

Politics and Media:
How the U.S. Presidential Election was covered in America and Austria

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Abstract

Cluster criticism analysis analyzes key terms and word clusters surrounding those key terms. This research paper utilizes cluster criticism analysis to examine a speech given by Republican Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin and newspaper articles which discussed the 2008 U.S Presidential election in American and Austrian newspapers. After examining the key terms, issues of who is a true American and the effects of media bias on the voter are discussed.

Introduction

In 2008, the United States held its presidential election between Democrat Barack Obama and Republican John McCain. This election gained worldwide coverage as Democrat Barack Obama was vying to become the nation's first African-American President while Republican John McCain chose Alaskan Governor Sarah Palin to be his running mate, making her the first woman Vice Presidential candidate for the Republican Party. For both parties, winning this election would mean going down in U.S. history.

On October 4, 2008, at an Englewood, Colorado rally, Republican Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin gave a speech where she smeared Democrat Barack Obama and his ties to former terrorist William Ayers. The media immediately made this a story. News stories focused on Palin's use of the words "terrorist" and "Obama" and closely linked the two together. Kenneth Burke refers to this as a "terministic screen"¹ (Foss, 2004, p. 71). Burke states:

The terms we select to describe the world constitute a kind of screen that directs attention to particular aspects of reality rather than others. Particular vocabularies constitute a reflection, selection, and deflection of reality.² (Foss, 2004, p. 71)

Media people select the words and phrases they want to use in a story and relay to the public. As a result, the message the public receives can be interpreted in many different ways.

Using cluster criticism analysis, Palin's speech and newspaper articles from American newspapers—*The Honolulu Advertiser*, *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, and *USA Today*, and an Austrian newspaper, *Die Presse*, were examined. The idea of who is a true American can be discussed. The effects of media bias on the voter can also play a tremendous role in the outcome of an election.

¹ Foss, S. K. *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*. (3rd ed.). Waveland Press, 2004, p. 71.

² Foss, *loc. cit.*

Politics and Media: How the U.S. Presidential Election was covered in America and Austria

Politics and the media have a symbiotic relationship. Politicians rely on the media to boost their campaign and help them receive votes, while the media is looking for a story to attract more readers and viewers. In 2008, the United States Presidential election between Democrat Barack Obama and Republican John McCain was an event covered worldwide. Newspapers in the United States and Austria covered the event with different perspectives. By using cluster criticism analysis to analyze newspaper articles from American newspapers and an Austrian newspaper, the language used within each article suggests who is a true American and reveals a bias toward one candidate which ultimately affects the voter's attitudes toward each candidate and who they decide to vote for.

Background Information: Political Structure

United States

The political system in the United States is comprised of two main parties—Democrats and Republicans. According to “The Democratic Party” (2009) website, the Democratic Party was founded in 1792 by Thomas Jefferson as a “congressional caucus to fight for the Bill of Rights.”³ The party favors liberal positions and is “committed to keeping [the] nation safe and expanding opportunity for every American”⁴ (“The Democratic Party,” 2009).

The Republican Party often referred to as the Grand Old Party or GOP was founded in 1854 by “anti-slavery activists and individuals who believed that government should grant western lands to settlers free of charge”⁵ (“GOP.com,” 2009). The party favors conservative

³ Democratic National Committee. *The Democratic Party*. <http://www.democrats.org/a/party/history.html> (retrieved October 9, 2009)

⁴ Democratic National Committee, *op. cit.*

⁵ Republican National Committee. *GOP.com*. <http://www.gop.com/About/AboutRead.aspx?Guid=a747a888-0ae6-4441-94f4-2a3a6561f872> (retrieved October 9, 2009)

positions and support “basic and traditional principles [and that] individuals not the government can make the best decisions”⁶ (“GOP.com,” 2009).

Democrats and Republicans always clash on the issues. Both parties support different American values and take a different stand on the key issues. Because the United States is comprised of two political parties, Democrats and Republicans are forced to compromise with each other when a decision can’t be made. As a result, voters are always asked to choose between one or the other in an election.

Austria

Austria is situated in the heart of Europe and “is considered one of the ‘bridges’ between East and West because of its status as permanently neutral since the Second World War”⁷ (Trappel, 1992, p. 1). Austria has a parliamentary democracy with a federal constitution⁸ (Trappel, 1992, p. 1). Josef Trappel (1992) states that like the United States, Austria has a president and several political parties:

The President is the head of state, but he does not play an active role in daily politics. In parliament there are four parties—Socialist Party (SPÖ), People’s Party (ÖVP), Green Party, and National Liberal Party—of which the Socialist and the conservative People’s Party are the largest.⁹ (p. 1)

The social partnership between all political groups has yielded a relatively stable social system. Unlike the political parties in the United States who are forced to compromise on the issues, political parties in Austria decide on the issues by majority rules. With four political parties, two of which are dominate, politics in Austria are based on the number of politicians supporting the issue and on all groups coming to a consensus.

⁶ Republican National Committee. *GOP.com*. <http://www.gop.com/About/AboutRead.aspx?Guid=a747a888-0ae6-4441-94f4-2a3a6561f872> (retrieved October 9, 2009)

⁷ Trappel, J. *The Media in Western Europe: The Euromedia Handbook*. Sage, 1992, p. 1

⁸ Trappel, *loc. cit.*

⁹ Trappel, *loc. cit.*

Methods

Materials

Newspaper articles taken from American newspapers and an Austrian newspaper during October 2008 were used to assist in this project. The American newspaper articles were taken from *The Honolulu Advertiser*, *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, and *USA Today*. The Austrian newspaper the articles were taken from was *Die Presse*. Key comments made by Republican Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin on October 4, 2008, at an Englewood, Colorado rally was used as the primary source.

Procedure of Analysis

In order to analyze each newspaper article, cluster criticism analysis was used. The first step required selecting an artifact. According to Sonja K. Foss (2004) this “method requires you to identify key terms and the terms that cluster around them”¹⁰ (p. 72). The artifact should also be “long enough and complex enough to contain several terms that cluster around the key terms in the artifact” (Foss, 2004, p. 72).

The second step involves analyzing the artifact. Foss (2004) states that there are three basic steps to analyzing the artifact: “(1) identifying key terms in the artifact; (2) charting the terms that cluster around the key terms; and (3) discovering an explanation for the artifact”¹¹ (p. 72). To identify the key terms select those that appear to be most significant to the rhetor, and select no more than five or six¹² (Foss, 2004, p. 72). Once the key terms are identified, chart clusters around those key terms. This process involves a close examination of each identified key term and the occurrence of the key term as well as the clusters around them¹³ (Foss, 2004, p. 73). Discovering an explanation for the artifact is the next step. In this step, “attempts to find

¹⁰ Foss, *op. cit.*, p. 72

¹¹ Foss, *loc. cit.*

¹² Foss, *loc. cit.*

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 73

patterns in the associations and linkages discovered in the charting of clusters as a way of making visible the worldview constructed by the rhetor”¹⁴ (Foss, 2004, p. 74).

Using cluster criticism to identify key terms and clusters in Republican Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin’s speech and newspaper articles retrieved from American and Austrian newspapers, I will analyze how the media creates certain “terministic screens”¹⁵ (Foss, 2004, p. 71) and how they influence media bias.

Analysis

Using the key comments stated by Republican Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin and the newspaper articles retrieved from American and Austrian newspapers, key terms such as “Obama,” “American,” and “America” were highlighted. With those key terms in mind, the word clusters formed mentioned the words “William Ayers,” “terrorists,” “radical,” “Muslim,” “Arab,” “black,” “Reverend Jeremiah Wright Jr.,” “bombings,” and “truth”. These word clusters were within five or six words of the highlighted key terms.

Key Comments from Palin

When Republican Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin gave her speech in Englewood, Colorado, the media picked up on some of her phrases to use in a story. Palin’s full comment as stated by Mark Halperin (2008) in an online *Time* article was:

There’s been a lot of interest in what I read lately. Well, I was reading my copy of today’s *New York Times* and I was really interested to read about Barack’s friends from Chicago. Turns out, one of his earliest supporters is a man who, according to *The New York Times* was a domestic terrorist and part of a group that, quote, ‘launched a campaign of bombings that would target the Pentagon and the U.S. Capitol.’ These are the same guys who think patriotism is paying higher taxes. This

¹⁴ Foss, *op. cit.*, p. 74

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 71

is not a man who sees America as you and I do - as the greatest force for good in the world. This is someone who sees America as imperfect enough to pal around with terrorists who targeted their own country. This, ladies and gentlemen, has nothing to do with the kind of change anyone can believe in - not my kids and not your kids. The only man who can take on Washington is John McCain.¹⁶ (“Key Comments,” 2008)

Palin’s remarks infer that Democrat Barack Obama is not an American. In her quote, “this is not a man who sees America as you and I do,” she suggests that Obama is not American because his views are different. She implies to the crowd that people like her with similar views are American while someone like Obama is not.

In another quote, Palin states, “this is someone who sees America as imperfect enough to pal around with terrorists”¹⁷ (“Key Comments,” 2008). With this statement, Palin accuses Obama of not being American because he was “pals” with former terrorist William Ayers. In addition, Palin implies that anyone who sees America as being “imperfect” can’t be American because no American sees America as “imperfect”. To Palin, an American sees America as flawless and has similar beliefs and values to her.

Palin also appeals to people that Obama can’t be trusted by stating, “this, ladies and gentlemen, has nothing to do with the kind of change anyone can believe in-not my kids and not your kids”¹⁸ (“Key Comments,” 2008). Her quote targets parents as they are forced to think about the future they want for their children. She creates this image of her and McCain as the bright future while Obama and Biden are the dark, uncertain future. Palin also portrays Obama as someone who doesn’t keep his word because the kind of change he wants to introduce was not “the kind of change anyone can believe in”¹⁹ (“Key Comments,” 2008). As a result, Palin paints Obama to be someone who is not credible.

¹⁶ Halperin, M. Key Comments By Sarah Palin at Colorado GOP Fundraiser. *Time*. <http://thepage.time.com/key-comments-by-sarah-palin-at-colorado-gop-fundraiser/> (retrieved October 12, 2009)

¹⁷ Halperin, *loc. cit.*

¹⁸ Halperin, *loc. cit.*

¹⁹ Halperin, *loc. cit.*

The Honolulu Advertiser

The key term used throughout this article was “Obama.” Surrounding “Obama” were words clusters that included “Arab,” “terrorist,” “radical,” and “Ayers.” William Ayers was a former terrorist in the 1960s who launched terroristic bombings on the U.S Capitol and the Pentagon²⁰ (Talev & Douglas, 2008). Early in Obama’s campaign, Ayers supported him. The media used the terms “Ayers” and “terrorist” to come before and after the key term “Obama” seven times within the article. The media emphasized Obama’s relationship with Ayers and in turn subtly played on the issue of race.

In the United States, race is still an issue. With the current terrorist profile consisting of those people with darker skin tones, the media has subtly used Obama’s race as another issue with his association with Ayers. Within the article, the word “Arab” appears twice and follows the key term “Obama.” A McCain supporter said, “I don’t trust Obama. He’s an Arab.”²¹ (Talev & Douglas, 2008) This quote clearly denotes that the public has associated Obama with terrorists since they refer to him as an “Arab.”

In this case, the reporter created her own terministic screen in order to convey the message that Obama was friends with terrorists. The reporter constructed the story to focus on Obama’s ties with terrorists and then the issue of his skin color since those terrorists from the Middle East have a darker skin tone. As a result, the public can misinterpret the information they are given because the reporter chooses the quotes and places them within the story.

The New York Times

In this article, the key term “Obama” is preceded or followed by “Ayers” eight times. Similar to *The Honolulu Advertiser* newspaper article, *The New York Times* article emphasizes Obama’s association with Ayers. The story begins with background information on William

²⁰ Talev, M. & Douglas, W. McCain comes to Obama’s defense. *The Honolulu Advertiser*. <http://the.honoluluadvertiser.com/article/2008/Oct/11/In/hawaii810110367.html> (retrieved October 9, 2009).

²¹ Talev & Douglas, *loc. cit.*

Ayers and how he and Obama first met. Toward the later part of the article, the reporter begins to attack Obama for misleading the public about his association with Ayers.

Another word that precedes or follows “Obama” is “bombings”. The word “bombings” also adds to the association of Obama and Ayers since terrorists bomb buildings. As a former terrorist, Ayers launched bombings that targeted the U.S. Capitol and Pentagon²² (Shane, 2008). The word “bombings” lead readers to believe Obama is somehow involved with terrorists since the word “bombings” appear six times before or after “Obama”.

The reporter in this case creates a terministic screen which provides the reader with background information about William Ayers’ past as a former terrorist and then suddenly fast-forwards to how Obama first met Ayers at a meeting in Chicago²³ (Shane, 2008). This effect causes the reader to make associations with Ayers, a former terrorist, and Obama, the Democratic Presidential candidate. As a result, the public begins to interpret the information as Obama being friends with terrorists and also the idea that Obama himself might be a terrorist.

Another key term, “America” had word clusters of “Reverend Jeremiah Wright Jr.” and “Ayers”. Surrounding the term “America” with words like “Reverend Jeremiah Wright Jr.” and “Ayers” also affect who the public sees as being American. The article defines “Ayers” and “Reverend Jeremiah Wright Jr.” as not being American because one was a former terrorist and the other denounced America. With the placement of the words “Reverend Jeremiah Wright Jr.” and “Ayers” so close to the key term “Obama”, readers may make associations between “Obama” as being a terrorist and as being un-American.

How the reporter shapes a story can affect how readers view each presidential candidate. With the terministic screens the reporter created in this article, how readers begin to view each presidential candidate can affect how they decide to vote in the general election.

²² Shane, S. Obama and ‘60s Bomber: A Look Into Crossed Paths. *The New York Times*.
http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/04/us/politics/04ayers.html?_r=2 (retrieved October 12, 2009)

²³ Shane, *loc. cit.*

The Boston Globe

The key terms “Obama,” “American,” and “America” were seen throughout the article. Surrounding those key terms were the words “Ayers,” “terrorists,” and “truth”. Looking at the first key term, “Obama” the word “Ayers” precedes or follows seven times within the article. The use of “Ayers” next to “Obama” emphasized the close relationship between Obama and Ayers. In addition, by repetitively mentioning “Ayers” next to “Obama” readers will begin to associate “Obama” and “Ayers” synonymously. In *The Boston Globe* article, almost every other line lists “Obama” and the word “Ayers” either precedes or follows that key term²⁴ (Rhee, 2008).

The key term “Obama” was also surrounded with the word “terrorist”. Adding to the attention between Obama’s relationship with Ayers, the word “terrorist” also allows readers to make associations of “Obama” as a “terrorist”.

This reporter created a terministic screen that really drove the point home about Obama’s association with Ayers. Using repetitive language, the reporter subliminally made a point to the reader that Obama is friends with Ayers and therefore he is friendly with terrorists. Utilizing the information for the story and constructing it in this manner, affects the message the reader receives after reading the article.

The other key terms, “American” and “America” were surrounded by the word “truth”. Because Obama downplayed his association with Ayers, the media attacked him for hiding the truth from the public²⁵ (Rhee, 2008). When the placement of the word “truth” is analyzed within the article, it tends to precede or follow immediately after “American”. As a result, this information can be misinterpreted because people may interpret the article as stating “Obama” is not an “American” because he doesn’t tell the “truth”. It also raised the idea that true Americans tell the truth and aren’t associated with terrorists.

²⁴ Rhee, F. McCain hammers away at Obama’s Ayers connection. *The Boston Globe*. http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2008/10/10/mccain_hammers_away_at_obamas_ayers_connection/ (retrieved October 9, 2009)

²⁵ Rhee, *loc. cit.*

The placement of words surrounding “American” and “Obama” clearly show the contrast because “Obama” is surrounded with words like “Ayers” and “terrorist” while “American” is surrounded by “truth”. Word placement is key for readers to create associations because if a word continually pops up around a person’s name, the reader may start to link that word with that person. In this case it’s “Obama” as associated with “Ayers” and “terrorist”.

USA Today

There are two key terms present in this article, “Obama” and “America”. Looking at the “Obama” key term, this term is surrounded by the words “terrorist,” “Ayers,” “radical,” “Muslim,” and “Reverend Jeremiah Wright Jr.”. Thus far, the other American newspapers have also used the words “Obama” and “Ayers” symbiotically in order to emphasize Obama’s association with Ayers. The same instance is displayed in this article by the *USA Today*. The only difference is that the word “terrorist” isn’t used or seen near the word “Ayers,” instead the word “terrorist” is seen next to “radical” and “Muslim”.

In this article, the words “radical,” “Muslim,” and “terrorist” directly associate Obama with those terrorists from the Middle East. A direct reference to Obama’s skin color is made when he’s referred to as a “radical, foreign-born Muslim”²⁶ (The Associated Press, 2008) in the article. With phrases like those used in an article, readers will shy away from voting for Obama because they will start to associate him with the words “Muslim” and “terrorist”.

The reporter in this case has created a terministic screen in which she used past references of what a terrorist is considered to look like and then added that information with the present issue of Obama’s relationship with former terrorist, William Ayers. The reporter wanted to portray Obama as a terrorist because she chose such high-strung words like “radical” and “Muslim” to precede or follow the key term “Obama” on numerous occasions. By the end of the

²⁶ The Associated Press. Palin: Obama pals around with terrorists. *USA Today*. http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/election2008/2008-10-04-palin-obama_N.htm (retrieved October 9, 2009)

article, readers are bound to associate “Obama” with either “Muslim,” “radical,” or “terrorist” since those terms were consistently repeated and placed around the key term “Obama”.

In addition, with the mention of the name “Reverend Jeremiah Wright Jr.” located near the key term “Obama,” readers may also sight Obama as condemning America because Reverend Wright gave a sermon called “God damn America”²⁷ (The Associated Press, 2008).

Looking at the next key term, “America” we see that it’s surrounded by the word “terrorist”. As Palin states, “this is not a man who sees America as you see America and I see America”²⁸ (The Associated Press, 2008). Palin brings up the idea that someone like Obama who has an association with a former terrorist is therefore not an American. In this one sentence, Palin says “America” three times to place the emphasis that someone like her with similar values is truly American because they don’t associate themselves with known terrorists. Palin directly attacks Obama and brings up the idea that he is not an American and rather he’s a terrorist.

Die Presse

In the first newspaper article titled “Palin wirft Obama Nähe zu Terroristen vor” by the Austria Associated Press (2008) the key word “Obama” is seen throughout the article²⁹. Surrounding “Obama” are word clusters with “Ayers,” “terrorist,” and “Muslim”. Like the article written by *The New York Times*, this story gives a background look at how Obama and Ayers met and then emphasizes Obama’s association with former terrorist William Ayers.

Unlike news stories in the national realm which can affect how a voter casts her vote, news stories in the international realm can affect how the rest of the world views America. By using the words “Ayers,” “terrorist,” and “Muslim” to surround “Obama,” the international realm may start to associate Obama with terrorists or Muslims because in news stories his name is constantly found around those words.

²⁷ The Associated Press, *loc. cit.*

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ Austria Associated Press. Palin wirft Obama Nähe zu Terroristen vor. *Die Presse*. <http://diepresse.com/home/politik/aussenpolitik/419999/index.do?from=suche.intern.portal> (retrieved October 12, 2009)

Reporters in the international realm play an important role in how the rest of the world views America because they choose what stories to report on and what angle they take on the story. How they report a story also affects how well the people within that country know politicians from America and whether or not they have a favorable or unfavorable bias toward them. Reporters also create terministic screens based on their bias and knowledge of each candidate. If a reporter sides with a certain political party—conservative or liberal—their values and bias toward a candidate may appear in their news story.

The second newspaper article by Rief Norbert (2008) titled “USA: Wahl zwischen ‘terrorist’ und ‘verbrecher’” uses the key term “Obama”³⁰. In this article, the key term “Obama” is preceded or followed by word clusters with “Ayers,” “terrorist,” “dirty,” and “Reverend Jeremiah Wright Jr.”. The words “Ayers,” “terrorist,” and “Reverend Jeremiah Wright Jr.” create images that Obama is a terrorist and someone who doesn’t like America.

In this Austrian newspaper article, the reporter refers to Obama’s relationship with Ayers and Reverend Jeremiah Wright Jr. while at the same time subtly getting at the issue of race. When the reporter refers to Obama’s relationship with “Ayers” and “Reverend Jeremiah Wright Jr.” he uses words like “dirty,” “dark,” and “shady”. These words can take on various meanings but the placement of them next to the key term “Obama” suggests the reporter is making sure the reader knows Obama has a dark skin tone and is African-American. In addition, the argument can be made that the reporter sees a true America as someone who is white and not someone of color. In the United States, words that bring up the issue of race would never be found in a news story because it would create such uproar within the community.

There was also a quote that read “the Democrat is known as ‘dishonest’, ‘dangerous’ and ‘too risky for America’”³¹ (Norbert, 2008). The use of this quote sums up the idea that Obama is portrayed as being linked with terrorists and shouldn’t be trusted. The use of the word “dangerous” implies that Obama is someone who poses a threat to the well-being of every citizen

³⁰ Norbert, R. USA: Wahl zwischen “terrorist” und “verbrecher”. *Die Presse*. <http://diepresse.com/home/politik/aussenpolitik/420755/index.do?from=suche.intern.portal> (retrieved October 9, 2009)

³¹ Norbert, *loc. cit.*

in the country. Using “dishonest” also generalizes a group of people, African-Americans, and implies that they can’t be trusted because they don’t tell the truth. Word usage plays a big role in how the reader makes associations with political candidates.

In the third story by the Austria Associated Press (2008), titled “US-Wahlkampf: Palin verschärft Attacken gegen Obama” the key word throughout the story is “Obama”³². Word clusters around the key term consist of “Ayers,” “terrorists,” and “black”.

This is the first story to identify Obama as the “black presidential candidate”³³ (Austria Associated Press, 2008). In the United States, the word “black” would never precede a person’s name or status because the issue of race is a heated topic. Also, by describing someone by the color of their skin or their ethnicity, a reporter will start to discriminate that person by race because the reader will then associate that person’s ethnicity and skin color with their name. Using the word “black” in the international realm also vividly paints the picture that Obama has a darker skin tone than McCain. How the reader interprets that information may create favorable or unfavorable bias toward Obama.

The word clusters “Ayers,” “terrorists,” and “black” also create linkages between the three terms. Readers may start to associate “Obama” as being a “terrorist” because he’s “black” and was associated with former terrorist “Ayers”. If international readers begin to make this association, the way the international realm views Obama would be negative because the rest of the world would think he is friends with terrorists when he really isn’t.

The reporter in this story has created a terministic screen to portray Obama’s race as an underlying issue of why his connection to Ayers is appalling. The reporter has used her own past knowledge of what features a “terrorist” possesses, and used that information to then portray Obama’s race as an issue because of the fact that he was associated with former terrorist, William Ayers.

³² Austria Associated Press. US-Wahlkampf: Palin verschärft Attacken gegen Obama. *Die Presse*. <http://diepresse.com/home/politik/uswahl/420009/index.do?from=suche.intern.portal> (retrieved October 12, 2009)

³³ Austria Associated Press, *loc. cit.*

Discussion

In political stories, media bias shapes how the story is told. The bias can either be conservative or liberal. Conservative bias examines the coverage of each candidate's campaign³⁴ (Hahn, 1998, p. 29). According to Dan F. Hahn (1998), author of *Political Communication: Rhetoric, Government, and Citizens*, most conservatives argue that the media uses a liberal bias and is unfair in how they cover elections:

First, the fact that there are more Democrats than Republicans among reporters does not, by itself, prove there are more liberals than conservatives. The conservative position does not rely only on the party labels of reporters and their presumed bias during presidential campaigns. It also holds that a liberal bias can be found in news coverage. Here conservatives point to the unremitting criticism of American officials as opposed to the relative lack of coverage of the leaders of countries that might be considered our enemies.³⁵ (p. 30)

Unlike conservative bias, liberal bias looks at the audience being reached with each story. Similar to the argument conservatives pose, liberals argue that the media uses a conservative bias. Hahn (1998) states that liberals point the finger at the people in charge of the media:

The people to whom they point are not reporters but owners, editors, and experts interviewed. Corporations tend to be conservative although they are not 100 percent so. The second group of media people that liberals point to are the editors. Editors who want to infect the news with a conservative bias have the power to do so. The final category is experts who are called on for commentary.³⁶ (p. 32-33).

Ultimately media bias is really geared toward what makes money. Corporations and their owners are not concerned with the bias their reporter takes on a story, but rather the profits their

³⁴ Hahn, D. F. *Political Communication Rhetoric, Government, and Citizens*. Strata, 1998, p. 29

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 30

³⁶ Hahn, *op. cit.*, p. 32-33

article bring in. For these media outlets, the main idea of their business is to “sell political positions to their readers and viewers”³⁷ (Hahn, 1998, p. 36).

If the media takes a stand for one party and produces stories that favor one candidate and not the other, it is only natural for readers of that newspaper or viewers of that news program to produce favorable attitudes toward that same candidate. Media bias has a strong influence on both readers and viewers in the national realm as well as in the international realm. In the national realm within the United States, media bias affects the public’s attitudes towards politics and towards the candidates in the election. Public opinion polls produced by media people are a good example of how the public’s attitudes towards each candidate can change. In the international realm--countries in Europe, Asia, Africa, South America, and Australia—how the media portrays a candidate tremendously affects how leaders and people abroad view that candidate. How the international realm views a presidential candidate is important for successful international relations. When the candidate becomes president, he will have to collaborate with other world leaders. If they don’t agree on the issues, working together could prove difficult.

Over the past few decades in the United States, the media has played a vital role in shaping people’s attitudes toward the government. As the media became more involved in the political sphere in the 1970s, political parties needed to adjust their approach in interacting with the public. Richard Davis and Diana Owen (1998), authors of *New Media and American Politics* state:

The emphasis [the media places] on primaries, as opposed to caucuses, for selecting delegates to the national nominating conventions made it necessary for candidates to appeal directly to the public, as opposed to party regulars. These developments gave rise to candidate-centered, as opposed to party-directed elections as candidates campaigned through the media largely to the exclusion of party mechanisms.³⁸

(p. 171)

³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 36

³⁸ Davis, R. & Owen, D. *New Media and American Politics*. Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 171

As the media has gotten more involved with politics, it has assumed a role that was previously reserved for political parties. The media has taken it upon itself to “recruit and screen candidates for office, structure the campaign process, organize the issue agenda, and inform and mobilize voters”³⁹ (Davis & Owen, 1998, p. 172).

As a result, the public’s attitudes toward the government have also shifted. People used to believe in their government and trust their local and state leaders. With the media acting as the “watchdog” they have also influenced the public’s attitudes. People nowadays are more skeptical and untrusting of their government leaders. Davis and Owen (1998) assert:

Public expectations regarding government are not being met, yet there is no consensus on what the role of government should be. For many, there is too much government intervention in too many aspects of society.⁴⁰ (p. 173)

Many also argue that news stories about politicians and the government mainly focus on the problems, infighting, and scandals rather than the accomplishments of each politician and what really works in the government⁴¹ (Davis & Owen, 1998, p. 173).

The amount of press a candidate receives during an election will affect how often a voter sees their picture in the newspaper or on the television. Having more coverage can work to a candidate’s advantage and disadvantage. If the press coverage a candidate is receiving is positive the voter will form positive attitudes toward the candidate. However, if the press coverage is negative, the voter will form negative attitudes toward that candidate. Voters usually associate certain characteristics or events with each candidate and if those associations are positive the voter will cast their vote for that candidate; but if the associations are negative, the voter will not vote for that candidate.

Democrat Barack Obama’s win in the presidential election may have occurred because of all the positive attitudes the media and voters had toward him. The media portrayed Obama as someone breaking U.S. history to become the first African-American president and a candidate

³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 172

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 173

⁴¹ Davis & Owen, *loc. cit.*

who was all about change. Obama was on the receiving end of the positive press spectrum while Republican John McCain was on the opposite end. McCain may have lost the election because of all the negative press surrounding his running mate, Governor Sarah Palin, and his ties with the current (now former) President George W. Bush. Majority of the people in the United States did not favor President Bush and as a result they may have associated that with McCain and not vote for him.

As the media coverage has shifted from print to television, different aspects of each candidate are specifically focused on. According to Hahn (1998), “the media has exacerbated the public’s tendency to focus on the candidate’s personality”⁴² (p. 229).

Horse Race

The horse race analogy has become part of campaign reporting strategies in the United States. This strategy mainly focuses on the “character” of each candidate rather than the stance they have on the issues. Davis and Owen (1998) said, “the media concentrates on campaign tactics and the relative position of the candidates in the race, often to the exclusion of issue information”⁴³ (p. 214).

This type of reporting has in turn affected the attitudes and perceptions voters have of each candidate. By tuning in on a candidate’s character rather than their stance on the issues, voters are then asked to vote based on likeability. Influencing voters to vote for a candidate based on how likeable they are, changes the way the government is run because a presidential candidate won’t be voted into office based on their stance on the issues plaguing the country, but rather how well liked they are by the public.

Horse race strategies also play on the emotions of voters. As the media builds up the character of each presidential candidate, they are also shaping a story to appeal to readers’ emotions. If a voter can relate to a candidate on an emotional level they are most likely to cast

⁴² Hahn, *op. cit.*, p. 229

⁴³ Davis & Owen, *op. cit.*, p. 214

their vote for that person. The message that's relayed by the media to the public can truly affect the outcome of any election.

Public Opinion Polls

In the twentieth century, the development of survey research and sampling techniques gave journalists independent and objective information about the nature of public opinion on any given subject. Sometimes public opinion polls became news stories in their own right. For example, in 2003, polls about public attitudes of the Iraq war were an important part of the way journalists could see the conflict⁴⁴ (Lewis et al., 2005, p. 18).

There is no doubt that opinion polls are an ideal source for news reporting. Opinion polls have become part of today's modern culture—people want facts but they also want to know what others think. However, how a journalist utilizes an opinion poll in their news story can affect the outcome of an election.

As Justin Lewis, Sanna Inthorn and Karin Wahl-Jorgensen (2005), authors of *Citizens or Consumers? What the Media Tell Us about Political Participation* states:

There is no doubt that journalist often tend to see polls simply as predictions of the likely outcome of an election. As such, they see elections as the true manifestation of public opinion against which polls are measured. This leads to a range of possible misreading because a poll cannot precisely predict whether the sample of people voting will be representative of the electorate as a whole.⁴⁵ (p. 53)

In general, people's perceptions of each candidate change with what they see and hear in the news. With public opinion polls it is usually the misreading of them that affect how a voter casts his or her vote. According to Thomas Patterson (1994), "the returns, projections, and

⁴⁴ Lewis, J. & Inthorn, S. & Wahl-Jorgensen, K. *Citizens or Consumers? What the Media Tell Us about Political Participation*. Open University Press, 2005, p. 18

⁴⁵ Lewis & Inthorn & Wahl-Jorgensen, *op. cit.*, p. 53

delegate counts of the primaries and the frequent polling and game context of the general election are of considerable interest to the voters”⁴⁶ (p. 176).

For undecided voters, knowing who is winning and losing in the polls may be important. It is typical human nature to be on the winning side. Most people don’t like to be on the losing side so they’ll go ahead and cast their vote for the person expected to win. This type of setting can create a bandwagon.

Just as voters take public opinion polls into consideration when voting, politicians also look at public opinion polls as a way to “gauge the public mood”⁴⁷ (Negrine, 1996, p. 107). Politicians monitor public opinion polls in order to detect if the public agrees with the stance they have on the key issues. Although public opinion polls may not be reliable measures of vote count, politicians also use it to see if they are gaining majority of the public’s support and vote.

Bandwagon Effect

Information about a candidate’s chances to win can result in creating a bandwagon effect. A bandwagon is where a large number of voters choose to vote for the candidate who is ahead in the public opinion polls⁴⁸ (Patterson, 1994, p. 178). For a bandwagon effect to occur, two conditions must be met. According to Patterson (1994), “the first condition is voters must be largely unfettered by other influences; second, they must be convinced that the leading candidate is almost certain to win”⁴⁹ (p. 178).

However, bandwagon effects are limited to the nature of the election. Although public opinion polls can gain some votes for a candidate, voters mainly cast their vote based on party, issue, and leadership preferences.

⁴⁶ Patterson, T. E. Views of Winners and Losers. *Media Power in Politics*. Congressional Quarterly, 1994, p. 176

⁴⁷ Negrine, R. *The Communication of Politics*. Sage, 1996, p. 107

⁴⁸ Patterson, *op. cit.*, p. 178

⁴⁹ Patterson, *loc. cit.*

Conclusion

In conclusion, using cluster criticism to analyze newspaper articles from American and Austrian newspaper and how they covered the 2008 U.S. Presidential election, we can see how reporters create terministic screens in order to allow the readers to make certain associations toward the candidates. The problem with this is that the media chooses what quotes and words to use in its news story and that then affects what information the reader receives and how the reader interprets that information provided in the news story.

In most cases, the media can distort someone's words to mean something else. Word selection by a reporter is crucial in creating a story because the angle they choose to work with in formulating or telling a story can then affect how a reader views each candidate in an election.

Analyzing the words that surrounded the key term "Obama," we found that negative words associated with him like "Ayers," "terrorist," "Arab," and "Muslim" can cause the reader to assume he's friends with terrorists or is a terrorist. On the other hand, the other key terms "American" and "America" were surrounded by the word "truth" which then brought up the idea that a true American is someone who tells the truth and isn't associated with terrorists. The words a reporter chooses to use in a story can create media bias toward one candidate. As a result, that bias can then affect the voting outcome of an election.

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