

No.001

**Media, Connectivity,
Literacies & Ethics**

**War, God and Gays: The
UK Press and the 2004
US Presidential Election**

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October 2005

Published by
EDS Innovation Research Programme
London School of Economics and Political Science
Houghton Street
London WC2A 2AE

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ISBN 0

Individual copy price: £5

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WAR, GOD AND GAYS: THE UK PRESS AND THE 2004 US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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Executive summary

This paper examines the UK media's reporting of the 2004 US presidential election. It identifies and compares the issue agendas and tone of coverage across four broadsheet newspapers and the BBC, and examines qualitatively their sister websites. It identifies the weight of media attention devoted to the US race compared to all other foreign news, and it compares and contrasts coverage of the 2000 and 2004 presidential races.

It examines the quality of the news in comparative context: the weight of attention given to substantive issues, the balance of the tone of coverage between negative and positive, and the degree of innovation and variety.

Research methodology

Detailed content analysis was conducted in two parts. The first part covered the parties' conventions and the presidential and vice-presidential debates. This was a total of 18 days in all, five for each of the conventions and two days for each of the debates. The second part of the analysis includes the last six weeks of the campaign, encompassing the period from October 1 to November 5. Four daily newspapers were examined: The Guardian, Times, Independent and the Daily Telegraph. Each article was coded for subject (whom and what), overall tone of the report and the reporter's comments. The second part of the analysis, from October 1, also includes the BBC's two flagship television news programmes, the 10 O'Clock News (BBC1) and Newsnight (BBC2).

Key findings:

- The election generated intense interest, stories devoted to the campaign accounting for 35 per cent of all foreign news.
- The polls, campaign trail activities and personality dominated the coverage of all media. Horserace stories accounted for between 41-44 per cent of all coverage on average; substantive issue and policy stories averaged between 24-28 per cent.

- By comparison with the 2000 Presidential election, UK news was more positive, less cynical and more substantial.
- Strategic framing – the reporting of issues in terms of their strategic intent, mobilizing target voters or unsettling opponents, is a settled characteristic of political reporting.
- There was relatively little variety in the news and with a couple of exceptions relatively little innovation. The papers covered the same events, often in a similar tone and reached the unanimous conclusion that moral issues decided the contest.
- Overall, the media was more negative towards Bush than Kerry, but the difference was slight.

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Introduction

The re-election of George W. Bush overwhelmed the UK national newspapers, dominating almost all the front covers, generating multiple-page inside analysis and special supplements. Some of the papers all but drowned in their shock and misery. ‘How can 59,054,087 people be so DUMB?’, asked The Mirror, over a full-page picture of Bush. ‘FOUR MORE YEARS’ was The Independent’s headline, the three words separated by iconic images of the Iraq war, orange-clad Guantánamo Bay captives, Abu Ghraib torture and a Bush supporter holding a placard, ‘finally a Christian fighting evil’. The Guardian’s G2 supplement summed up its feelings in two words: ‘Oh, God’.

Only The Sun welcomed Bush unequivocally. Its editorial (November 4) proclaimed the world a ‘safer place’; the result was bad news for terrorists, and Bush now had the chance to make his presidency ‘one of the greats’. Of the rest, the more conservative or weakly-aligned papers also welcomed the apparent rebuff of terrorism. The Telegraph, noting that Bush was reviled at home and abroad, rejoiced in American independence: the vote showed, it said in its November 4th editorial, that ‘no power on earth can intimidate’ America. The Times emphasised Bush’s opportunity, offering advice, especially on the importance of the Middle East peace process and domestic fiscal responsibility, and hope that Bush’s second term might be more pragmatic and multilateral. Bush’s decisive mandate, a number of papers noted, was a ‘wake-up call’ for Europe and one with uncertain consequences. It might widen the Atlantic divide and urge the European Union to seek alternatives to Nato, or it might force a more conciliatory attitude upon leaders who had to face up to the reality that Bush’s ‘hard-nosed nationalism’ (Financial Times editorial, November 4) had been endorsed by his people. Ultimately the result split the papers along predictable partisan lines, the left-liberal (normally Labour-supporting) press depressed about the apparent slide ‘into an earlier age of bigotry and social injustice’ (Independent editorial, November 4) and fearful of an aggressive, unilateral foreign policy; the conservative and right-leaning papers more welcoming of the US electorate’s approval for the ‘war on terrorism’, more optimistic about

cross-Atlantic co-operation and more willing to believe in Bush's post-election pledge to unite his nation.

This was an election which inflamed the papers' passions and aroused colossal interest. However, despite some clear partisan differences, the UK press campaign coverage overall is more notable for similarity rather than dissimilarity. This is most evident in four particular ways:

- significance of the contest;
- explanations of the result;
- the focus on issues;
- coverage of the course of the campaign.

Significance of the contest

International news research confirms that the United States is the nation to which mass media world-wide pay most attention (Wu, 1998), and all the papers (analysed below) have correspondents based in Washington, supplemented with correspondents assigned to cover the campaign trail. US elections typically generate intense attention around the world, sometimes producing more press coverage than domestic politics (Swanson and Mancini, 1996). Even by this normally high standard this race was considered especially important. Table 1 shows the volume of news coverage devoted to the presidential election alone, during the periods of the two major party conventions and presidential debates, versus all other foreign news, including non-political stories. Fully 35 per cent of all words devoted to overseas coverage in the analysed papers went to the US contest. This figure is simultaneously unsurprising, given automatic interest in the US campaign, and remarkable, given the news competition from *inter alia* the elections in Afghanistan, the Beslan school massacre in Russia, hugely destructive hurricanes in the Caribbean and Florida, Bill Clinton's heart operation and the continuing turmoil in Iraq, including the Ken Bigley hostage crisis.

Table 1: US campaign news and all other overseas news in the UK press (word count)

	Dem convention	Rep convention	Debates	Total n.	Total %
Non-campaign O/seas	77748	142102	229267	449,117	65%
US campaign	72581	82514	83822	238,917	35%
Total	150329	224616	313089	688034	100%

This table is based on word counts for all overseas news in the Guardian, Daily Telegraph, Independent and The Times over an 18-day period: five days each for the conventions, eight days for the presidential and vice-presidential debates.

The global significance of the result was a continuing theme of coverage with several papers reporting the views of world leaders (diplomatic) and public opinion (mostly hostile) towards Bush. For some it raised the question of whether and how, outside opinion could, or indeed should, influence the US electorate. ‘Why can’t we vote for the US president’ asked Independent columnist and satirist, Mark Steel, tongue only partially in cheek (September 2): ‘Given that we do whatever the winner tells us, we ought to have a vote over here. And, seeing as Iraq is under US occupation...the Iraqis should have a vote as well.’ The Guardian developed the theme into a ‘unique experiment’ encouraging readers from ‘Basildon to Botswana’ to write to voters in marginal Clark County in the battleground state of Ohio. This was, the paper said (October 13), the most important election in living memory, and despite the US Declaration of Independence declaring ‘a decent respect to the opinions of mankind’ there were no direct avenues to influence the vote. The Guardian directed readers to its website to be paired with individual voters in Clark County: ‘write a personal letter, citizen to citizen, explaining why this election matters to you, and which issues you think ought to matter to the US electorate’. A week later, the Guardian abandoned ‘Operation Clark County’. It reported considerable international interest, 14,000 names of Clark County voters had been sent out to readers around the world. However, it had been stunned by the vehemence of the backlash, ‘right wing spammers’ jamming the paper’s e-mail accounts and Democrats Abroad warning that the experiment was ‘dangerously counter-productive’ (Ian Katz, ‘The last post’, October 21).

Explanations of the result

Regardless of partisanship the press generally agreed on what won it for Bush: moral issues. The ‘moral majority sweeps Bush back into the White House’, the Telegraph’s campaign

correspondent, Alec Russell reported (November 4). Virtually every paper concurred, analysing ‘the rise of moral issues’ (The Independent), the ‘march of the moral majority’ (Daily Mail), the victory of ‘small town morals’ (Guardian) and the impact of ‘God, guns and gays’ in mobilising conservative America. This verdict was based primarily on exit polls (normally CNN) which showed that moral values, at 22 per cent, was the single most important issue deciding respondents’ votes, closely followed by the economy and terrorism. Four fifths of respondents who listed moral values top, also voted for George Bush, reported the Sunday Times US election analysis (November 7). The triumph of moral values was seemingly reinforced by referenda in 11 states, which overwhelmingly rejected legalisation of gay marriage. For much of the press this signalled a changed America, more conservative, more bitterly divided, more distant from socially liberal Europe; a new and realigned era, as Jonathan Freedland argued in a front-page comment piece (Guardian, November 4).

These instant explanations may have lasting merit, as we await the verdicts from the social scientific testing of voting models. However, even in the heat of the moment there was some reason for doubt. The poll lead of moral values over the next issues, the economy and terrorism, was just two and three per cent respectively, in statistical terms tiny, and within the margin of error. Moreover, moral values had also topped the list in both the 1996 and 2000 presidential elections, a point that the Sunday Times’s poll analysis noted, but did not remark upon further. Thus, the main change may well turn out to be, not the rise of moral values but the Iraq war and rise of terrorism on the public agenda. The Pew Research Center’s (2004) analysis of its exit polls gives some credence to this view. Pew reports widely varying answers depending upon whether respondents were checking off from a fixed list of issues, or whether the question was open-ended. Moral values topped the fixed list (27 per cent), but lagged well behind Iraq if respondents were not prompted (Iraq 25 per cent; moral values 15 per cent). The point here is not that the newspapers may have got it wrong; rather that here was a demonstration in action of what Entman and Herbst (2001) call ‘perceived majorities’: elite perceptions of majority opinion, which may or may not correspond to the polls or indeed the reality of public opinion, but which may be powerful influences on political behaviour. The press switched, almost as one, from reporting the race as a referendum on the war in Iraq to a united verdict about the impact of moral values. A case in point was Charles Moore’s advice to the Conservative Party (Daily Telegraph November 4, ‘Can the Tories figure out how Bush won again?’); the big lesson from America, he wrote, was the strength of religious

conservative culture and the possibility of its political mobilization. ‘This culture is actually growing. Tories should be learning from it, not looking down their noses at it.’

The focus on issues

Given the strength of newspaper opinion that moral values won it for Bush, it is remarkable how little attention these received in general electoral coverage. As the analysis (below) shows, they figure scarcely at all. In general, reporting focussed heavily on horse race and campaign trail aspects, with significantly less attention to the substantive issues, of foreign affairs, the economy, social welfare and indeed moral and social issues. By comparison with 2000 this was a more substantively reported race, but nonetheless, issues that all the papers claimed were of great significance to the world, trailed well behind the candidates’ campaigning activities, and concern with who was ahead and who was behind in the race, and why. The trend towards ‘strategic framing’ is a well-noted aspect of US political journalism (Patterson, 1993; Cappella and Jamieson, 1997). It has been found to be a trend of UK political journalism also, with regard to British general elections (Norris et al., 1999; Goddard et al., 1999). Given these trends, it was no surprise to find strong evidence of strategic framing in the coverage of the US election. However, it is contrary to the papers’ own claims for the policy significance of the outcome. Indeed, of 389 articles analysed until the end of the debates (below), only one (Independent, October 15) directly, and in significant detail, compared the policy implications of the two leading candidates.

Coverage of the course of the campaign

There was a distinctly monolithic cast to press reporting over the course of the campaign until polling day, with the various papers moving in step across the phases of party conventions, televised debates and the final push in the battleground states. Stories focussed overwhelmingly on the two main candidates, their families and their vice-presidential running mates. This central cast apart, the papers found interest in celebrity involvement. ‘Curtain up on star-spangled campaign’ ran the headline over the Telegraph’s report (Alec Russell, October 30) of the campaign efforts of Arnold Schwarzenegger, for the Republicans, Leonardo DiCaprio and Bruce Springsteen for the Democrats. In the crucial battle for Ohio, Russell wrote, ‘you could be forgiven for thinking that President George W Bush and his rival Senator John Kerry had "outsourced" their campaigns to the world of entertainment’. The Guardian (October 29) published a celebrity list of who was supporting whom: 14 stars,

including Bruce Willis and Britney Spears, for the Republicans, 45 for the Democrats, including Martin Sheen, Oprah Winfrey and Michael Douglas. The star quality theme also framed the intermittent but persistent appearances of Bill and Hillary Clinton throughout the campaign. Invariably the stories were framed in relation to positive and negative impact on John Kerry. The papers reported in almost identical terms that Bill Clinton's Democratic convention speech was a lesson to Kerry in 'how it's done'; but Clinton's post-heart surgery involvement in October was reported universally as a boost for Kerry; while, post-election, much of the press noted that Kerry's defeat cleared the path for Hillary to run for the presidency in 2008. Hillary's smiling, as some of the tabloids put it, while Kerry has the long face.

In coverage of the conventions there was scant attention to policy; instead considerable news space was devoted to the predictability of these choreographed extravaganzas, and the vital opportunity for Kerry to present a clear and personable image. What little coverage there was of foreign policy and Iraq tended to focus on the presentation and strategic implications rather than the policy details themselves. With a few exceptions, the reporting of the conventions was both predictable and virtually interchangeable between the papers, regardless of their sharp partisan differences. It was notable for a simultaneous revelling in and disdain for the showbiz glitz. Partisanship and issue interest became more evident during the debates. However, again, the general tenor of reporting was much the same, all papers stressing the importance of the debates for influencing voters and all reporting confidently that Kerry's performance put him back in the running.

British media and the US election: analysis of content

From the Democratic convention in July, 2004 the major press, networked television news outlets and their sister websites were monitored qualitatively. Detailed content analysis was conducted in two parts. The first part covered the Democratic and Republican parties' conventions and the presidential and vice-presidential debates. This was a total of 18 days in all, five for each of the conventions and two days for each of the debates. The second part of the analysis includes the last six weeks of the campaign, encompassing the period from October 1 to November 5.

Four daily newspapers, and as appropriate for the debates their sister Sunday editions, were examined. The chosen papers were The Guardian, The Times, The Independent and the Daily Telegraph. These top-selling national ‘quality’ newspapers provide a balance of political viewpoints, with The Guardian (Labour-supporting in the 2001 general election) and the Independent (non-aligned) to the liberal-left, the Telegraph, a traditional Conservative paper, and the Times, although it backed Labour in 2001, somewhat right of centre, its political opinions issue-dependent rather than strongly partisan-aligned. The sample excludes the Financial Times, although the FT was monitored closely. It also excludes the popular press, the ‘tabloids’, which were monitored on a regular basis but which were excluded from this content analysis because of, as it turned out correctly, an expectation that they would display little interest in the campaign until the end. Each article was coded for subject (whom and what), and tone of the report and the reporter¹. The second part of the analysis, from October 1, also includes the BBC’s two flagship television news programmes, the 10 O’Clock News (BBC1) and Newsnight (BBC2).

The campaign issues

Tables 2 and 3 demonstrate the extent to which news coverage was dominated by the horserace (polls, predictions, battleground campaigns, strategies) and campaign activities (campaign trail, behind-the-scenes, activities of campaign professionals). The attention to policy and substantive issues increases from 24 per cent during the conventions and debates to 28 per cent as the race enters the final few weeks. The shift to increased emphasis on issues is in line with similar findings for content analysis of the US media (Media Tenor, 2004); the nearer the winning post, the more the media seem to concentrate on what is substantially at stake. Nonetheless, it is striking that for all media analysed, horserace/campaign is easily the largest single category, in all but two cases (Guardian and BBC Newsnight) amounting to 40 per cent or more.

¹ The coding frames for the two parts of the analysis were slightly different. The basic coding unit for the first section (conventions and debates) was individual stories, and each was coded for main subject and up to three subsidiary subjects, and for overall story tone and reporter tone. Across the four categories intercoder reliability was 85 per cent. The analysis from October 1- November 5, was commissioned from Media Tenor, and uses two base units of analysis: the statement and the story. Stories typically contain several statements, the latter being defined as a person/institution, topic and source. Each statement is rated on a positive/negative scale depending upon the explicit tone of the reporter (critical, cynical, disdain) and the contextual tone (that is, whether the statement is reported as positive/negative from the candidate. As any part of the statement changes (e.g. person or topic), a new statement is coded. Thus strict comparability for the two sections can be made only at the story level. Intercoder reliability was 77 per cent.

Table 2: All subjects in the news: conventions and debates

	N.	%
Horseshoe/ campaign	329	44%
Substantive issue/policy	181	24%
Personal aspects	142	19%
Domestic aspects	50	7%
Other	46	6%
Total	748	100%

Table 3: All subjects in the news: 1 October– 5 November

	Substantive issue/policy	Personal aspects	Horseshoe/cpgn	Other	Total N*
Daily Telegraph	19.6	20.5	44	15.9	5627
Times	26.5	14.2	41.7	17.6	6318
Independent	30.2	14.8	40.4	14.6	4829
Guardian	28.3	16	36.4	19.3	6567
BBC1 Ten O'clock	32.1	12	46.7	9.2	570
BBC2 Newsnight	28.5	13.7	39.3	18.5	386
Average	28%	15%	41%	16%	

*Total N. here is statements. See footnote 1.

Only the Independent and the BBC Ten O'clock news devoted more than 30 per cent of the election coverage to substantive issues. Attention to personal aspects (the candidates' personal capacities and qualities for office, voters' responses to the candidates as persons) was the third most important subject category. All media organisations were close to the 15 per cent average, with the exception of the Telegraph. As suggested above, despite the press verdict that moral issues swung it for Bush, moral issues and indeed social issues generally were a relatively minor part of general issue coverage. Table 4 shows the issue profile for both Bush and Kerry, similar in each case and dominated by foreign policy, with terrorism and the economy the next most important issues, but trailing a long way behind.

Table 4: Substantive issues by candidate: 1 October– 5 November

	Bush %	Kerry %
Foreign policy	42.3	40.6
Terrorism	13.9	12.7
Domestic security	3.7	5.7
Economy*	13.2	14.3
Environment	2.7	2.2
Health	3	5.1
Other social policy	9.7	5.1
Other	11.5	14.1
Total	100	99.8

* Economy includes tax, budget policy, employment and general economic issues

The flow of issue coverage in the last six weeks of the campaign is shown in Table 5. Foreign policy and security matters generally dominate the entire period, although there is a significant rise in attention to the economy from the middle of October. Social matters, including health, education and moral issues, come into focus in the latter weeks of the campaign, and feature heavily, as described above, in the post-poll explanations of the issues that won and lost the election.

Table 5: Substantive issues in the last six weeks

	Week	Foreign	Security*	Economy	Social**	Other	N
Bush	1-3 Oct	65.1	23.5	2.9	2.9	5.6	315
Bush	4-10 Oct	53	23.5	13.3	6.2	4	421
Bush	11-17 Oct	37.5	11.7	20.7	13.7	16.4	608
Bush	18-24 Oct	43.7	27.4	4.4	13.1	11.4	535
Bush	25-31 Oct	37.1	20.3	16.8	14.7	11.1	731
Bush	1-5 Nov	38.9	16	13.8	14.7	16.6	1722
Kerry	1-3 Oct	71.4	22.2	3	0.3	3.1	329
Kerry	4-10 Oct	43.7	17	14	13.5	11.8	229
Kerry	11-17 Oct	25.8	16.1	26.9	15.6	15.6	391
Kerry	18-24 Oct	36	27.7	7.6	15.7	13	317
Kerry	25-31 Oct	44	17.5	15.1	12.5	10.9	350
Kerry	1-5 Nov	31.9	19.9	15.6	21.1	11.5	558

*Security includes terrorism

**Social includes health, education, gay marriage etc

However, until the very end it is hard to escape the overall conclusion that the British media viewed the election as a referendum on Bush, the ‘war president’, his war against terrorism and his war in Iraq. This view is buttressed not just by dominance of foreign policy and the emphasis on terrorism, but also by both the relative weight of attention given to the two candidates, and qualitatively by the assessments of their campaigns. It is not unusual, even typical, for content analysis of election campaigns to show a visibility bonus in the news for incumbent leaders and governments. However, Bush’s lead over Kerry in volume of stories is striking, more than five times as many stories with statements about Bush only (see Table 6). The balance of coverage is one of the few areas where there is a notable difference between television and press coverage; television news by regulation and by custom is required to show political balance, although for foreign coverage this is not monitored with the intensity of domestic affairs.

Table 6: Volume of coverage on Bush and Kerry (1 October– 5 November)

medium	stories with statements on Bush only	stories with statements on Kerry only	stories with statements on both Bush and Kerry	N (stories)
Daily Telegraph	41	2	125	168
Times	34	7	140	181
Independent	64	8	116	188
Guardian	106	21	170	297
BBC1 Ten O'clock	21	8	46	75
BBC2 Newsnight	17	4	30	51

Qualitatively, the impression of a ‘referendum on Bush’ is supported by comments throughout the campaign about Kerry’s struggles to define himself, to shake off the Bush campaign’s flip-flop attacks, and to prove more than an indecisive waffler. A number of the papers suggested that Bush was lucky to have Kerry as an opponent. Only The Times in its post-election editorial (November 4) found much to praise in Kerry’s ‘gritty’ campaign. That the election was a referendum on the Iraq war is bolstered by deeper analysis of the media’s treatment of the foreign policy issue. Table 7 demonstrates the dominance of Iraq in countries and regions mentioned in election news. The main surprise in this table is the small figure for Europe, and indeed for the UK (2.6 per cent), given that relations with Europe and strains on the Atlantic alliance were to emerge forcefully in post-election analyses of the consequences of Bush’s victory. Most surprising is the lack of attention to the UK, and what attention there was, was mostly couched in personal terms: what a Bush victory might mean for Prime Minister Tony Blair, did he favour Bush or Kerry? On this, press commentary was mixed, with claims that Bush’s re-election was both a curse and a comfort for Blair: a comfort because it prevented his international isolation over the wisdom of the Iraq war, and a problem because Blair must now prove to a sceptical party and country that he had real influence over Bush, especially with regard to the Middle East peace process. To a far lesser extent by volume, there was also press interest in the Republican ‘snub’ of Conservative leader Michael Howard, demonstrated in the refusal to invite him to the White House, following Howard’s accusations that Blair has misled parliament over intelligence services information in the run-up to the Iraq war.

Table 7: Regions mentioned in coverage of candidates' foreign policy

region	%	Statements N.
Europe	5.5	152
(UK)	(2.6)	(73)
Iraq	49.3	1358
Middle East, other	10.3	285
USA	21	579
other	13.9	383
Total	100	2,757

Overall, media treatment of the 2004 presidential race is notable in a number of respects. First, although the substantive issue/horserace balance was heavily weighted towards the latter, reporting appears to have been significantly more substantial than in 2000. Analysis of a sample of 262 stories from the same set of newspapers in 2000 found that substantive issues amounted to only 11.5 per cent of all subjects while the horse race and professional aspects of the campaign took 60 per cent. This compares to a 24/44 per cent issue/horse race balance for the 2004 conventions and debates, and 28/41 per cent during the final weeks of the campaign. A word of caution is necessary here, since strict comparability was not possible, due to some differences in the periods of analysis, and for the final weeks sampling and coding procedures². Nonetheless, this is a considerable difference, and one that conforms to qualitative impressions that the media viewed the 2004 race as a far more serious affair than in 2000. The 2000 contest was relatively low-profile in the UK media until the final two weeks, and only really exploded into life, overwhelming all over political stories, with the Florida re-counts and the legal challenges. The press in 2000, regardless of partisanship, viewed the race as a dismal choice between two uninspiring choices (Bush and Al Gore); it was reported as a dull contest with little politically or indeed technically, in the sense of campaigning craft, to generate interest (Scammell, 2001). The contrast with 2004 could hardly be sharper: the outcome mattered not just for the US, but the world; the choice was significantly differentiated, and the campaign itself fascinating.

² Analysis of press coverage in the 2000 campaign covered the period from 1 August to 5 November and sampled 20 per cent of all US election stories each month. A total of 282 stories were coded from a population of 1,200, using the same code design as was used for the debates and conventions in 2004. It was decided to exclude August from the analysis of the 2004 campaign, and thus August was excluded from comparisons of all subjects across the campaigns. The 2004 analysis took selected periods (as footnote 1), but examined all stories within these, a total overall of 1,349 stories were analysed in the 2004 campaign. Intercoder reliability was tested by the author on 10 per cent of the sample in 2000 and 10 per cent of the convention/debates sample for 2004.

This final point is worth extending because it is typical of content analysis to draw a distinction between substantive issue and horserace/campaign coverage and to suggest explicitly or implicitly that the balance is one reasonable indicator of news quality. There is both clarity and logical merit in this view. It does matter whether and to what extent the news provides audiences with sufficient, accurate and substantial policy information (see Zaller, 2003; and Bennett's, 2003, reply to Zaller on the 'full news standard' of news quality). However, it is too simplistic to consign all horserace/campaign stories to the bin labelled 'trivia'. A fair portion of these stories in 2004 dealt with matters both interesting and intrinsically important: for example, details of the electoral system, demographic/economic/political profiles of battleground states, background features on campaign finance, the role and power of campaign strategists (especially Bush's campaign architect, Karl Rove), and initiatives to mobilise the grassroots. Overall, judging both by attention to substantive policy and the type and quality of campaign stories, the media performance in 2004 was a significant improvement over 2000. The analysis here goes against the grain of the of the relentless 'dumbing down' criticism, from both UK media scholars and practitioners (see e.g., Barnett and Gaber, 2001; Lloyd, 2004). By comparison with 2000, this was 'smartening up'.

However, while 2004 media reporting was relatively substantial, it was, nonetheless, policy-lite. From the debates onwards, stories not uncommonly listed the candidates' key policies, but rarely elaborated in any further detail. Moreover, frequently the policy discussion was framed by evaluation of performance effectiveness. Thus, for example, the Daily Telegraph's Alec Russell reported of the first debate (October 2) that 'for once Mr Kerry shook off his tendency for long-windedness, landing some telling blows about Iraq'; or Gerard Baker, writing for the Times on the same day, President Bush's 'repetition - at least six times - that Mr Kerry could not be trusted because he had held a variety of positions on the Iraq war - had a staged, pre-prepared quality that did not fit well with the Democrat's clear denunciation of the conduct of the war on the night. In the process Mr Bush repeatedly missed opportunities to offer a strong case that Iraq and the war on terror were intricately interlinked.' In this sense, the UK media generally was much in line with noted trends in political reporting towards strategic framing. The point can be illustrated by several examples, but here we take just one, gay marriage. This was widely reported post-election as a key moral value, a 'wedge' issue, cleverly used by Karl Rove, to motivate Christian conservatives in battleground states. It was also reported clearly that Bush, unlike Kerry, aligned himself with

the drive to change the constitution to define marriage as a union between a man and a woman. However, one can scour the press throughout the campaign and still be far from sure of the consequences of Bush's policy: what would be the impact of constitutional change, would it prevent civil partnerships as well as marriage, how many people might be affected, what are the formal procedures for changing the constitution anyway, and how would such a change compare with the European Union, and indeed the UK where civil partnership legislation has been passed? This example is typical: the hypothetical reasonably attentive news consumer would (could) have learned that Bush and Kerry differed on abortion, stem cell research and attitudes towards the Iraq war, but would struggle for further detail of what these differences might mean, save their consequences for mobilizing voters.

Tone of the coverage

The analysis was concerned with three broad questions: to what extent did the news content focus generally on 'bad news', preferring to emphasise negative rather than positive aspects of stories; how evaluative was the reporting, as opposed to the content, that is, to what extent was evaluative commentary evident in the reporters' tone; and third, to what extent were the papers' partisan biases reflected in overall and reporter tone. The first refers to a general inquiry (and criticism) that news and news values are excessively driven by the negative, bad rather than good news (Patterson, 2000; Bennett, 2003). The tendency of the news was coded in three ways; the use of candidates' quotes/soundbites; whether a story/statement was negative/positive or neutral/unclear from the point of view of the candidate (e.g., 'poll boost' or 'poll blow' for Bush/Kerry); and whether the reporters' words included evaluative descriptions, positive/praising, or negative, critical, cynical or disdainful. The latter, evaluative reporting has been a trend noted in the US (Nimmo and Combs, 1992) and is a controversial feature of modern UK journalism especially in the 'quality' press. It is comprised of two elements: the rise of the pundit and the growth of the 'commentary industry' (McNair, 2000) and the spill-over tendency to mix factual reporting with comment (Lloyd, 2004).

However, it is clear from successive analyses of UK reporting of domestic elections that these trends are tempered by partisanship (Norris et al., 1999; Scammell and Harrop, 2002). Broadly, papers can be expected to report more positively about the party they support and more negatively about those they oppose. Both the Guardian and the Independent declared a

preference for Kerry; the Daily Telegraph supported Bush, while the Times was unaligned. Thus one might expect the news overall to be predominantly negative, but the weighting of negativity to vary according to the papers' candidate preference. Hence, for example, one would expect that the Guardian would have more negative stories about Bush than Kerry. Equally it could be anticipated that both the Times (unaligned) and the BBC (not allowed to express editorial preference) would be more balanced, and more neutral/straight in overall tone.

Table 8 analyses the media's use of candidates' quotes. It can be seen that of the citations coded as evaluative, the negative balance is overwhelming. The media clearly preferred to cite attacks on opponents, rather than positive self-promotion. Kerry is quoted significantly less than Bush and appears more negative; a higher proportion of Kerry's quotes contain attacks and a lower proportion is positive self-promotion. This portrayal of Kerry as the aggressive challenger accords with Media Tenor's contemporaneous analysis the US television networks and weekly news magazines. It is possible, of course, that this portrayal accurately reflects reality, and that Kerry did wage the more negative campaign, although at the time of writing there was no independent corroboration of that, through, for example, analysis of candidate advertising. However, it is clearly in line with the media's general tendency to report the race as a referendum on Bush.

Table 8: Selection of quotes: October 1 – November 5

Source	Target	% positive- negative	% negative	% positive	% no clear rating	N (statements)
Bush on	Bush	11.6	0.9	12.5	86.6	2089
Kerry on	Bush	-76.8	81.3	4.5	14.3	470
Bush on	Kerry	-73.7	77.7	4	18.2	494
Kerry on	Kerry	3.9	4.7	8.5	86.8	1604

Table 9 distinguishes between the overall tone of the story from the viewpoint of the candidate, and the tone of reporter's comments. By both standards, reporting is predominantly neutral. By overall tone, most stories – just – were coded as neutral. While negative outweighs positive, the main surprise is the relatively high positive figure. The reporter tone was primarily neutral/straight, but to the extent that it was evaluative, it was heavily oriented towards the disdainful and cynical, rather than the positive register of respect/admiration. Prima facie reporting of the 2004 race appears more positive, and considerably less disdainful/cynical than 2000. Similar coding of the 2000 election found that

29 per cent of stories overall were negative (11 per cent positive, 60 per cent neutral); while for reporter tone, fully 37 per cent were categorised as disdainful/cynical, and just 51 per cent neutral. As already suggested, direct comparisons need to be handled cautiously. Nonetheless, these appear to be substantial differences. Campaign reporting was more substantive in 2004, more positive and less cynical.

Table 9: Story tone in news coverage of conventions and debates

	Tone of the report (from view of candidate)							
	Dem		Rep		Debates		Total	
	Conv		Conv					
	N.*	%	N.*	%	N.*	%	N.*	%
Overall positive	25	20.5	23	17	29	22	77	20
Overall negative	23	19	43	32	39	29.5	105	27
Straight, neutral	74	60.5	68	50.5	65	49	207	53
Total	122	100	134	99.5	133	101	389	100
	Reporter tone							
Correction (of candidate)	1	1	1	0.5	1	0.5	3	1
Disdain/critical/cynical	17	14	50	37.5	32	24.5	99	25.5
Straight/neutral	97	79.5	82	61	99	74.5	278	71.5
Admiration / respect	4	3.5	1	0.5	0	0	5	1.5
Other	3	2.5	0	0	1	0.5	4	1
Total	122	100.5	134	99.5	133	100	389	101

* N = number of stories

Finally, Table 10 compares tone across the various media in the final weeks of the campaign. In general, the media organisations conform to expectations of partisanship. The Independent and, especially The Guardian, rate negatively overall towards Bush, and positively towards Kerry. The Telegraph, as anticipated, shows the opposite tendency, strongly positive towards Bush and slightly negative towards Kerry. Also as expected, The Times is more evenly balanced, and is positive overall to both candidates although more for Bush than Kerry. The BBC's Ten O'clock News is the most equitable of all, with a nearly identical overall (positive) rating for both candidates and the highest percentage of neutrally-rated statements. The Ten O'clock news conforms to the usual rule that public service delivers more balanced, neutral and substantive news (see also Table 3) than the commercial market. However, BBC Newsnight (airing half an hour later at 10.30pm) appears to suggest almost the opposite; it is the outlier in every respect. Its news is easily the most evaluative, in each case the most negative and the most positive for Bush and Kerry. It is designed as a news magazine programme, offering fewer stories than the Ten O'clock, but with more in-depth analysis. It is the exemplar par excellence of what McNair (2000) calls the 'interpretive turn' in UK

political journalism, and the rise of the ‘comment industry’. In this respect, the results shown in Table 10 are not startling. However, the strong positive balance in favour of Kerry is surprising and not immediately explicable within BBC traditions of balance.

Table 10: Overall rating of Bush and Kerry by British media: Oct 1 – Nov 5

Medium	candidate	% positive-negative	% negative	% positive	% neutral/not clear
Daily Telegraph	Bush	6.33	16.6	22.9	60.5
Times	Bush	2.52	19.2	21.7	59.2
Independent	Bush	-1.62	19.2	17.5	63.3
Guardian	Bush	-6.76	22.9	16.1	61
Ten o clock	Bush	4.18	14.9	19.1	66
BBC2 Newsnight	Bush	1.27	23.3	24.6	52.1
Average			19.4	20.3	60.4
Daily Telegraph	Kerry	-0.96	20.3	19.4	60.3
Times	Kerry	0.55	19.4	19.9	60.7
Independent	Kerry	3.26	15.7	18.9	65.4
Guardian	Kerry	3.24	17	20.2	62.8
Ten o clock	Kerry	4.26	11.5	15.7	72.8
BBC2 Newsnight	Kerry	10.67	21.3	32	46.7
Average			17.5	21.0	61.5

News on the Internet: media websites

The rapid growth of broadband from virtually a standing start has been the outstanding technological change since the 2000 election. Government regulator, Ofcom, estimates that there are now some five million broadband connections in the UK or roughly 20 per cent of households. It might be imagined that this, and the general availability of the internet to a clear majority of the population, might have encouraged significant innovation in the media’s use of websites. However, with the exception of the BBC and the Guardian, this was not the case. Neither the Independent nor the Times websites offered added value compared to their offline editions, and in each case demanded subscription fees for search facilities. The Telegraph provided a ‘White House factfile’, with background information, online guides to the electoral process, links to external sites, including (unusually) all presidential candidates, campaign news updates, polling services and transcripts of the presidential debates.

The BBC claims the most visited website in Europe, with more than 500 million page impressions per month for its online news and sport pages (BBC 2004). As in 2000, it devoted a special ‘in depth’ section to the election, Vote USA 2004. In addition to regularly updated links to news articles published elsewhere on the BBC news website, there were

permanent features: profiles of the candidates, including Peter Camejo and Ralph Nader, of the two main parties, of the individual states, an election calendar and a guide to the electoral process. Compared to 2000, the major change was the use of multimedia applications, with interactive maps, an image slideshow with audio commentary, downloadable video clips of news and occasionally US political advertising. A further innovation was a weblog from journalist Kevin Anderson based in Washington, who provided a personal, often critical/cynical take on the contest, and who was also tasked to answer questions raised in readers' e-mails. The international significance of the election was emphasised with BBC reporters from around the world contributing articles on how people in their respective countries were viewing the election. It also posted prominently an area for users to have their say on the election campaign as it was unfolding, and to debate the effects of the result on the US and world politics. Email comments from thousands of users world-wide were posted (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/3983079.stm>.)

The BBC's was the most eye-catching and energetic site, with easily the most sophisticated multi-media applications on view. However, this was at some cost to some of the more basic but useful features displayed in 2000. It had then been the journalistic hero of the UK main media, and its attention to substantive issues was a class apart. In addition to its regular news links it had also run permanently key issue profiles, strangely abandoned this time. One could still find an abundance of often in-depth issue treatment, but unless this coincided with the day's campaign news agenda, it required the search facility. It was also notable that the BBC site was rather closed compared to the more networked Guardian Unlimited and Telegraph sites, with only a handful of external and usually official links. Guardian Unlimited, by contrast, linked to the most external sites, and while it did not have as much self-generated content as the BBC's Vote America, it had greater click-through capacity.

For simplicity of use and non-technical innovation, the Guardian's 'election special' site stood out. It contained instantly accessible archives of all reports in the print editions of both the Guardian and the Sunday Observer for both the 2004 and 2000 contests; interactive background election information, home page audio links to the debates, links to Guardian, official party and unofficial weblogs, to Associated Press and to 'partnership newspapers' around the world, and to external information sites, for example the Annenberg Political Factcheck, the Center for Public Integrity and Project Vote Smart. The site made more extensive use of weblogs than the other mainstream media, some of which featured in-depth

discussion of substantive issues, together with close scrutiny of media treatment of the election. Operation Clark County ultimately failed and was much derided by the Guardian's media competitors. As the BBC's blogger Kevin Anderson put it, (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/3980873.stm>) most Americans of his acquaintance 'found the whole project condescending at best...Republican friends fumed and Democratic friends groaned. Most of the responses I can't include in this family-friendly blog.' It was nonetheless the most imaginative attempt at interactivity and the most innovative example in the campaign of on and offline integration. It remains to be seen whether the Guardian is now simply embarrassed by the experiment or will attempt to salvage any of its 'get involved' citizen toolkit for future elections.

At the time of writing, it is not known with precision how extensively internet news supplemented or replaced other sources. A MORI survey (April, 2003) suggested that about 20 per cent of the population use internet news regularly: the 'technos', mainly young men who access news via the internet, teletext or mobile phone, and the 'night owls', mainly young, single women, often students, who access multiple sources including the Internet. Television remains by some distance the most important and most trusted source of international news for most people, according to the annual surveys of attitudes to broadcasting, conducted by the government regulator, OfCom.

Conclusion

The most memorable aspect of UK coverage of the US election was the venomous treatment of George W. Bush at the end. Elections concentrate partisanship, and in the left/liberal leaning press this erupted ultimately into anger and despair at the result. However, overall, the media are notable for two apparently contradictory features: uniformity and contrast.

There is a common tendency among non-media scholars, and indeed politicians, to talk of media in the singular, as a monolith. Scores of political biographies paint the same picture, of the media as a predictable and hungry beast, many-headed maybe, but one animal nonetheless. Overall media coverage of the US campaign gives some credence to this view: the same key events, portrayed in much the same way, broadly the same issue profile and weighting between substance and horserace, and similar explanations of the result. For most of the campaign, until judgement day, the press were more or less interchangeable.

Partisanship might be expected to provide variation, and it did affect story tone, although to a surprisingly small degree. The Telegraph was strongly positive towards Bush, but not symmetrically negative towards Kerry; the Guardian was strongly negative towards Bush, but not especially positive towards Kerry. Overall, the media were more negative towards Bush than Kerry, but the difference was slight.

The contrast is evident in two main ways. First is the contrast with reporting of the 2000 presidential election. Against the tide of dumbing down criticism, the media this time were more substantial, less cynical and more positive. This contrast may be campaign-specific, brought about by the intensity of feeling towards Bush, both in the US and overseas, and the war in Iraq. It is also possible that this may be the new trend; that the elite press and its readers have become tired of the debilitating battle with politicians' spin doctors and want a more substantial news diet (Scammell and Harrop, 2002; Barnett and Gaber, 2001; McNair, 2004). However, this more optimistic view needs to be tempered by the second contrast: the glaring differences between post-election verdicts and the media's own conduct of the coverage. The media, as one, proclaimed the exceptional international significance of the contest, and were equally united in the verdict that conservative moral values won the day. Yet, international consequences and moral issues were a relatively minor part of coverage, which, notwithstanding the contrast with 2000, remained dominated by the excitement of the horserace and the campaign battle. Even if there may be a trend towards more substantial news, it is absolutely clear that strategic framing has become a settled characteristic of UK political reporting.

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Acknowledgements

This research was conducted with the aid of a grant from EDS-LSE Innovation Research Programme, Media and Communications Theme. Thanks to Helen Marsh for research assistance.

A version of this paper is being published in Journalism Studies (in press).

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