea, meaning that one paragraph could contain positive and negative or descriptive and substantive elements. As such, we code the overall tenor of each paragraph.⁹

Second, we code tone or relative level of favorability toward the president, also based on the number of paragraphs in an article. Positive paragraphs include descriptions of an applauding or enthusiastic audience, an upbeat assessment of the president's remarks by an audience member, or statements in support of the president by political allies. Negative paragraphs include reports of public protests, negative analysis of the president's remarks by a group representative or political opponent, or paragraphs that place the visit in a context that frames the president or his policies negatively. Generally, it was quite obvious whether a paragraph was positive or negative and this technique is consistent with much content analysis media studies (Druckman and Parkin 2005). For measurement purposes, tone equals positive paragraphs minus negative paragraphs divided by the total number of paragraphs. It is multiplied by 10 for easier presentation and interpretation. This is the same approach to measuring tone used in previous research (Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2006). The distribution of our tone variable is illustrated in Figure 1. Tone approximates the normal distribution, with the modal category being zero. This supports the general expectation that most newspaper stories will, on balance, be relatively even-handed and neutral in their coverage of the presidency and politics.

9. One may be concerned that paragraph sizes might differ by newspaper, but this is not the case, at least for our sample of stories.

Independent Variables

We collected a number of measures which may affect local coverage of the presidency. First, local community support should affect local coverage of the presidency. An area that is mostly supportive of President Bush is likely to affect the tone of newspaper coverage (Barrett and Peake 2007; Eshbaugh-Soha 2008b). To approximate the level of support for Bush among a newspaper's readers, we measure presidential support at the county level for the community serviced by the newspaper. We measure the level of electoral support for the county in which the newspaper is located and all contiguous counties to create our measure of Republican support in the 2004 presidential election. This is the same approach used by other recent studies of local newspaper coverage of the presidency (Barrett and Peake 2007; Peake 2007). To account for favorable venues, we code all speeches to military bases or military-related venues (e.g., the American Legion) as a one and zero otherwise.

Second, to account for editorial slant that may affect news coverage, we collected data on each newspaper's endorsements of President Bush in the 2000 and 2004 elections. Presumably, a newspaper that endorsed President Bush would cover him more favorably than otherwise. Newspapers that did not endorse Bush in either election are coded 0, those that endorsed him in one election are coded 1, and those newspapers that endorsed President Bush in both elections are coded 2.

Third, we collected data on newspaper resources and corporate ownership. We approximate resources as the size of the newspaper (see Arnold 2004). Measured as weekly circulation numbers for each newspaper, using the 2003 edition of *Editor and Publisher*, resources may affect the amount of coverage that a newspaper may devote to its coverage of presidential speeches. Next, we control for ownership, as independent newspapers may cover the president differently than chain newspapers. Given corporate ownership's focus on profit, these newspapers may be more likely to cover the presidency in a negative light because negative news is seen as more profitable (Bennett 2003). In addition, because soft news coverage is more profitable than hard news coverage, including stories on the presidency, there should be a negative relationship between amount and corporate ownership (Eshbaugh-Soha 2008a; Peake 2007). Independent newspapers are defined as those papers owned locally, independent of a major newspaper chain or media conglomerate.¹⁰ These data are located at <http://www.cjr.org/resources/>.

Next, we code how the newspaper actually covered the president on his trip. That is, we examine whether or not the president himself is quoted in the story, whether the journalist paraphrases the president, or whether they just mention him as part of the story. After all, the president himself maintained that local news media will not filter his words and, presumably, report more of what he says. We therefore code the number¹¹ of

10. The only national newspaper in our sample was the *New York Times*. We coded it as an independent newspaper (being that, as a corporation, it owns itself) in one model and corporately owned in another. Neither variable affects tone. The corporate ownership variable in Table 2 counts the *Times* as an independent newspaper.

11. Modeling this and other count variables as percentages does not substantively alter our results.

paragraphs that quote directly the president, that paraphrase his words, or simply mention his name or what he was doing.¹²

We are also interested in the content of each story. First, the policy content of each story is important. So, we have counted the number of paragraphs related to policy, in general, and specific policy areas. This is fairly straightforward. If a paragraph mentions a policy then it is counted as dealing with that policy area. Our policy areas include economic, foreign, domestic, and the war in Iraq. Second, if a story focused on protests, this is likely to frame the president in a more negative light. Here, we count the number of paragraphs that relate to a protest or counterprotest of the president. Third, newspapers may cover the presidency in a descriptive or analytical frame. A descriptive frame states general reporting addressing questions on who, what, where, and when events occurred. Quotations by the president were also typically coded as descriptive. Analytical framing generally provides deeper analysis, addressing the political or policy significance of what is reported or explaining why the president (or others) behaved the way they did. The voice provided in analytical coverage may be that of the reporter or it may constitute evaluative statements on the part of sources that address politics or policy. We treat the two categories as mutually exclusive and all paragraphs received a code of either being analytical or descriptive. We code the number of analytical paragraphs to assess its impact on the tone of coverage.¹³

The national context is important to shaping newspaper coverage of the presidency. We measure the national context as the president's job approval ratings, as provided by the Gallup Poll. These data are the percentage of the public that approves of George W. Bush's handling of his job as president the date closest and before the date of the newspaper story.

We control for a number of other effects, too. We note whether the article relates directly to the president's speech or visit (coded 1 if so), which should have a positive impact on tone. Whether or not the story is written by a local staff writer, a Washington bureau reporter, or was taken from an AP Wire Report may also affect tone. For this variable, a story written by a local reporter was coded 0, 1 otherwise. If a story has a mostly local focus, it may be less negative than other stories. For this variable, we count the number of paragraphs in a story that relate to items of purely local interest. The *New York Times* is our only national newspaper in the sample. And because previous research indicates that national media should cover the presidency differently than local news (Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2006), we include a control for whether or not a story is a *New York Times* story. Finally, we control for whether front-page stories are more positive than other stories.¹⁴

12. We also kept track of who else is quoted in the story, whether local or national experts and political officials and their party affiliation. Because these variables produced uninteresting findings, we do not model them for this article.

13. We also modeled the percentage of analytical paragraphs in a story. This variable produced virtually identical results as those presented in Table 2.

14. In order to compare our results with previous research on local media coverage of presidential trips (Barrett and Peake 2007), we ran a separate analysis where we aggregated the coverage by trip ($N = 51$). We do not report this analysis as it does not offer interesting findings that differ from what we report below. The main finding related to audience preferences holds with the by-trip aggregation.

Findings

Descriptive Evidence

The descriptive and comparative evidence presented in Table 1 demonstrates substantial variation across different characteristics of local newspapers. We examine amount of coverage here in two ways: the number of stories and paragraphs within each story. In terms of the number of stories, corporate ownership and less than a majority of electoral support contributed to more stories on the presidency. There were also more stories on the Iraq War (70) than all other stories on the presidency, combined (63). The length of each story, measured as the number of paragraphs, is fairly even across newspaper characteristics except in two instances: stories that mentioned the Iraq War at least once and an editorial endorsement of the president in the 2004 election contributed to substantially more paragraphs of coverage. We had argued that newspaper size might relate to the volume of coverage. Table 1 provides some evidence that small newspapers print more and longer stories about the presidency when the president visits, contrary to our general expectations that large newspapers, with more resources, have more available space with which to cover the presidency.

Characteristics of each story, in terms of the number of analytical paragraphs; the number of paragraphs that quoted, paraphrased, or mentioned the president; and tone varied in mostly predictably ways by our five categories. Stories on the Iraq War tended to be more analytical than other stories. Small newspapers, those that endorsed President Bush's reelection, and those that serve communities supportive of President Bush generated fewer analytical paragraphs than their reverse categories. The coverage in these papers was much more descriptive. These findings are consistent with our expectations, as analytical paragraphs tend to be probing and potentially critical of the president and his policies. The number of paragraphs related to the president generates similar findings, except one: those newspapers in communities with less than a majority supporting the president mention the president more (12.15) in each article than those newspapers that support him (10.19). Our key dependent variable—tone—is also quite consistent across

TABLE 1
Average Values by Independent Variable

	<i>Stories</i>	<i>Paragraphs</i>	<i>Tone</i>	<i>Analytical Paragraphs</i>	<i>Presidential Mentions</i>
Iraq War/Not	70/63	25.8/19.8	-0.04/0.03	7.61/5.63	15.01/7.47
Corporate/Not	74/59	22.29/23.71	-0.01/0.03	6.55/6.79	10.61/12.38
For Bush/Not	67/66	24.5/21.34	0.02/-0.01	6.05/7.25	12.69/10.15
Support/Not	52/81	23.13/22.77	0.05/-0.2	5.75/7.23	10.19/12.15
Large/Small	65/68	22.5/23.31	-0.06/0.3	7.92/5.40	10.7/12.06
Total/Average	133	22.9	0.1	6.7	11.4

Note: There are 18 corporately-owned newspapers in our sample; 17 are independent newspapers. Large and small newspaper distinction is based on the median value of circulation, which is 374,000. Hence, large newspapers are those newspapers with a circulation larger than 374,000.

these variables, as Iraq War coverage, corporate ownership, no editorial endorsement, a minority of community support, and large newspapers all produce more negative than positive stories, on average.

Overall, the president received much coverage in newspapers local to his travels and the coverage varied in relatively predictable ways. Our data show other benefits to the president, as well. The president is a front-page story 60 times, amounting to 45 percent of all stories in our sample. He was a front-page story on all but eight of his trips,¹⁵ or at least once on 84% of his visits. Clearly, the president is newsworthy, especially to local newspapers that cover the president's visits. In addition, that these characteristics of coverage vary predictably provides presidents with some information about how to select their local visits if their intent on traveling is to generate favorable newspaper coverage.

Explaining Tone

On October 6, 2003, in a joint press conference with President Mwai Kibaki of Kenya, President George W. Bush lamented the difficulties he faced in communicating progress in the war in Iraq when so much of this communication depended on the American people receiving information through the national news media. The president maintained that the national news media was not adequately covering the progress that he and administration officials noted had been taking place in Iraq.¹⁶ The next week, the president, in an interview granted to regional broadcasters on progress on the war, commented, "I'm mindful of the filter through which some news travels, and sometimes you have to go over the heads of the filter and speak directly to the people" (Bumiller 2003, A12). In some respects, he was correct in his characterization of national media. For example, the *New York Times* coverage of Bush's UN speech, delivered on September 23, 2003, was decidedly negative. Additionally, according to a Pew Research Center poll, nearly 40% of the public perceived, at the time, that mainstream media coverage of Iraq was more negative than the actual situation on the ground.¹⁷ But it remains to be seen

15. The visits that did not generate at least one front-page story are Chicago (June 11; September 30), Dallas (July 18), Philadelphia (July 24), Kansas City (September 4), Houston (September 12), Greer, SC (November 10), and Kill Devil Hills (December 17). We did not have a local newspaper for the Dallas, Kansas City, or South Carolina visits. We used the largest available (on LexisNexis) newspaper in the state for these visits. Other trips for which we were unable to use the most local newspaper (due to availability) include Bush's visits to Nashville (February 10), Ft. Stewart, GA (September 12), and Orlando (November 13). See the Appendix for a list of newspapers used for each of the trips.

16. This is the quotation, as printed in the *Public Papers of the Presidents*: "And listen, we're making good progress in Iraq. Sometimes it's hard to tell it when you listen to the filter. We're making good progress. I had a—Bernie Kerik came in the other day, and he described to me what it was like to set up a police force in Baghdad right after our successful efforts there. I was really impressed. I was impressed by the—his work. I was impressed by the spirit of the Iraqi citizens desirous to start taking care of business on their own."

17. The poll results are reported in the following Pew Report: "President's Criticism of the Media Resonates, But Iraq Unease Grows," and can be found online here: <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=195>. Pew asked the following question: "In general, do you think news reports are making the situation in Iraq seem WORSE than it really is or BETTER than it really is, or are reports showing the situation about the way it really is?" Thirty-eight percent answered "worse," 14% answered "better," 36% answered "about the way it really is," and 12% did not know or refused to answer. The poll also indicates that most of the respondents sharing the president's views on mainstream media coverage were Republicans, watched Fox News, and believed the war was the right decision.

TABLE 2
Determinants of the Tone of Local Presidential Newspaper Coverage

	<i>Full Model</i>	<i>Reduced Model</i>	<i>Interactive Model</i>
Audience Support	0.04* (0.02)	0.03* (0.02)	0.004 (0.02)
Iraq War	-0.07* (0.03)	-0.07* (0.03)	-0.04 (0.03)
Presidential Paragraphs	0.06* (0.02)	0.05* (0.02)	0.04* (0.02)
Analytical Paragraphs	-0.07* (0.03)	-0.06* (0.02)	-0.06* (0.02)
Protest	-0.17* (0.03)	-0.16* (0.03)	-0.17* (0.03)
Relate to Trip	0.94* (0.51)	1.13* (0.46)	1.33* (0.46)
Location	0.58 (0.38)	0.70* (0.35)	0.58* (0.34)
Support Iraq War*			0.007* (0.002)
National Approval	0.02 (0.02)		
Page 1 Story	0.21 (0.39)		
National Reporter	-0.93 (0.63)		
Local References	-0.02 (0.03)		
<i>New York Times</i>	-1.65 (1.18)		
Endorsement	0.12 (0.20)		
Corporate	-0.12 (0.32)		
Circulation	0.001 (0.001)		
Constant	-1.79 (1.67)		
<i>R</i> -squared	.42	.39	.43
<i>F</i> test	5.67*	11.45*	11.54*
White's Test	102.29	31.09	26.79
<i>N</i>	133	133	133

* $p < .05$ (one-tailed test).

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses.

whether local news organizations provide a more positive alternative to the national news filter of information communicated to the American people.

Table 2 presents our regression results for the determinants of the tone of local coverage of the president in three models. The first model includes all of our variables,

including the control variables we discussed above. The reduced model includes those variables that were statistically significant (or near significant) in the full model. Finally, the interactive model includes a variable where we interact, or multiply, audience support with the number of paragraphs in an article on the Iraq War, to determine if local variation in coverage on Iraq can be explained, in part, by the support for Bush among the newspaper's market audience.

No matter how we model tone, our results counter the president's contention that local media would necessarily present a view more favorable to his policies. Table 2 shows clearly the negative impact that coverage of the war in Iraq has on the tone of local newspaper coverage of President Bush in 2003. Including one additional paragraph that covers the Iraq war in a story leads to a decline of .07 in tone. Whether or not the national media filtered the events in Iraq to portray them more negatively than the president preferred, local media did not provide the president with an entirely positive outlet for his Iraq war message. These results are consistent with the descriptive evidence presented in Table 1. This does not mean, however, that local coverage of the Iraq War was consistently negative. Instead, Iraq War coverage varied based on community support for the president. According to a positive and significant interaction between community support and Iraq War coverage in the interactive model, the negative impact of Iraq War stories on tone decreases as community support increases. In other words, President Bush benefited from community support, even on a contentious issue like the Iraq War. It is worth noting that no other policy area—economic, domestic, or all other foreign policy issues—had a statistically significant impact on tone and these variables were dropped from the final model.¹⁸

Other variables have clear effects on the tone of local presidential news coverage. Audience preferences are positive and significantly related to tone, consistent with our expectations. A percentage point increase in the president's county-level 2004 election popular vote share contributes to a .03 (.04 in the full model) increase in tone for each story. That coverage varies substantially by the context of local support for the president and that this impact survives in a multivariate setting (with many controls) is important for understanding how local media cover the presidency. Local media are not monolithic, and audience preferences, presumably due to profit-seeking behavior on the part of newspapers, clearly affect how they cover the president. Speech location or audience makeup also increases the tone of coverage. When the president targeted more favorable audience locations (such as military bases),¹⁹ he was the beneficiary of more positive local news.

Next, more analytical paragraphs and paragraphs devoted to protest contribute to more negative stories. When reporters emphasize the political and policy implications of a political event (the president's visit), the coverage is less positive. Choosing to report (or not to report) on protests, which typically accompany presidential visits (but are not always given coverage), clearly affects the tone of an article. Third, paragraphs attributed

18. We also ran the model excluding the six *New York Times* articles covering the UN Iraq speech. The results did not differ.

19. This includes appearances before troops, military factories, and veterans groups.

to the president—whether direct quotations, paraphrases, or general mentions of the president—are generally framed in a positive light, having roughly the same impact as audience support on tone. Finally, stories that focus on the president’s visit, as opposed to stories unrelated to the visit, lead to positive coverage, with an increase of about one point in tone over stories unrelated to the president’s visit. This last point lends support to the “going local” strategy in the form of domestic travel, as the stories directly covering Bush’s visits tended to be more positive than stories that did not cover the president’s visits.

Contrary to our expectations, variables that represent the resources and politics of the news business are not influential. Newspaper resources, measured as a newspaper’s level of circulation, have no statistically significant impact on tone. Corporate ownership produces a similar null result. Endorsements simply do not directly affect tone for this set of articles.²⁰ This provides some additional evidence that endorsement effects may be relegated to coverage of a candidate during an election campaign. What is more, national conditions, measured by the president’s national approval ratings, have a positive, but statistically insignificant effect on the tone of coverage.

Conclusion

Conventional understanding of local media and the presidency centers on the contention that local media treat the White House more favorably than national media do. President George W. Bush’s actions imply that at least his administration also believes that local media should be more receptive to the president’s words and judgments than national media. His efforts to target local media have not been restricted to our year of analysis, 2003, but also mirror his approaches in 2001 (Barrett and Peake 2007) and 2005, during his Social Security reform tour (Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2006). Yet, there are clear and important differences across local media. Too often, observers of media and the presidency treat the local media as a single unit, despite vast differences in political support for the president across the nation. We have considered these differences in our examination of newspaper coverage of President Bush’s domestic travel in 2003, much of which focused on building support for the Iraq War.

Our analysis has several important findings. Primarily, local coverage of the Iraq war tended to be more negative than stories that did not cover the war, suggesting that the story itself may have driven the tone of newspaper coverage, irrespective of any filter by national or even local media outlets. Yet, local newspaper coverage also varied substantially by political support for President Bush. Newspapers serving more supportive communities covered the president more positively than newspapers serving communities where Bush had less support. We note from these findings as well that the

20. We also examined a newspaper’s endorsement of Bush, separately, for both the 2000 and 2004 elections. Neither measure had a positive and statistically significant impact on tone. Modeling endorsement of Gore in 2000 or Kerry in 2004 also had no impact. Previous research on trips-related coverage indicates that endorsement effects were limited to the amount of coverage in the local newspaper, not its tone (e.g., Barrett and Peake 2007). Endorsement effects have been shown in how local newspapers write their headlines, however (Peake 2007).

president did not just target those locales that were likely to generate the most positive newspaper coverage. Instead, President Bush traveled broadly in 2003,²¹ much as he did in 2001 (Barrett and Peake 2007, 9) and 2005, when he promoted his Social Security reform proposal (Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2006, 699). Traveling broadly—or visiting areas that are not predisposed to support the president—is a clear indication that presidents believe that their communications efforts can be successful influencing public opinion or at least local media (see Edwards 2007). Yet much research demonstrates the enormous difficulty presidents have moving public opinion, despite their concerted efforts (Edwards 2003).

Our research does not alleviate the concern through local newspaper coverage. Although presidents tend to receive mostly positive coverage, on average, from local newspapers, this local coverage also tends to be very descriptive. In the data we examine here, 73% of coded paragraphs were descriptive. Although much of the analytical coverage tended to be negative,²² analysis and discussion of policy is important if the president's goal is to shape the policy debate and influence local public opinion. If presidents choose this strategy, they must be cognizant to avoid the tendency to preach to the choir, which critics argue President Bush did during his 2005 Social Security reform tour. Many of President Bush's local visits in 2005 involved orchestrated and scripted town hall meetings where Bush responded to questions of supportive audiences, avoiding contact with skeptical partisans or members of the national media (see Edwards 2007; Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2006, 699). By prepackaging their message and not considering a wide variety of opinions, presidents may undermine their ability to influence public opinion, which is extremely difficult to do in the first place.

An alternative strategy—one that research has yet to uncover because presidents do not appear to do this exclusively—is for presidents to target locations based on likely support. This should lead to much more positive local coverage than what we see here across our broad sample of newspaper stories. Thus, if a future president's goal is generating positive local news coverage, he or she should visit locations that are politically supportive, virtually guaranteeing positive local coverage, even for an issue as contentious and negative as the war in Iraq. What is more, if presidents are unable to move public opinion (Edwards 2003), they may be better off targeting areas where they are already popular (see Canes-Wrone 2006) to increase those followers' intensity of support for the president and, perhaps, his or her policies. This is more akin to an agenda-setting strategy. By expanding the scope of conflict, presidents may increase an issue's salience among those who already support the president, perhaps translating

21. For the 51 trips we examined, the mean community support score was -1.3 (based on the difference between the local and national 2004 vote), with significant variation around the mean (the standard deviation is 8.5). Nine of the trips were to communities that scored one standard deviation below the mean (-9.8) or lower and 11 were one standard deviation above the mean (7.2). The range of the variable is -21.4 (Santa Clara, CA) to 11.9 (Birmingham, AL).

22. We made distinctions between analytical paragraphs that focused on politics or policy, with the latter being more frequent than the former. We coded 10 percent of all paragraphs as analytical in a political sense. These paragraphs examined the electoral consequences of a president's speech or the president's disagreement with Congress irrespective of policy content. Seventeen percent of the coded paragraphs were analytical in terms of policy.

existing, but more intense support into legislative success. Naturally, this has drawbacks, as targeting supportive areas may limit the president's ability to meet the public's expectations that he lead the nation, not just his partisan supporters, not to mention the limitations to a "going public" strategy (Edwards 2003; Eshbaugh-Soha 2006).

Presidents also desire reelection. Even though they may not be able to change minds on policy, presidents may be able to mobilize election-year support. One way the White House attempts to do this is by selling the president as a person and thereby limiting local news coverage of the presidency as an institution. President Bush, in particular, fared better in survey responses about his personal leadership qualities rather than his issue positions (Kumar 2007, 77). Our research shows limited support for the success of this approach, with positive coverage being less analytical, and less focused on the presidency and policies, but more on the president, qualities of character, and what he likes to eat for lunch. A "going local" strategy also allows the president to target the so-called "battleground" states in order to maximize the electoral effects of the positive, yet descriptive, coverage these trips tend to generate. Bush's travels during his first term certainly appeared to follow this strategy where he would focus his travels on the swing states (Kiefer 2001; Kornblut 2002).

Taken together with recent research on the topic of local media and the presidency, our findings suggest that a local media strategy is a fruitful one if the White House desires positive news coverage. Yet, there are significant limitations to the effectiveness of the strategy in terms of influencing the policy debate and generating broader political support. Generating positive local news by essentially stacking the deck and visiting locales that are politically supportive has its own drawbacks, however, when one considers the importance of public leadership in a democratic system. So, too, does the "going local" strategy as part of an effort to avoid the filter of the White House press corps. If the president responds to negative national media (or negative local coverage, even) by avoiding the White House press corps and entertaining only those local media likely to be supportive, he or she may have even less influence over what most Americans read about his or her policies. President Bush's efforts to "go local" in 2003 met with some success in terms of positive news coverage, but which also varied substantially by locale. Specifically considering coverage of the war in Iraq, it is possible, nevertheless, that even this positive coverage deteriorated as the conditions on the ground in Iraq continued to worsen into 2004 and 2005. Yet, if our findings hold for future years and alternative contexts, the president's best hope in "going local" may be in targeting not just local media, but local media in areas that are already supportive.

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Appendix

TABLE A1
List of Newspapers and Locations Analyzed, 2003

<i>Newspaper Used</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Number of Stories/Visits</i>
<i>Albuquerque Journal</i>	Albuquerque, NM	4/1
	Santa Fe, NM	2/1
<i>Arkansas Democrat-Gazette</i>	Little Rock, AR	1/1
<i>Atlanta Journal-Constitution</i>	Kennesaw, GA	4/1
	Fort Stewart, GA	1/1
<i>Austin American-Statesman</i>	Dallas, TX	4/2
<i>Beacon Journal</i>	Richfield, OH	2/1
<i>Birmingham News</i>	Birmingham, AL	3/1
<i>Charleston Gazette</i>	Sulfur Springs, WV	1/1
<i>Chattanooga Times</i>	Nashville, TN	3/2
<i>Chicago Sun-Times</i>	Chicago, IL	4/3
<i>Columbus Dispatch</i>	Columbus, OH	1/1
	Lima, OH	1/1
<i>Dayton Daily News</i>	Dayton, OH	2/1
<i>Denver Post</i>	Aurora, CO	4/1
	Fort Carson, CO	2/1
<i>Florida Times-Union</i>	Jacksonville, FL	6/2
<i>Houston Chronicle</i>	Killeen, TX	2/1
	Fort Hood, TX	1/1
	Houston, TX	6/2
<i>Las Vegas Review Journal</i>	Las Vegas, NV	5/1
<i>Milwaukee Journal Sentinel</i>	Milwaukee, WI	4/1
<i>Morning Star</i>	Camp Lejeune, NC	2/1
<i>New York Times</i>	New York, NY	6/1
<i>Omaha World Herald</i>	Omaha, NE	4/1
<i>The Oregonian</i>	Portland, OR	3/1
<i>Philadelphia Inquirer</i>	Philadelphia, PA	8/2
	Scranton, PA	3/1
<i>Pittsburgh Post-Gazette</i>	Pittsburgh, PA	2/1
<i>Post and Courier</i>	Greer, SC	1/1
	Columbia, SC	2/1
<i>Raleigh News & Observer</i>	Kill Devil Hills, NC	2/1

TABLE A1 (continued)

<i>Newspaper Used</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Number of Stories/Visits</i>
<i>San Bernardino Sun</i>	San Bernardino, CA	1/1
<i>San Diego Union-Tribune</i>	San Diego, CA	9/2
	El Cajon, CA	1/1
<i>San Jose Mercury News</i>	Santa Clara, CA	1/1
<i>St. Louis Post-Dispatch</i>	St. Louis, MO	9/2
	Kansas City, MO	1/1
<i>St. Petersburg Times</i>	Orlando, FL	1/1
<i>Tampa Tribune</i>	Tampa, FL	5/1
<i>The Fresno Bee</i>	Dinuba, CA	1/1
<i>The Seattle Times</i>	Pasco, WA	2/1
<i>Union Leader</i>	Portsmouth, NH	6/1

TABLE A2
Descriptive Statistics on Story Characteristics

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>
Paragraphs	22.91	9.70	6	53
Negative paragraphs	3.10	3.39	0	14
Positive paragraphs	3.42	3.24	0	19
President-paragraphs	11.38	8.80	0	42
Analytical-paragraphs	6.54	7.11	0	29
Local reference	5.43	5.68	0	25
Policy references	9.25	8.24	0	34
Number of Stories	2.56	1.53	1	6