

DIVERGENT COVERAGE OF THE EARLY TEA PARTY MOVEMENT IN THE  
*WASHINGTON TIMES* AND THE *NEW YORK TIMES*

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DIVERGENT COVERAGE OF THE EARLY TEA PARTY MOVEMENT IN THE  
*WASHINGTON TIMES* AND THE *NEW YORK TIMES*

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By

George Hatt

2011

## **DEDICATION**

For my fiancée Cindy Schiurring. Thanks for being there through the rough times.

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**ABSTRACT**

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This thesis examines media bias in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Times* by presenting the results of a content analysis of the two newspapers' coverage of the first year of the Tea Party movement. The researcher establishes that the *New York Times* has a liberal editorial bent and that the *Washington Times* takes a conservative stance on its editorial page. The stories were counted and categorized by the researcher, and two coders determined whether each piece was favorable, unfavorable or neutral toward the Tea Party, which is considered a conservative movement in this thesis. The tone of the editorials in each newspaper aligned with expectation, and the news coverage was comparable. However, a significant disparity was found in the sheer volume of stories. The findings

are examined through the lens of selective exposure hypothesis, and implications to the fields of mass communication research and the professional realm are discussed.

This research occurs at a singular time in American political history and represents an opportunity to take a snapshot of the very genesis of an upheaval in the political landscape.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The “Tea Party” movement has introduced no small amount of consternation into the American political system. Democratic candidates were shouted down at town hall meetings over their stances on healthcare reform and the economic stimulus plan in 2009. Meanwhile, Republican incumbents in once-secure seats faced “Tea Party” opponents assailing their right flanks in the 2009 Republican primaries.

To make matters more confusing, the “Tea Party” movement is far from unified and is certainly not a political party (Weigel, 2010). Admirers of former Alaska governor Sarah Palin and U.S. Rep. Ron Paul of Texas have wildly differing and opposing views on what it means to be a Tea Party activist. The movement’s very origins are even in dispute. Opponents claim it is an “Astroturf” movement manufactured by Fox News and established conservative organizations with deep pockets with the sole purpose of derailing President Barack Obama’s agenda (Krugman, 2009). Proponents claim it is a populist grass-roots movement spurred by people’s frustration at an ever-expanding federal government (CBS & *New York Times*, 2010).

Many people look to the news media for information, including members of the powerful elite and the public-at-large. Research has not yielded a definite ruling, but some suggest that national newspapers, because of their in-depth reporting, affect policy makers more than the public. Researchers also argue that when mass media emphasize

certain topics, those receiving the messages will believe those topics are more important (Walgrave & VanAelst, 2006). However, research also suggests that audiences choose which news organizations they pay attention to based on their perceptions of the organizations' editorial bent (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009.) The Tea Party movement offers fertile ground for many many theoretical approaches to mass communication research.

The Tea Party movement is, essentially, an amorphous grassroots movement that coalesced in the spring of 2009 during tax season. However, many see the movement's genesis in a 2007 fund raising event, dubbed Boston Tea Party '07 for then-presidential candidate U.S. Rep. Ron Paul. In 2009, groups of people who were angry about what they called federal "bailouts" of Wall Street companies and automotive manufacturers rose in protest against what they perceived as runaway spending and cronyism in the U.S. government Federal Reserve (Weigel, 2010). The movement has attracted many who claim to be apolitical and past non-voters, and tension exists between adherents to Ron Paul's libertarian philosophies and those of conservative former Alaska Governor Sarah Palin (Benedict, 2010) .

In the summer of 2009, the movement found a new villain: healthcare reform. Broadcast news coverage showed story after story in which citizens loudly denounced proposed healthcare reform legislation at summer town hall meetings with their representatives and senators. Legislators were stunned by the backlash and came back to Washington after the summer recess with their resolve shaken. The Tea Party movement has been credited with (or accused of) slowing and complicating passage of healthcare reform (Jonsson, 2009).

While the Tea Party has been hailed as a grassroots movement of fiscal conser-

vatism by some, it has been accused by detractors of being neither truly grassroots nor fiscally conservative. Established conservative advocacy groups have supported the Tea Party movement by providing organization and training for activists and local leaders in the movement (Mayer, 2010). Its detractors claim that all the protests were ginned up by these organizations and overblown by Fox News, whom they accuse of trying to manufacture a story (Good, 2009).

The movement has also been accused of harboring racists, anti-government militants and conspiracy theorists—as well as garden variety hypocrites (Holland, 2011). Detractors note that many of the Tea Party protestors who oppose federal spending are recipients of Social Security and Medicare benefits (Associated Press, 2010). The protestors, however, quickly answer that they deserve those benefits because they have been paying into the programs all of their working lives (Associated Press, 2010).

In truth, the Tea Party movement is hard to pin down with a simple label and it is difficult to concisely state its mission. The movement has been credited with knocking both Democrats and Republicans from power (Weigel, 2010). Its biggest supporters have helped organize rallies, but refused to sponsor the first “Tea Party Convention” because its for-profit format and high admission fees (Zernike, 2010). Some Tea Party organizers wish for the movement to become a third party (as it has in Nevada); others want it to remain a movement of outsiders that vets candidates of all persuasions. The Republican Party has tried to harness the Tea Party movement’s power, but is wary of its anti-incumbent rhetoric.

No national leader has emerged for the movement. Some revere former Alaska governor Sarah Palin and her neo-conservative rhetoric, and others favor Texas Congress-

man Ron Paul for his stark libertarian record and desire to dismantle the American military presence abroad (Hohmann, 2010). The local level is no different; many cities and counties have multiple competing groups of Tea Party organizers. It can only be said with certainty that the Tea Party movement has passion—but its platform is hard to determine. A very strong libertarian, anti-incumbent vein runs through the movement. The libertarian overtones muddy the waters for people who base their ideas of conservatism on the basis of social issues, upon which many of the the “Tea Partiers” are silent--if the word “silent” can be used to described such a rowdy lot on the American political scene (Hohmann, 2010). Since the only consistent theme to emerge from the movement seems to be a message promoting fiscal conservatism, the Tea Party movement will be considered a conservative phenomenon for the purposes of this study.

The Tea Party was chosen because it is such a politically divisive issue and is easily identifiable as a conservative phenomenon (CBS & *New York Times*, 2010). Thus, a news outlet's stance on the Tea Party will tell us more about the outlet's political leanings than is coverage of less ideologically-driven phenomena, such as power transmission routes or dam construction. Any controversial political issue would have served just as well – gun control, abortion, immigration reform, anything that can “get a rise” out of people by appealing to (or assaulting) their political opinions.

Examining coverage of the Tea Party also helps us avoid the error that would be introduced by looking at more substantive issues. For instance, a Republican and a Democrat would both be expected to oppose a new power transmission line if it led to the condemnation of their homes through eminent domain; the evidence of partisan politics would be be washed out. More complicated issues may tell us how informed and engaged

the reader is (or how informative and engaging the media source is), but we risk losing measurement of readers' political stance in the shuffle.

Groseclose and Milyo (2005) use an indirect way to measure media outlets' political biases in their comprehensive study of the subject. The researchers counted the times that media outlets in their study cited policy groups and think tanks and compared them with the frequency with which members of Congress cite those groups in the Congressional Record. The researchers used the Americans for Democratic Action scores for members of Congress to place them on a scale describing how liberal, conservative or centrist they are; if a news source cited the the same think tanks that a conservative member of congress cited in his or her speeches, Groseclose and Milyo considered it to be conservatively biased (2005).

Groseclose and Milyo build an important foundation by quantitatively demonstrating overall political bias in many of our major news outlets. Their methods are like those used by astronomers to infer the existence of extra-solar planets by measuring wobble in a star's relative position. This study zooms in the telescope, so to speak, to look at the planet itself—a phenomenon whose coverage could exhibit media bias.

The Tea Party phenomenon itself has immediate concern for the political system, as the 2009 primaries and 2010 elections show. In fact, the Tea Party made the cover of *Foreign Affairs*, the journal of the Council on Foreign Relations, in a story about the implications of its brand of populism on American foreign policy. Walter Russell Mead (2011), the writer of the article, writes that the Tea Party is new manifestation of Jacksonian populism that sprouts up periodically. He sees two currents in the Tea Party: the isolationist bent of the Ron Paul branch and the defensive militarism of the Sarah Palin

branch. He believes that the Tea Party will make it harder to sell America's soft power world-order schemes to the public, but the neoconservatives in the movement will support military action abroad against external threats (Mead, 2011).

There is much in the Tea Party movement to give foreign policy thinkers pause, but effective foreign policy must always begin with a realist assessment of the facts on the ground. Today's Jacksoninans are unlikely to disappear. Americans should rejoice that in many ways the Tea Party movement, warts and all, is a significantly more capable and reliable partner for the United States' world-order-building tasks than were the isolationists of 60 years ago” (Mead, 2011).

This study examines the coverage of the Tea Party movement in the *New York Times* and *Washington Times*. Such a politically charged, partisan phenomenon will help reveal political bias, if any, in each newspaper.



## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature is divided as to the utility of selective exposure theory, but researchers agree that the news media play an important role in public discourse and informing the members of a democratic society.

UCLA researchers Groseclose and Milyo (2005) found a liberal bias in all of the news organizations they studied except for the *Washington Times* and Fox News' Special Report compared to members of Congress, whom the researchers used as the baseline for the study. The researchers eschewed the anecdotal evidence that commentators cite and used objective measures to study the slant in news. They also excluded all but news content in their study—and still found significant bias (Groseclose and Milyo, 2005).

The researchers cite survey results that show “an almost overwhelming fraction of journalists are liberal” and that Washington correspondents comprise a group that is more liberal than any congressional district in the country (Groseclose and Milyo, 2005). They note that the norms of journalism and pressure from those who pay their salaries could keep their liberal views out of their news stories, as well as research that predicts commercial news outlets slant whichever way their audience tilt (2005). However, their findings did not show this to be the case.

Robert McChesney, however, might ask, “What liberal media?” “In commercial media, owners hire, fire, set budgets, and determine the overarching aims of of the en-

terprise. Journalists, editors and media professionals who rise to the top of the hierarchy tend to internalize the values, both commercial and political, of media owners...editors who toe the party line can be given autonomy because those in power know it will not be abused” (McChesney, 2004). He goes on to argue that the commercial media are actually skewed right because the corporations that own national media outlets certainly will not want positive coverage of real left-wing issues such as socialism or the labor movement—and shows that coverage of labor has decreased dramatically since the 1930s (McChesney, 2004).

Research within mass communication studies and without has demonstrated the importance of news coverage to the public’s knowledge base. One study of President Bill Clinton’s stances on certain topics showed that people’s knowledge increased as the number of stories published increased. Furthermore, the study indicated that the most dramatic increase in knowledge happened when coverage increased from no stories to nine stories. “Once an issue receives some coverage, additional media attention (10 stories and beyond) does little to increase policy-specific knowledge” (Barabas and Jerit, 2009).

Boyle, Schmierbach, Armstrong, Cho, McCluskey, McLeod and Shah (2006) argue that “it is important to understand how individuals respond to news coverage about dissenting groups.” Their study suggests that when people are against an activist group’s agenda, they are more inclined to take expressive action (write letters to editors, for example) when a story about the activist group is framed around a person, rather than the group. Conversely, people are more inclined to take expressive action when a news story about an activist organization that supports a cause the reader is friendly to is framed around the group, not an individual (Boyle, et al. 2006).

Iyengar and Hahn (2009) maintain that readers “who feel strongly about the correctness of their cause or policy preferences seek out information they believe is consistent rather than inconsistent with their preferences.” Lester argues that “by moving beyond formal politics to the sphere of movement politics and its juncture with media and celebrity, we have the possibility of better understanding the changing dynamics of media roles in broader political conflict.” McClusky (2009) states that “news becomes a political resource for activists.”

The applicability of selective exposure hypothesis is not confined to newspapers. Thorson (2008) argues that the “free flow of information is crucial to an active public sphere and, for the most part, media—first newspapers, then television, and now internet—are the major source of relevant new information.” Despite the fact that the number of television channels has increased, “most individuals chose to watch the same small fraction of these channels.”

Meanwhile, activists themselves are studying how to best garner media coverage. “Most neoinstitutional research focuses on identifying how organizations seek to convince others of their legitimacy by making structural changes or adopting new policies and procedures that symbolize their conformity to societal rules and values...the theory generally fails to identify the role an organization’s external communication has in the legitimacy process...” (Patterson and Allen, 1997). Ryan, Carragee, and Schwerner (1998) maintain that media are “critical arenas of struggle for social movements and community groups seeking political change and social justice.”

This study assumes that national newspaper coverage exerts significant influence on the public’s understanding and opinion on a given subject—in this case, the Tea Party

movement. It is hoped that the findings will be useful not only to academics, but also to the media professionals, media users and activists themselves who are shaping the debate generated by the Tea Party movement.

## CHAPTER III

### EXPLICATION OF SELECTIVE EXPOSURE HYPOTHESIS

The term “selective exposure” is sometimes used to describe any bias in the composition of an audience “as long as the bias can be correlated with anything unusual in communication content” (Sears and Freedman, 1967). They note other broad definitions of selectivity, including propositions that people tend to more easily register communications that are favorable to their existing opinions, as well as Lazarfeld et al.'s idea that “[e]xposure is always selective; in other words, a positive relationship exists between people's opinions and and what they choose to listen to or read” (Lazarfeld, et al., quoted in Sears and Freeman, 1967).

With such a broad definition and long history in the realm of communications research, the selective exposure hypothesis has undergone much scrutiny and revision. The hypothesis has face validity, but the empirical evidence that researchers have reported over decades of study is contradictory. Sears and Freedman's overview of the research conducted up to the 1960s shows mixed results. In fact, one study they reviewed showed that the respondents actively sought out information that contradicted their beliefs regarding their children's safety (1967).

Sears and Freedman also made a distinction between *de facto* selectivity, or the bias in composition of voluntary audiences, and true selective exposure. “Often these biases parallel the opinion dimension emphasized by the communicator, and are in the

direction of of unusual initial agreement between audience and communicator” (1967).

According to Sears and Freedman, studies that have *de facto* selectivity bias do not tell us much about selective exposure hypothesis because the researcher must sort out whether group affiliation or attitude was the strongest predictor of exposure than other variables.

Another problem that Sears and Freedman note is the research did not focus on long-term exposure. People may be willing to put up with exposure to non-supportive information for the duration of a laboratory experiment, but they drift toward supportive information over the long term—they may “organize their surroundings in a way that ensures *de facto* selectivity” (1967). Milburn in his longitudinal test of the hypothesis controls for this problem and introduces another by studying a three-year media campaign that sought to educate audiences in three communities about heart disease prevention.

Milburn's study included a community that was not exposed to the campaign as a control group. This is significant, Milburn says, because it is nearly impossible to randomly assign exposure to conditions within a community (1979). He also narrowed the research by selecting a specific goal, reducing the risk of heart disease, instead of measuring diffuse attitudes like past studied had done.

Milburn found that the media campaign was effective, which seemingly contradicts the theory that selective exposure limited the effects of the media campaign (Milburn, 1979). However, information about maintaining one's health is useful information – and Sears and Freedman list information utility as one of the several factors that influence exposure preferences (1964).

Despite the evidence that seemed to undermine selective exposure hypothesis, researchers returned to it in the age of new media and an ever-changing information

environment (Garrett, 2009). Mutz and Martin (2001) used national survey data to investigate which sources of information expose people to a variety of political views. They hypothesized that mainstream news media offer more exposure to competing political views than interpersonal communication because there is more variety in the audience's media environment than in their physical environments and the audience members have less ability and desire to exercise selective exposure to news media content. However, Mutz and Martin (2001) do not see this as evidence that necessarily contradicts the selective exposure hypothesis; they suggest that people seek political reinforcement but may or may not expose themselves to dissimilar views. They tested their hypothesis by examining test subjects' local news options, the partisan news environment and the subjects' comfort with face-to-face confrontation.

Mutz and Martin found that respondents with more than one newspaper in their area reported less exposure to dissimilar views in their paper of choice; they also found that British respondents acted on their ability to selectively expose in their highly partisan press, whereas only 16 percent of American respondents reported reading a newspaper that shares their political leanings. "Selective exposure," they say, "clearly occurs under the right ideal real world conditions; when people have a choice, they tend to use it to reduce their exposure to cross-cutting political views" (Mutz and Martin, 2001). They also found that people who are more comfortable with face-to-face conflict get more of their dissonant information from interpersonal interactions than they do from the media – and the opposite is true for people who avoid conflict.

Garrett (2009) expands on a point in the research conducted by Mutz and Martin and argues that previous researchers could have been missing an important component

of the discussion: perhaps audiences actively seek opinion-reinforcing political information without actively avoiding challenges to their political views. His research is based on national random digit-dial telephone survey involving 1,510 test subjects conducted prior to the presidential campaign in 2004. Garrett found that neither strong candidate support by the respondents nor online news uses was associated with challenge avoidance. Indeed, “contrary to prior interpretations of selective exposure theory, the data demonstrate that seeking opinion-reinforcing and avoiding opinion-challenging information are not equivalent. The results support the hypotheses that individuals are using control over their political information environment to increase their exposure to opinion-reinforcing information, but that they are not using this control to systematically screen out other opinions” (Garrett, 2009).

Garrett's take on selective exposure hypothesis provides a useful analytical tool with which to examine media coverage and the phenomena the reporters and editors examine and explain for the public.



## CHAPTER IV

### METHODOLOGY

The research is intended to explore the question: “How did the *New York Times* and the *Washington Times* cover the Tea Party movement between the March 2009 and March 2010?” The two newspapers were chosen because each is considered by many to be exemplars of the political left and right, respectively. According to *New York Times* Public Editor Daniel Okrent, “Of course it is (a liberal newspaper)” (Okrent, 2004). And the *Washington Times*’ Web page lists Fox News, News Max, and the Christian Broadcasting Network as “Times Partners” and offers links to them on its home page. To find anecdotal evidence of “liberal bias” in the *New York Times* and “conservative bias” of the *Washington Times*, one need only go to the partisan press and see what the opposite camps are saying about each other. Luskin replies in *The National Review* to Okrent's column by saying, in essence, We all knew that (2004).

“That's right - Okrent's column superficially fesses up to the Times's liberal bias, but he trivializes the definition of 'liberal' to the point where it scarcely matters. The column is exclusively concerned with the paper's treatment of so-called 'social issues,' what Okrent calls 'the flammable stuff that ignites the right'” (Luskin, 2004). He goes on to critique Okrent for confounding the difference between “urban” bias and “liberal” bias. “After almost eight months on the job as 'public editor,' it simply defies credulity that Okrent cannot easily 'conclude' that the Times's coverage of 'politics-and-policy issues' is

liberally biased” (Luskin, 2004).

While the *New York Times* is being labeled as “liberal” by the right-wing press, the *Washington Times* actually comes under fire from the Southern Poverty Law Center. Beirich and Moser (2003) go so far as to accuse the *Washington Times* of harboring extremist conservative views on race, religion and immigration. The paper was founded in 1982 by the Rev. Sun Myong Moon, whom Beirich and Moser call a “right-wing cult leader.”

“While mainstream media critics scoffed at 'The Moonie Times' for enthusiastically championing the Rev. Moon's staunch anti-communism and his efforts to move the Republican Party farther right, the Times made a splash in conservative circles. President Ronald Reagan said it was his favorite paper” (Beirich and Moser, 2003).

However, we are not compelled to rely on the two newspapers' commercial and ideological rivals for an evaluation of their political leanings or even editorial bias. Groseclose and Milyo (2005) conducted a systematic quantitative measure of media bias and found a general liberal bias in the media - except in the *Washington Times* and Fox News' Special Report. “Consistent with claims made by conservative critics, CBS Evening News and the *New York Times* received scores far to the left of center” (Groseclose and Milyo, 2005). The new coverage in the *New York Times* (the researchers excluded editorials and letters to the editor in their study) was scored 73.7 and the *Washington Times* was scored 35.4 on a scale of 1-100. The low end of the scale denotes conservative bias, and the high end represents liberal bias.

The research question was examined through the lens of selective exposure theory; according to Baran and Davis (2009), people have a “tendency to expose themselves

to or attend to media messages they feel are in accord with their already-held attitudes and interests and the parallel tendency to avoid those that might create dissonance.”

If selective exposure theory is applicable here, then people who perceive that *New York Times* and the *Washington Times* are biased to the political left or right will take the paper that they perceive jives with their own political bent. But will the coverage actually pan out for the reader? Will the conservative reader actually find more favorable coverage of the Tea Party movement in the “conservative” *Washington Times*? Will the liberal reader find negative coverage in the *New York Times*?

Answering these questions will, it is hoped, shed more light on the phenomenon of the Tea Party movement and its role in American discourse. Perhaps it is even more important to ask whether members of the newspaper reading public are being given clear, truthful information about the Tea Party movement in their national daily newspapers. This study examines coverage from March 2009 through March 2010 in both papers. Items were counted and then categorized as “news,” “editorial,” “letters to the editor,” and “news briefs.” The location in the paper was noted, as was the tone (favorable, unfavorable, neutral). The categories and locations of the articles are represented in a chart in the Findings section; a more thorough discussion of the context and associations are also presented.

A LexisNexis search for the period between March 1, 2009 and March 30, 2010 with the key word “tea party” produced 49 articles from the *New York Times*. The same search revealed 91 articles in the *Washington Times*. All articles were read and coded according to the above specifications. A spreadsheet was created in which each article’s headline, date, word count, page number, type, and tone were entered.

Of the categories that were selected for examination, tone presented the most need for informed subjectivity on the part of the researcher. Each piece was labeled “favorable,” “neutral,” and “unfavorable.” Pieces labeled “favorable” either displayed outright endorsement of the Tea Party movement on the part of the writer (as was the case of many of the editorials and letters to the editor) or uncritical news stories. Favorable news stories, for the purpose of this review, downplayed or omitted the controversy associated with the Tea Party movement, used flattering language to describe it, or profiled leaders of the movement.

Six mass communication graduate students volunteered to read all of the articles and code them as “favorable,” “unfavorable” or “neutral.” They were briefed and given instruction sheets describing how to code for the three variables; the coders met weekly for two months and coded 15-20 articles per session in a classroom setting. After they coded each story, the coders discussed their choices and were reminded of the coding instructions as needed. For example, early in the process some coders let their ideological perspectives cloud their judgment. Coverage depicting a Tea Party candidate successfully wreaking havoc on a Democratic candidates' re-election bid is positive coverage for the Tea Party, regardless of how the coder feels about the outcome of the election. The coders were reminded to focus on the author's language and message.

The coders also addressed the unit of analysis issue. If fewer stories were to be coded, then it would make sense to narrow the unit of analysis down from the story level to the paragraph, sentence, or even word level. However, with so many stories to code in a limited amount of time, the coders were asked to determine whether the articles came off as strongly favorable or unfavorable on first reading; if one needed to count positive

and negative words, then the story was probably balanced and could be reasonably coded as “neutral.” The coders also faced some very subtle editorials and letters, especially in the *New York Times*. Some editorials masked biting criticisms behind sarcastic praise. The coders were reminded to thoroughly read all of the articles and watch out for such subtleties.

After the articles were coded, two coders whose scores showed .79 intercoder reliability (Wimmer and Dominick, 2005) were chosen, and their scores were averaged to determine the results.

Pieces labeled “neutral” in this study acknowledged the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the Tea Party movement or demonstrated arguments and characteristics cited by both supporters and critics of the movement. Some pieces labeled neutral showed neither criticism nor praise for the movement—for instance, a news brief stating the time and place of a coming rally or an article that made a simple statement of fact regarding the Tea Party movement supporting or opposing a candidate.

Unfavorable coverage, in this study, is represented by editorials and letters that are openly hostile to the movement or focus on a controversial aspect of the Tea Party movement. Also considered unfavorable coverage are unflattering news articles.

In all cases determining how a piece was labeled, the researcher ultimately asked, “If one were for/against the Tea Party, would one clip this article and share it with his or her friends and associates?”

The locations of the stories were coded as Front page, Section A and Section B. The researcher paid special attention to stories that appeared on the front page; each of the papers studied have different criteria determining what goes in their A and B sections,

so the study could just as effectively separated the stories into “Front page” and “Inside” stories.

Pieces were also labeled by the types news, letters to the editor, editorial pieces, briefs and corrections. Editorial pieces included opinion pieces by guest and staff columnists as well as the newspapers’ editorial boards.

Finally, the total number of pieces collected in the study were counted in each newspaper by month from March 2009 to March 2010. All categories are presented as charts in the Findings section of this paper.

#### Expected Outcome

Before the research began, it was expected that the *New York Times* would run mostly negative editorials and letters to the editor regarding the Tea Party movement. As a respected national newspaper, it is expected that the news coverage would be accurate and fair, but not uncritical. The protests and the movement itself has generated much controversy, and overall coverage about the Tea Party movement that excludes the controversy would not be complete. However, the *New York Times* was not expected to devote as much overall coverage to the Tea Party movement as the *Washington Times*, which was expected to actively promote the movement by reporting on it heavily and running many editorials.

It was also expected that the *New York Times* coverage would make extensive reference to the strong support that large conservative organizations have given the young movement. Critics have argued that the Tea Party movement is nothing more than a smokescreen for well-established conservative advocacy groups. The researcher expected the *New York Times* to acknowledge these criticisms, but not take them as given.

The editorial pages in the *Washington Times* were expected to be fertile ground for pro-Tea Party editorials, given the paper's conservative bent. However, it was unknown going into the study how the news coverage would treat the Tea Parties. The news articles could be slanted toward a political conservative point of view by downplaying the controversy and outside support and playing up the "grassroots" aspect of the protests. The researcher expected to find that, while the news coverage is truthful, the controversy would be played down and the "grassroots" aspect would be taken as given without much criticism demonstrated.

Research questions, and not hypotheses, were posited because this study included no variables to be manipulated. Based on the two newspapers' editorials leanings, one could guess how the coverage of the Tea Party would pan out. But guesses such as these are not hypotheses; they were not educated guesses as to the effects of an independent variable on some dependent variable based on theory or past observation.

No inferential statistics were used in this study because the information is not useful for making inferences to any particular population. This study simply observes and records a phenomenon – news coverage of the Tea Party – and analyzes the coverage using some of the theoretical tools available to mass communication researchers.

The following research questions are put forth regarding the coverage between March 2009 and March 2010:

RQ1: As a conservative newspaper, will the *Washington Times* will have a higher percentage of favorable coverage than the *New York Times*?

RQ2: As a liberal newspaper, will the *New York Times* will have a higher percentage of unfavorable coverage than the *Washington Times*?

RQ3: Will the *Washington Times* will have more total coverage of the Tea Party movement than the *New York Times*?

RQ4: Will the *Washington Times* devote a higher percentage of its coverage to news stories on the Tea Party movement than the *New York Times*?

RQ5: Will the *New York Times* have a higher percentage of unfavorable news coverage than the *Washington Times*?

RQ6: Will the *Washington Times* will have a higher percentage of favorable news coverage than the *New York Times*?



## CHAPTER V

### RESULTS

The starkest difference between the *New York Times* and *Washington Times* coverage of the Tea Party movement is in the sheer number of pieces that ran in the papers. The *Washington Times* ran 91 pieces total, as compared to the 49 that ran in the *New York Times* in the same time period.

*Washington Times* coverage in 2009 peaked at 12 stories in April, followed closely by 11 in September. The rest of the year saw between five and nine stories per month. The Times ran seven Tea Party-related items in January 2010; coverage spiked to 19 pieces in February and 17 in March. The spikes in coverage correspond with the first “Tax Day Tea Party” protests in April 2009, follow-on protests in Washington, D.C. and other cities in September of the same year, and a special election early in 2010 in which Republican Scott Brown took the Massachusetts Senate seat vacated when Edward M. Kennedy passed away. The most pronounced spike in coverage for both newspapers occurred in February 2010, coinciding with the first Tea Party “convention” in Nashville.

The *Washington Times* ran two news stories about the Tea Party movement in April 2009 and 10 editorial pieces.

In September 2009, during the Tea Party march on Washington, the *Washington Times* ran four news stories--three on the Tea Party Express march and one on protests in favor of President Obama. The Times ran six editorial pieces and one letter to the editor.

In February 2010, the *Washington Times* ran nine news stories, eight editorials and one letter to the editor. The news stories mostly concerned the Tea Party Convention and its implications for Republican political maneuvering.

March coverage in the *Washington Times* saw three news articles in the *Washington Times*; two of them concerned state political races and one gave the Tea Party's response to accusations of vandalism and racist epithets in its ranks.

*New York Times* coverage was sparse until January and February 2010, when it ran 12 and 17 pieces, respectively. Between March 2009 and December 2009, the *New York Times* ran one news story, two letters to the editor, and four op-ed pieces.

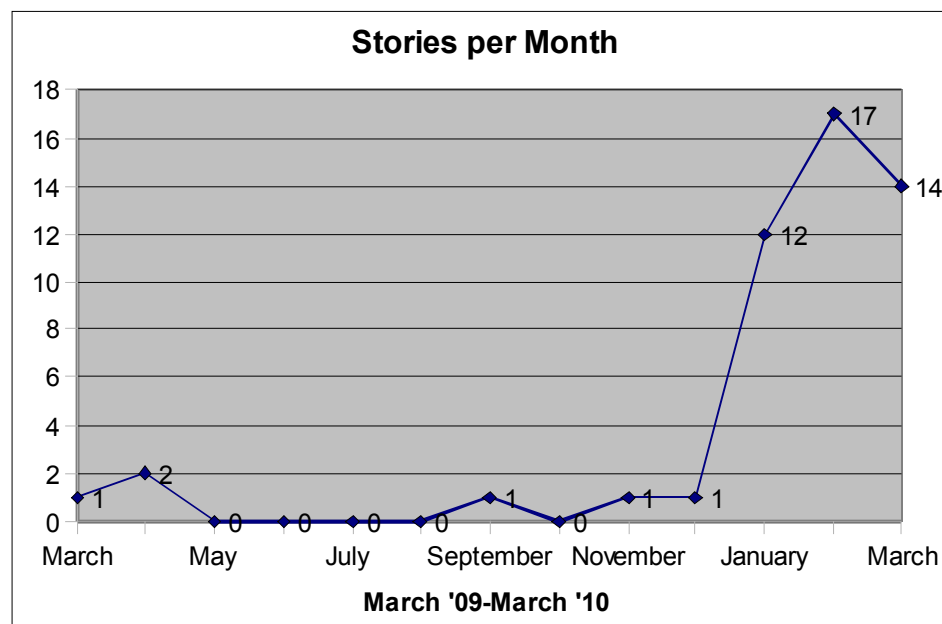


Figure 1. Number of stories per month run in the *New York Times* mentioning the Tea Party from March 2009-March 2010.

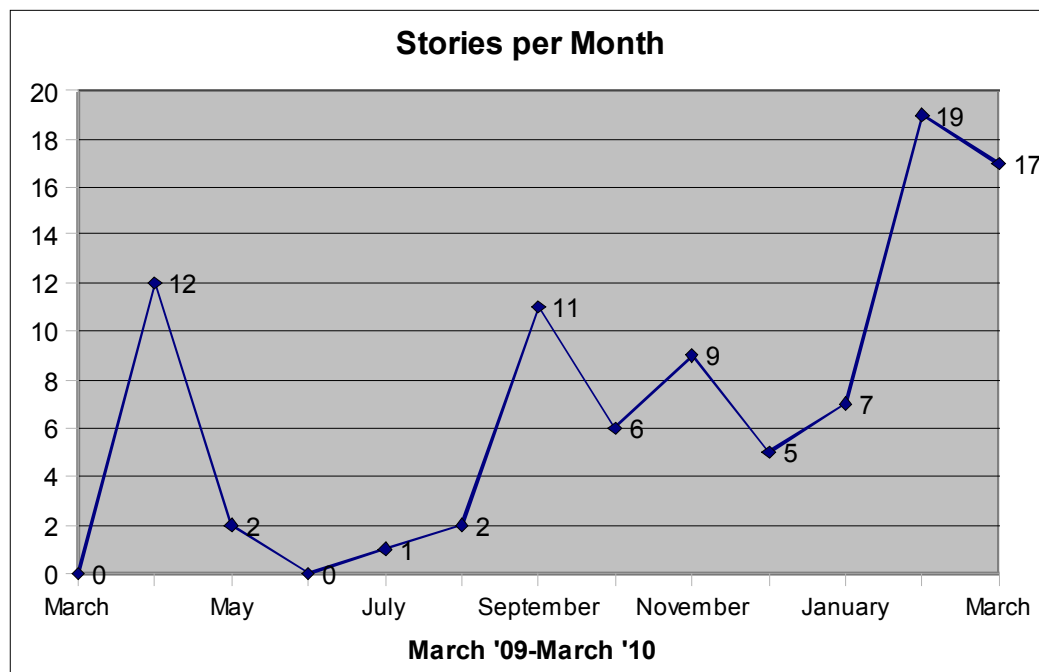


Figure 2. Number of stories per month run in the *Washington Times* mentioning the Tea Party from March 2009-March 2010.

Coverage picked up in January 2010 with seven news stories, one news brief, one letter to the editor and three editorials. The news stories mainly concerned the coming Tea Party Convention and how the G.O.P tried to channel the Tea Party protestors' energy for its political gains.

In February 2010, the *New York Times* ran nine news stories, one news brief, two letters to the editor, four editorials and one correction (a name misspelling in the byline). The *New York Times* covered the Tea Party Convention as a news story, including the keynote address by Sarah Palin.

In March 2010, six news stories ran in the *New York Times*, as well as four letters to the editor and four editorials. The pieces generally covered the alternative "Coffee Party," which attempts to appeal to more moderate- and left-leaning individuals, and the Tea Party Express rally in Searchlight, Nev., the hometown of Senate Majority Leader

Harry Reid.

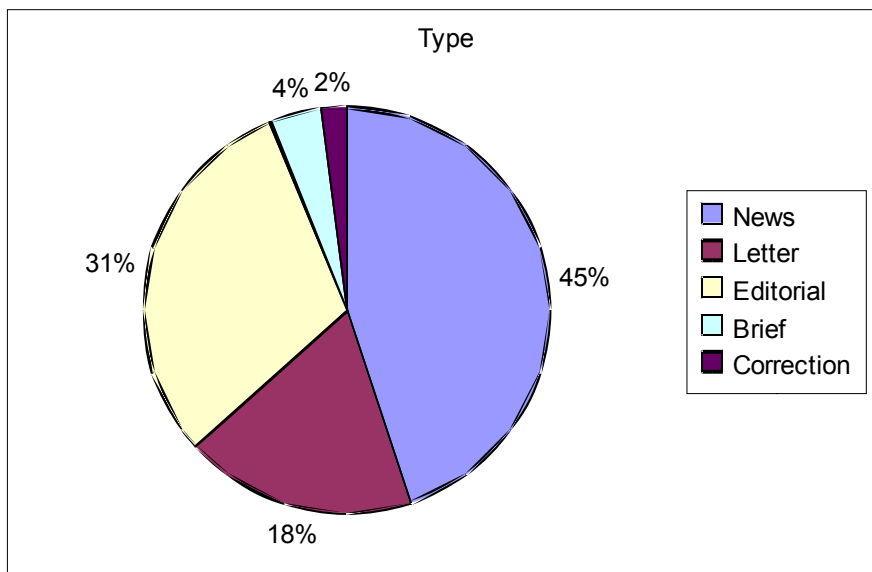


Figure 3. Percentage of story types in the *New York Times* from March 2009 through March 2010.

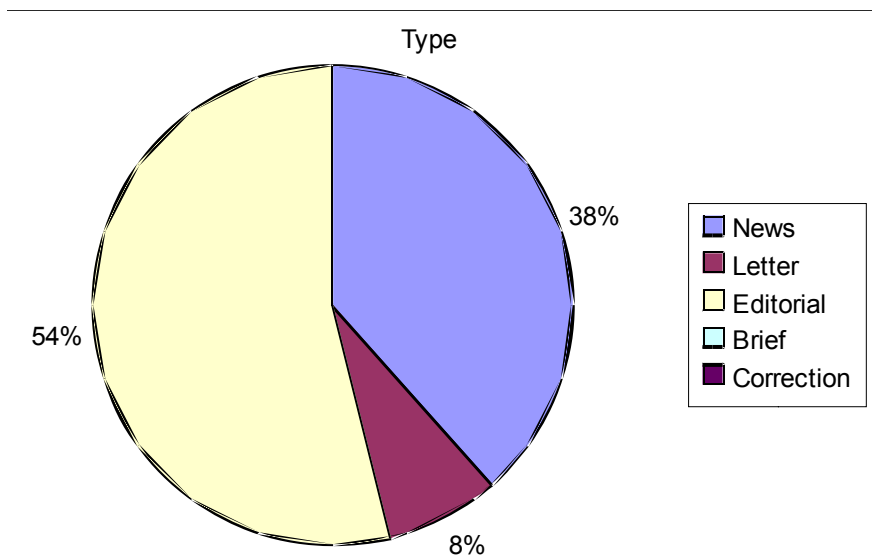


Figure 4. Percentage of story types in the *Washington Times* from March 2009 through March 2010.

In order to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference be-

tween the proportion of tea party stories published in the New York Times and the Washington Times, a test of proportion using the  $\pi$  statistic (as recommended by Glenberg, 1988) was computed. The resultant z-score was not significant at  $\alpha=.05$ . However, this does not tell the whole story. The significance of the results reported in this thesis is not in a statistical comparison between the two but rather in a comparison of the cultures of the two newspapers. The relatively rapid acceleration of reporting on tea party events by the Washington Times versus that of the New York Times, as we will see, suggests two different newsroom cultures at work.

The content analysis revealed some interesting results in the percentage of total pieces run by both newspapers. Thirty-eight percent of the *Washington Times*' coverage consisted of news, compared to the *New York Times*' 45 percent. Letters to the editor represented seven percent of the *Washington Times*' coverage, compared to nine percent in the *New York Times*. The *Washington Times* ran no briefs or corrections, and the *New York Times* ran very few (two briefs total and one correction).

However, the *Washington Times* was the clear leader in editorials. Fifty-four percent of the *Washington Times*' coverage consisted of editorials, as opposed to 31 percent in the *New York Times*.

The *Washington Times* and the *New York Times* had similar front-page placement. A total of 35 stories, or 17 percent of the *Washington Times*' pieces regarding the Tea Party movement, appeared on the front page. The *New York Times* ran 10 front page stories, or 20 percent of its coverage, on its front page.

Studying the tone of the pieces also revealed striking differences, as well as a notable similarity. Thirty-three percent of the *Washington Times*' stories regarding the Tea

Party movement were neutral in tone; 27 percent of the *New York Times*' coverage was neutral. The *Washington Times*, however, far surpassed the *New York Times* in favorable coverage. Sixty-seven percent of the *Washington Times*' coverage was favorable, compared to 30 percent of the *New York Times*' coverage. Only five percent of the *Washington Times*' coverage was coded as unfavorable, as opposed to the *New York Times*' 27 percent unfavorable coverage.

The news coverage in both papers was similar in tone. Fifty-nine percent of the *New York Times*' news stories were favorable, only nine percent was unfavorable, and 33 percent was neutral. In The *Washington Times*, 47 percent of the news coverage was favorable, six percent was unfavorable, and 47 percent of the news coverage was neutral.

The *Washington Times*' editorials were overwhelmingly favorable of the Tea Party Movement. An average of only three editorials were coded as unfavorable.

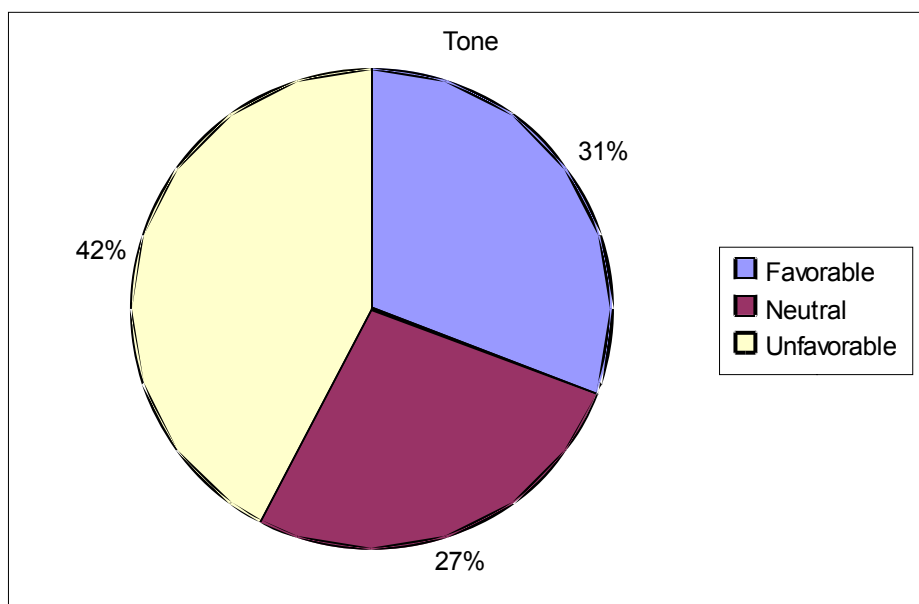


Figure 5. Overall tone of *New York Times* articles on the Tea Party from March 2009 to March 2010.

Seventy-one percent of the editorials were favorable, and 26 percent were coded neutral. Out of seven letters to the editor, the coders agreed on one unfavorable letter; one coder found one neutral letter while the other found none.

The *New York Times*' editorials, by contrast, were overwhelmingly unfavorable toward the Tea Party movement. Forty-eight percent of them were unfavorable, 41 percent neutral, and 13 percent were favorable. None of the letters to the editor that the *New York Times* ran were favorable.

The *New York Times* covered how the established political parties tried to harness (or exploit) the Tea Party's energy, as well as a news piece detailing how the G.O.P. took the senate seat held by the late Edward Kennedy, which many considered invulnerable to Republican capture. Political observers cite Tea Party activism as a driving factor behind Scott Brown's victory over Massachusetts Attorney General Martha Coakley, the Democratic candidate for the seat.

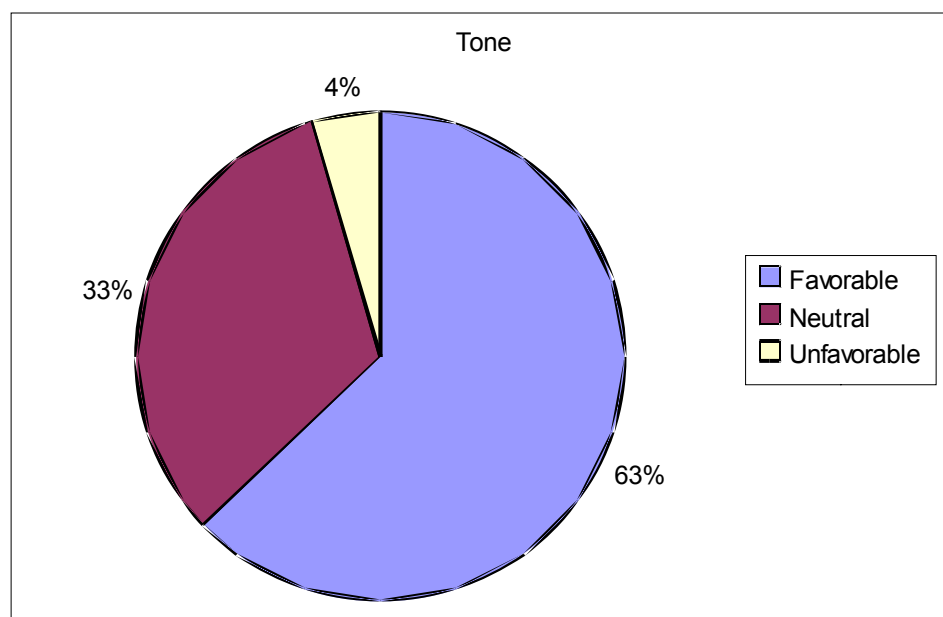


Figure 6. Overall tone of *Washington Times* articles on the Tea Party from March 2009 to March 2010.

Both newspapers framed the Tea Party movement in terms of Republican and Democratic conflict. Some stories discussed the Republican Party's attempts to co-opt the Tea Party movement, and the dangers to incumbents that course of action entailed. Others highlighted Democratic hopes that the Tea Party protestors would cause rifts within the GOP's ranks, and that movement's distaste for incumbents would adversely affect sitting Republicans' bids for re-election.

What is not mentioned as prominently in the coverage is the cohort of libertarians that make up the Tea Party movement—and are concerned that the movement has been co-opted by the Republican Party. In a press release dated April 14, 2010 Wes Benedict, Executive Director of the Libertarian Party, said, “Many Libertarians are enthusiastic about the Tea Parties, but many are not. Many Libertarians are concerned that participating causes us to get lumped in with conservatives and Republicans. In our online poll at LP.org, 28 percent so far say that 'The Tea Parties have become too Republican-flavored'”(Benedict, 2010).

A CBS/*New York Times* poll released the same day as the Libertarian statement categorized Tea Party activists as Republican, Democrat or Independent in political affiliation; the poll categorized their political beliefs as liberal, conservative or moderate. It is left to the reader to presume that the self-identified libertarians chose “Independent” as their political party. The Libertarian Party stands for ending drug prohibition and cutting back the role of the federal government, and thus defies the left/right dichotomy presented in the *New York Times* and *Washington Times* coverage of the Tea Party movement (CBS/*New York Times*, 2010).

Both newspapers frequently associated former Alaska Governor Sarah Palin, who



has expressed neoconservative tendencies, with a leadership role within the movement. Palin drew a speaking fee of hundreds of thousands of dollars at the first “Tea Party Convention,” and tickets to see her speech cost more than \$500. However, the “convention’s” credibility came under question because of its for-profit status (the conservative activist organization Freedomworks refused to endorse the event for this very reason) and the fact that the Tea Party is not an organized political party.

## CHAPTER VI

### INTEGRATION OF THEORY WITH RESULTS

This research demonstrates the utility of selective exposure theory when we examine newspaper coverage. If newspapers show editorial bias in their coverage of the news, then they aid people who would selectively expose themselves to stories that support their beliefs. Furthermore, the *New York Times* by ignoring the Tea Party early on deprived their readers of exposure to contrary points of view—which is troubling to researchers who, like Garrett (2009), believe that people do not filter out contrary points of view just because they actively seek belief-affirming stories.

When we look at the contrast between the numbers of stories that the two newspapers ran, we (perhaps with a shudder of uncertainty) realize that we are dealing with an instance of agenda setting – and we had not planned on that during the literature review.

As McCombs and Reynolds put it:

Many events and stories compete for journalists' attention. Because journalists have neither the capacity to gather all of the information nor the capacity to inform the audience about every single occurrence, they rely on a traditional set of professional norms to guide their daily sampling of the environment (2009).

At what point does an editor or publisher decide that a story is worthy of a journalist's attention? In the case of the Tea Party, both of the papers reviewed in this study picked up their coverage during the February 2010 Conservative Political Action Conference and the March 2010 primary elections. By this time, the Tea Party was upsetting

the equilibrium in American politics and thus demanded media coverage. But during the preceding year, was the *Washington Times* ginning up a story that was not really a story yet? Or was the *New York Times* quashing a story that deserved to be covered? Either way, agenda setting research suggests that “journalists do significantly influence their audience's picture of the world” (McCombs and Reynolds, 2009). At the same time, the selective exposure hypothesis maintains that people seek media sources that provide information supportive of their political opinions.

Perhaps for mass communication scholars, the most useful aspect of this study is simply that it shows how a complicated sociological and political phenomenon like the Tea Party defies explanation using a single theory of mass communication. If we are able to be comfortable with ambiguity and use whichever theories are useful, perhaps we can move this field of research forward in slightly larger increments.

The research is useful to people in the journalism field because it shows an instance of media bias by omission during the formative stages of a social and political phenomenon – or an instance of media bias by hyping a story that wasn't a story at the time. It is beyond the scope of this study to determine whether the Tea Party was worthy of national coverage during the time period that was studied. However, the fact remains that it is now (in 2011) influential enough to warrant a cover story in *Foreign Affairs*. Right or wrong, the *Washington Times* covered a breaking story from its genesis.

If Garrett (2009) and others are correct when they say that people do not filter out non-supportive information, then the *New York Times* did a disservice to the public by not covering the Tea Party earlier. Garrett (2009) argues that “a desire for exposure to opinion-reinforcing information is not synonymous with an aversion to other opinions.”

In fact, Garret says that avoiding opinion-challenging information is harmful; one must assume that being deprived of opinion-challenging information would be just as harmful to the public sphere.

## CHAPTER VII

### CONCLUSION

This study found that if selective exposure is an accurate theory through which to explain media consumers' choices, then the *Washington Times* and the *New York Times* held up their end of the bargain for readers seeking conservative and liberal fare, respectively. The *New York Times*' editorial pages came out vociferously in opposition to the Tea Party movement, while the *Washington Times* ran beat the drum loudly in favor of the movement.

It is interesting to note that the *New York Times* did not cover the Tea Party movement in its news sections until late 2009 and early 2010, while the movement appeared in the *Washington Times*' news coverage almost as soon as it gelled in April 2009. A significant proportion of that news coverage was favorable or neutral and did not address controversial issues associated with the movement. News articles in the *Washington Times* often used terms like "grassroots movement" and "excessive government spending," as if both were given.

The *New York Times*' news coverage showed both positive and negative aspects of the Tea Party movement, and indeed ran sympathetic stories about Tea Party organizers. However, *New York Times* news coverage was more likely to mention allegations of "Astroturfing," the practice of large organizations ginning up protests and hiding their involvement, giving the appearance of spontaneity.

Then answers to the research questions are as follows:

RQ1: As a conservative newspaper, will the *Washington Times* have a higher percentage of favorable coverage than the *New York Times*—it did.

RQ2: As a liberal newspaper, will the *New York Times* have a higher percentage of unfavorable coverage than the *Washington Times*—it did.

The overall favorable and unfavorable coverage in both newspapers was represented by editorial pieces and letters to the editor, and in each case the newspapers held to their historical editorial bents.

Less neutral coverage was found in the *Washington Times* than in the *New York Times* (33 percent in the *Washington Times*, and 43 percent in the *Washington Times*).

RQ3: Will the *Washington Times* will have more total coverage of the Tea Party movement than the *New York Times*—it did. The *Washington Times* ran significantly more pieces regarding the Tea Party Movement than the *New York Times* over the time period studied.

RQ4: The *Washington Times* will devote a higher percentage of its coverage to news stories on the Tea Party movement than the *New York Times*—it did not. While the *Washington Times* ran more news stories in total than the *New York Times*, the number of news stories the *Washington Times* ran was a smaller proportion of its overall coverage than the *New York Times*.

RQ5: The *New York Times* will have a higher percentage of unfavorable news coverage than the *Washington Times*—it did, but not by much. Very few of the news stories in either newspaper could be considered unfavorable, and the small percentages in both newspapers were within three percentage points.

RQ6: Will the *Washington Times* will have a higher percentage of favorable news coverage than the *New York Times*—it did not. Fifty-nine percent of The *New York Times*' news stories were coded favorable, as opposed to the *Washington Times*' 47 percent.

## CHAPTER VIII

### LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study presents certain limitations and opportunities for follow-up research. Most significantly, only the articles that appeared in the print editions of the papers were analyzed. Studying the associated photographs, if any, could yield interesting results (but pose a whole new set of research challenges). Future research could count how many pieces are accompanied by photographs, analyze the content of the photos, and code them as favorable, neutral and unfavorable. Do unflattering pictures accompany otherwise favorable articles? What kind of stories tend to have photos with them? One could seek a correlation between instances of photographs with pieces of a certain type or tone.

Another major limitation of this study is it did not consider online coverage. Newspapers change from edition to edition. Websites change by the hour (and by the minute if there is breaking news.) A story and multimedia package that dominates the home page of a news Web site one minute can be bumped back into a page deeper in the site by a breaking story the next. The researcher needs to observe and capture the Web pages live; archival tools typically do not yield information about when and where an item appeared online and how long it stayed there. Monitoring one website for a year would take a team of researchers; a single researcher would need to narrow his or her search to a small period of time, or else take samples in intervals over a period of time. Online news uses many storytelling tools not available to print editions, such as interac-



tive data charts, photo slideshows, video and audio. The audiences differ between print and online news, as do their news consumption habits—“The vast majority of online Americans say the Internet plays a role in their daily routines and that the rhythm of their everyday lives would be affected if they could no longer go online. Yet, despite its great popularity and allure, the Internet still plays second fiddle to old-fashioned habits” (Fallows, 2004). Fascinating information could be gathered by studying online content regarding the Tea Party movement in the *New York Times* and *Washington Times*—information that could support or conceivably contradict the findings presented here.

Another limitation to this study, and any study of its kind, is the subjective nature of categorizing stories as favorable, unfavorable and neutral. Favorable and unfavorable stories are relatively easy to agree upon; what constitutes a neutral story is up for debate. If both sides are depicted in a story, does one side have more leverage if it is placed higher or lower in the story? Should the researcher categorize individual paragraphs in the story? Individual words? This is the challenge the researcher must overcome when trying to replicate or build upon this research.

However, this study also points out new opportunities for research of both the Tea Party phenomenon itself and the news media that cover it. Previously mentioned research has quantitatively measured indirect evidence of media bias by counting the frequency with which liberal and conservative think tanks are cited in stories (Groseclose and Milyo, 2005). This study is a logical next step; it measures media outlets' actual coverage of a politically charged phenomenon. Other studies could focus on coverage of abortion, illegal immigration, war – as many politically divisive issues as can be found – and the accumulated evidence could give us a sharper image of the bias in our media landscape.

This study left off after the first chapters of the Tea Party phenomenon concluded. Another study could pick up where this one left off and be expanded into a longitudinal study of the Tea Party coverage in the *New York Times* and *Washington Times*.

## APPENDIX

### CODING INSTRUCTIONS

For the purposes of this study, favorable coverage constitutes items that clearly promote the Tea Party movement (usually editorial pieces and letters to the editor); refer to the movement using favorable terms without mentioning problems or criticisms; describe the movement's ability to influence elections; or highlight a Tea Party character or organizer in a feature story.

Neutral coverage constitutes items that show both the favorable and the unfavorable aspects of the Tea Party phenomenon. Pieces that mention the Tea Party in passing or as an incidental part of another story, or articles that make simple statements of fact with no value judgments associated, are also considered neutral.

Unfavorable coverage consists of items that clearly attack or denigrate the movement or its followers (again, letters to the editor and op-ed pieces are the easiest examples to spot.) Unfavorable coverage also includes news pieces that cast the Tea Party movement in an unfavorable light, use pejorative language to refer to the movement, or show an unflattering aspect of the movement without showing any positive aspects.

Editorials and letters to the editor are usually easy to figure out. The author is usually making his or her opinion quite clear from the outset.

News coverage requires a more nuanced approach on the part of the coder. Look for flattering and unflattering language and facts, and determine if there is a clear preponderance

of either. If there is no clear preponderance, code it as neutral. If most of the facts and words used are favorable or unfavorable, code the story as such.

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## VITA

George “Trey” Hatt was born in Johnson City, Texas on May 15, 1980, the son of George and Donna Hatt. After graduating from Burnet High School, he served for three years in the United States Army and five years in the Texas Army National Guard. In the course of his military service, Trey deployed to Bosnia in 1999 and Iraq in 2005. He attended Angelo State University for three years and transferred to Texas State University-San Marcos where he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English in 2006. He hired on as the community editor of the Llano County Journal, where he won awards for best news writing from the Texas Press Association in 2007 and Journalist of the Year award in 2009 from the West Texas Press Association.

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