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Is Anyone Getting it Right? A Content
Analysis Comparing Political Blog and
Online Newspaper Coverage of the 2008
Presidential Debates

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IS ANYONE GETTING IT RIGHT? A CONTENT ANALYSIS COMPARING
POLITICAL BLOG AND ONLINE
NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF THE 2008
PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES
THESIS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

As new media become more prevalent and a greater percentage of voters gather their information from these new platforms, voters today are once again faced with the same issues as voters in the 1960s with the advent of televised politics. "Television not only altered the ways in which public discourse was conducted, but it began to call increasing attention to the problem of what it might mean to be a 'public,' as well as to the problem of how public discourse was received and interpreted by the mass and multiple audiences that attended to it" (Lucaites, et al. 1999, pp 8). Today, a new dynamic, or obstacle has been added to the struggle of message control for the speaker: citizen publishing (blogs).

Bloggers being armchair pundits receive the speakers' original message via another medium and, by retelling or rebroadcasting the message to their audiences, have become a second gatekeeper. Where once rhetorical skill alone may have defined a speaker, in today's arena of instant publishing and reporting, a new set of rules must be applied.

In addition to the candidates' message being reported and then re-reported via blogs, research has found that the new medium of blogs can be very subjective and inaccurate in reporting (Allan, 2002; Wall, 2004; Gerlis 2008)

Blogs have come under fire for their subjectivity and currently there is great debate over their validity as a reliable medium for news. The blog voice differs

from the newspaper voice in that it filters news via an editorial or opinionated filter and often adds commentary without attributing sources for the bloggers' views.

Bloggers often produce content in "live blogging" form where they watch or participate in an event and create content and commentary "live" as the event unfolds without any proofing or editing before the post is published. This format for reporting news is extremely timely and encourages a great amount of interactivity from readers in the comments and forums, but without any editorial process, is often littered with inaccuracies and typos that may be cleared up after the fact or not. Where a traditional newspaper reporter would gather facts and quotes and would optimally piece together a story with fact checkers, copy editors, and publishers, this process takes more time and they are often scooped by bloggers. Bloggers also create reputations over time with their readers and are often looked to for news just based on their personality and perspective. With more voters turning to blogs for political news and candidate information (Pew Internet and American Life, 2005), the accuracy in which blogs report the candidates' own acclaims, attacks, and defenses is critical to voter preparedness.

The purpose of this investigative research is to find how accurately independent political bloggers covered and reported candidates' statements in the 2008 Presidential Debates by analyzing and comparing the bloggers' content with the transcripts of the debates and the content of selected newspaper online editions.

The following research was conducted from November 2008 to October of 2009 following the 2008 presidential election. The political blogs, online newspaper stories, and the debate transcripts were analyzed using the functional theory of political campaign discourse (Benoit, 2004). Developed by Benoit in 1998, this theory categorizes political discourse into five categories: Acclaims, Attacks, Defenses, Issue (policy), and Character.

The functional theory of political campaign discourse is based on the notion that candidates employ rhetorical phrases of Acclaim, Attack, and Defense in a tone either based on Issues or Character. The theory implies that every statement made by a candidate is calculated to persuade a voter to either vote for them or to not vote for the opposition. In a debate forum, candidates will craft and weave their overall message using these statements. For example, they may employ more Acclaims and Attacks, emphasis of Issues to separate themselves from their opponent, or more Defenses of Character to show their opposition as a bully. Acclaims of Character could be used to divert the voters' attention from something negative their opponent is attempting to pin to on the candidate. The success of the theory is based on the voter receiving the candidate's message as a whole. When it is chopped up into newsworthy sound bites or headlines, the candidate's overall intentions can be distorted and voters can take away incorrect impressions. For this reason, it is very important that media report a candidate's message consistently. If only Attacks of Character are reported, voters can assume a candidate's message is mostly hostile and

negative. If the media only report Defenses of Issue, a voter can assume the candidate's policies are confusing or full of holes.

Based on the review of available literature and research, it has been found that newspaper coverage of presidential and primary debates has not accurately reported the candidates' Acclaims, Attacks, and Defenses or statements of Issue or Character. This research hypothesizes that there will be similar findings of inaccurately reported statements among the political blogs. Since the sample blogs were chosen for popularity among the political blogosphere, number of comments (interaction), and rank in Google search results, it may be safe to assume that these bloggers are writing for an audience and have applied similar values as the newspapers for the newsworthiness of conflict (Graber, 1989, pp 86) and statements of character (Graber, 1978).

Upon the review of the literature, there was no published research found addressing how political blogs covered political debates. The research questions asked have been applied to newspapers and yielded the results the hypotheses for this research are based on.

The findings from testing the hypotheses and investigating the research questions can potentially contribute to the field of mass media and journalism, specifically in the areas of political communication and new media. The data derived from this content analysis will be valuable in critiquing the journalistic merit and importance of political blogging and bloggers.

The research questions will investigate the differences in coverage between political blogs and online newspapers. Based on the research showing

the increasing number of voters going to blogs for political information, the findings will also be helpful to candidates for how they present their message and the emphasis they put on statements of character and policy or the energy they spend on acclaims, attacks, or defenses.

The proposed questions will also look at any consistently reported inaccuracies among the blogs to see if there is any trend setting amongst the political blogosphere in reporting “sound bites” of the debate. The question will also look at consistently reported inaccuracies amongst the online newspaper stories and compare those to the blogs. This question will explore the possibility that political bloggers and political reporters have similar motives in how they report and present information for their readers.

Although the data are not derived from random samples, the research will attempt to find if political blogs are more accurate than online newspaper stories as far as reporting candidates’ statements from Presidential debates. From the research it is known that a large number of voters are turning to the Internet for political information (Rainie & Smith, 2008) and it will be beneficial for voters and candidates to know if one source is more accurate than another as far as reporting political debates goes. Previous research has shown that newspapers do not accurately report the debates, and the results of RQ3 may provide insight, information, or influence on the argument about the journalistic merits of blogs and bloggers.

Background

According to Pew's (2008) latest research, "33% of internet users (the equivalent of 24% of all adults) say they read blogs, with 11% of Internet users doing so on a typical day." PEW has also found in recent research concerning the 2008 Presidential election that:

In total, 46% of all adults are using the Internet, email, or phone text messaging for political purposes in this election. That is the percentage of those who are doing at least one of the three major activities we probed—getting news and information about the campaign, using email to discuss campaign-related matters, or using phone texting for the same purpose.

The results from the 2008 Pew surveys and the findings from previous research on the importance of how media coverage of the Presidential debates affects voters' opinions and knowledge of the issues warrants more research in the field.

Amidst the backdrop of major news media bankruptcies and the continuing debate over the validity of bloggers as journalists, the findings of this research could prove valuable in the fields of mass media and political communication. If blogs prove to fall into the same habits of coverage as newspapers do, it could say something to the similarities between the two and what bloggers value as newsworthy. Should bloggers report the debates more accurately, it would provide an interesting influence on opinions of bloggers as journalists.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Blogging as a Medium

Simply stated, blogs have been defined in different ways. Wilson Lowery (2006) describes a blog as “a frequently updated personal Web page with links to related sites.” In addition to this simple description, blogs also possess an interactive element as Martin Kuhn (2007) describes, “Blogs feature artifacts such as comments, trackback, blogrolls, and archives” (p. 19). Reese, Rutigliano, Hyun, and Jeong (2007) surmise that blogs are comments posted online by groups, individuals, and news organizations outside the “normal venues” provided by traditional media. Matt Carlson (2007) defined blogs as “websites that feature hyperlinked, journal-type entries with the most recent posts at the top and are often authored by non-journalists” (pg. 264). Deborah Chung affirms this and states that blogs are “essentially personal journals on the Web” and a blog “usually displays information in reverse chronological order and may offer numerous hyperlinks to full-length articles from other sites”. For this research, blogs are defined as publishing platforms that allow for reader interaction via comments or forums not owned or controlled by traditional media outlets.

According to Pew, 27% of Internet users regularly read blogs while 12%

have left comments or other material on blogs. Almost 10% of those surveyed regularly read political blogs during campaigns. Blogs have been growing in popularity over the past few years. Pew Internet and American Life compiled statistical data to track the number of Internet users who create blogs. In 2002, 3% of Internet users had created a blog. By November 2004, more than 7% of Internet users were writing blogs. This translates to eight million people keeping a public, online journal. (Pew Internet and American Life).

According to the 2004 Pew report, bloggers are most likely to be male, under the age of 30, broadband users, "Internet veterans" meaning they have been online more than six years, well-educated, and earning over \$50,000 annually. These same demographics could apply to blog readers; however, readership is growing among women and minorities, among other groups (Pew). In a 2006 study by Pew, bloggers were more likely to be white, followed by African-American, then English-speaking Hispanic. More than 50% of bloggers have not published their writings or material elsewhere while 44% state that they have been published in other media forms.

On the subject of objectivity, research has found that bloggers will often report news in the first person and are vulnerable to manipulation (Wall, 2004). Allan (2002) also confirms that bloggers often report the news in a more personal and opinionated manner than traditional journalists. Gerlis (2008) affirms this, stating that "for most blogging is about expressing a certain range of opinions or perspectives" (p. 127). Wall (2004) claims that "lack of professionalization may lead to lies, half truths and vitriolic voices."

The Importance of the Media's Presentation of the Debates

Research has found that traditional media hold a powerful influence on how voters interpret and perceive the debates (Hellweg, Pfau, & Brydon, 1992; Kendall, 1997).

Benoit (2004) suggested three reasons why it is important for news reports of debates to accurately report the content:

1. The media act as a gatekeeper. "Some voters learn from debates; others learn from reports of debates" (Benoit, Et Al, 2004, pp 247).
2. Ansolabehere & Iyengar (1995) found that negative coverage is correlated to low voter turn out.
3. Some voters say their decision is based on candidates' stance on issues, others say it is based on character. (Benoit, 2003) If the report focuses on only one of these aspects, then the voter who relies on the other is left out.

In a survey conducted with television and newspaper editors, Graber (1989) found that the three top priorities for selecting news were conflict, proximity, and timeliness. He noted, "Conspicuously absent from their choice criteria was the story's overall significance" (Graber, 1989, pp 86).

Presidential Debates and Voters

Scholars began studying the effects of presidential debates in 1976 (Benoit and Hansen, 2004). Much has been learned about how voters watch the debates,

what they learn from them, and what they watch for. Early research on presidential debates was conducted by Graber and Kim (1978) and found that little was learned from watching the debate. Graber confirmed this with another study in 1978.

There were other contrary findings that suggest the 1976 debates between Carter and Ford increased issue knowledge, drew high awareness from voters when key issues were discussed, and influenced perceived knowledge of both candidates' policies, which suggested that voters do learn from debates (Becker, Sobowale, Cobbey & Eyal, 1978; Bishop, Oldendick, & Tuchfarber, 1978; Abramowitz, 1978; Mulder, 1978; Chaffee, 1978).

The debates of the 1988 presidential race were also studied rather extensively. Drew and Weaver's (1991) research found that the debates between Bush and Dukakis were positive in leading to higher voter knowledge on campaign issues and also that "the debates proved more influential on knowledge than did exposure to other types of news that were measured in the study" (Drew & Weaver, 1991, pp 27). Lemert (1993) and Lanoue (1991) both confirmed that the 1988 debates increased voter knowledge of issues in their research.

Scholars, in general, agree that voters who watch the debates are more informed about the issues. Jamieson and Birdsell (1988) stated "the ability of viewers to comment sensibly on the candidates and their stands on issues increases with debates" (pp 127). Kraus (1988) studied the televised debates of 1960, 1976, and 1980 and found that the candidates discuss a wide variety of

issues and that voters do learn about the issues and what the candidates' stances are on them.

Aside from an increase in knowledge, research has found that the debates play an influential role in the decision making of undecided voters. Chaffee and Dennis (1979), watching the 1976 Ford and Carter debate, found that undecided potential voters were more confident in whom they would vote for after viewing the debates. In contrast, Benoit and Hansen (2004) found in a study of the 1984, 1996, and 2000 presidential debates that the debates did little to persuade undecided voters for either candidate, but in two of three debates, did help voters become more confident in their vote choice.

Although there are inconsistencies in the research of the influence the debates have over voters, the majority of the findings support that the debates do hold influence on providing voters with information about candidates and their policies. To explain the inconsistencies in the findings, Jamieson and Adasiewicz (2000) suggest that the quality and consistency of the information provided at the debates has varied from race to race.

Along with increased voter knowledge of issues, research has found that the debates are important in forming the image and character of the candidates to the voting public (Pfau & Eveland, 1994; Holbrook, 1996). Graber (1989) found that voters also valued character issues of trustworthiness, character, strength, and values. Benoit (2003) reported a public opinion poll in which certain groups of voters state policy is the most valued criteria and others say that character is more valued.

Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse

Benoit (1998) created the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse in order to comparatively analyze how the media report candidates' messages. The theory "argues that campaign messages are functional, designed to persuade voters that one candidate is preferable to opponents" (Benoit, 2008).

He first applied this theory in his research *Campaign '96: A functional analysis of acclaiming, attacking, and defending* with Blaney and Pier in 1998. In his theory, Benoit asserts that political messages serve three basic functions:

- (1) to enhance their own credentials as a desirable office-holder (Acclaiming), (2) to downgrade their opponent's credentials as an undesirable office-holder (Attacking), and, if their opponents attack them, (3) to respond to those attacks (Defending). (Functions of Political Campaign Discourse section, para. 1)

He also explains that these functions may be applied to both issue-oriented messages and character-oriented messages.

Benoit and Currie (2001) found in a study of 1996 and 2000 general debates coverage that news coverage discussed attacks and defenses more frequently, and acclaims less often, than they occurred in the debates. In both elections attacks were over represented as well as defenses and acclaims were under represented. The coverage in both years reported attacks as approximately half of the story while the attacks were between a third and a fourth of the debate with defenses taking 11% of the coverage but only 7% and 2% in the debates each year and with only 35% and 48% of coverage on

acclaims when they took up 59% and 74% of the debates. Reber and Benoit (2001) applied the same analysis to a Republican and a Democratic primary debate and found the same results with the attacks and defenses being over represented and the acclaims under represented.

In a 1996 study of the presidential general debates Benoit and Currie (2001) found that issues were 72% of the debate but only 55% was reported and character was 28% of the debates and 45% was reported. No significant gap was found in their study of the 2000 presidential general debates between the debate content and what was reported. This was also confirmed in the Reber and Benoit (2001) study of the 2000 primary debates.

In a 2004 content analysis of newspaper coverage of primary debates, Benoit concluded that “In short, newspaper coverage of primary debates accentuates the negative” and “Newspaper coverage of presidential primary debates is significantly more negative than the debates themselves, and this bias could lead voters to believe that the campaign generally, and debates specifically, are more negative than they actually are” and “it also means that voters who rely on these stories will have less opportunity to learn about the benefits these candidates claim” (Benoit, et al., 2004, pp 255).

Benoit et al., (2004) also found that newspaper coverage reported more on character than on policy where the debates focused more on issues than character. Although, these results are not consistently confirmed in other research (Benoit & Currie, 2001; Reber & Benoit, 2001).

He asserts that the newspapers are doing a disservice to voters by

reporting more on character than on policy. “Voters who only read newspaper accounts of these campaign events are relying on reporters to filter their knowledge of the candidates” (Benoit, et al., 2004, p 256). And finally “Evidence suggests that the news media do not provide voters with an accurate depiction of primary debates” (Benoit, et al., 2004, pp 257).

CHAPTER III

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this study are to find out how accurate bloggers, both forthright in partisanship and those professed to be objective, are reporting the 2008 Presidential debates.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

The research will test the following hypotheses derived from the review of the literature:

H1 Significantly more Attack and Defense utterances coded in the online newspaper and blog articles with fewer Acclaims than were coded in the transcripts of the debates.

H2 Significantly more Character utterances will be found in the blog articles and online newspaper articles than in the transcripts.

Additionally, the researcher will attempt to answer the following questions derived from the review of the literature:

RQ1 Are bloggers consistently reporting candidates' statements in Presidential debates?

RQ2 Are there any trends amongst the bloggers who are not consistently reporting the candidates' statements?

RQ3 Are bloggers reporting candidates' statements more or less consistently than online newspapers' stories?

CHAPTER IV

METHODOLOGY

The study analyzed how each of the three 2008 Presidential debates was covered by independent blogs and compared those results with those of the newspaper online stories by applying the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse to the debate transcripts, the blogs, and online newspaper stories. Six blog commentaries of each debate were chosen for answering the research questions and testing the hypotheses along with six online newspaper stories for comparison.

The Blog Samples

The sample blogs were not chosen randomly as there are not many published that fit the research criteria. The political blogs were chosen by popularity (large number of comments per post), regularity (consistently updated content), rankings within Google search and links from other political blogs within the blogosphere. No specific indicators were applied to determine each blog's leaning, but the researcher believes there was an even amount of liberal and conservative blogs chosen. Although the blog sample was not chosen randomly, due to the diversity in the blogs and authors, the researcher believes they are justified as if it were a normal distribution. The criteria applied to the blogs mandated that the blog posts were the main post covering the debate, were

published the day of or within three days of the debate, and focused more than 50% of the post on the debate. Among the six samples chosen, there were blog articles with multiple authors on one post, single author posts, and posts including comments from readers. Each blog sample was “live blogged”, produced as the debate was broadcast, with some only making generic opinionated commentary on the debate ad a whole and others commenting on nearly every point made by the candidates. The sample blogs included the Huffington Post, the Next Right, the Daily Kos, Talking Points Memo, the Daily Dish, and Michelle Malkin.

The Huffington Post: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com>

According to Time magazine (2009) the Huffington Post was founded in 2005 by Arianna Huffington, Kenneth Lerer and Jonah Peretti as a left-leaning commentary to counter other conservative blogs. Since its initial inception, the Huffington Post has added several editors and a large staff and broadened its categories to cover both political content and pop culture news and has hosted blog posts by several high level politicians, experts, and celebrities. According to the popular blog network site, Technorati (2009), the Huffington Post is the most linked-to blog on the Internet.

The Next Right: <http://www.thenextright.com>

The Next Right is a conservative political blog aimed at revolutionizing the

Republican party. The site encourages grass roots community involvement and was founded by Soren Dayton, Jon Henke, and Patrick Ruffini who each already had a respectable political and blogging career. The conservative-leaning site was created in 2008 and is focused solely on political news and mainly produces commentary on current political events.

The Daily Kos: <http://www.thedailykos.com>

The Daily Kos was founded by Markos Moulitsas Zúniga in 2002. The site boasts “2.5 million unique visitors per month and 215,000 registered users” (2009) in addition to high profile political columnists and guest authors. With a staff of eight, the Daily Kos encourages a high level of user interactivity with community activism and user produced content.

Talking Points Memo: <http://www.talkingpointsmemo.com>

Talking Points Memo was founded by Josh Marshall during the 2000 Presidential election vote recount in Florida.

Talking Points Memo is a liberal-leaning blog that has a history of breaking national political news and scandals from its own reporting and investigation and was receiving 400,000 visitors a day in 2007 (Genn, 2009).

The Daily Dish: http://andrewsullivan.theatlantic.com/the_daily_dish

The Daily Dish is produced by Andrew Sullivan and hosted on Atlantic magazine’s website. Of the blogs, it is the least independent. Sullivan self-

proclaims to be one of the earliest mainstream journalists to blog (blogging since 2000), and in 2007 moved his blog to Atlantic Online.

Sullivan is the sole author of the conservative-leaning Daily Dish and blogs on a variety of subjects, but focuses his commentary-style posts on social and political issues.

Michelle Malkin: <http://www.michellemalkin.com>

Malkin publishes on her own blog, but is a political conservative commentator and guest columnist for many major media outlets. She is best known as a commentator for Fox News and guest host on the O'Reilly Factor. She began focusing her career on her blog and book contracts in 2007. Of the blogs, Malkin's may be the most extreme in expressing her own opinions, and she has received a fair amount of criticism for her intensely conservative viewpoints.

The Online Newspaper Samples

The six online newspaper stories were taken from the top six national newspapers by circulation at the time of the research rated by the Audit Bureau of Circulations. The criteria for the chosen articles mandated that the articles were the main articles published the night of or within three days after the debate and were focused more than 50% on the debate. The sample online newspapers were the New York Times, USA Today, the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post, the LA Times, and the New York Daily News.

The researcher used the Functional Theory of Political Campaign

Discourse in a similar methodology as Benoit in his 2004 research of newspaper coverage of primary debates to accumulate data from the debate transcripts, the sample blogs, and online newspaper stories. Using the broadcast transcripts for each debate, every theme (utterance/comment/remark) was coded as an Acclaim, Attack, or Defense and was also categorized as either being a statement of Issue or Character.

The debate, blogs, and online newspaper samples were coded using the following rhetorical indicators:

- Acclaims- positive statements showing benefits or favorable qualities
- Attacks- negative statements identifying an opponent's costs
- Defenses- statements to refute attacks and dispel alleged costs (Benoit, 2004)

The debate, blogs, and online newspaper samples were coded using the following tone indicators:

- Issue- statements focusing policy or stances on issues
- Character-statements focusing on personal and public character, personality, or public and private history (Benoit, 2004)

In accordance with Benoit's research a theme was defined as an argument, and can be as brief as a phrase or several sentences in length.

The researcher was the primary coder with a second coder used to determine inter-coder reliability. The researcher applied statistical measurements to derive any statistically significant differences between the data.

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS

The data produced from the debates and reported by the blogs and online newspapers were analyzed using statistical software to run a cross tabulation with a Chi- Square. A second coder coded a random 10% sample of the whole sample and an inter-coder reliability rating of 76% was achieved. The second coder coded entire article samples and a percentage of agreement was taken per each article page and accumulated to acquire the percentage of agreement.

The variance between the coders can be attributed to the subjective nature of the content and due to the lack of contextual awareness by the second coder. Each statement was judged on two scales, and the statements reported by the blogs and online newspapers could often be judged differently based on the coder's familiarity with the debate content. The 10% coded by the second coder was chosen at random and out of the 39 possible samples, only three were debate transcripts, content produced directly from the candidates, and the second coder did not code any of this material. Without familiarity with the conversations, arguments, and dialogue between the candidates, statements plucked by bloggers and journalists for their newsworthiness could be judged multiple ways depending on the background and context available to the judger.

The initial inter-coder reliability rating was only 73%. The researcher acquired another coder and invested a greater and more in-depth amount of training and the higher percentage was acquired. It can be assumed that the discrepancy can also be attributed to lack of training.

Data From the Debate Transcripts

Upon coding the three 2008 Presidential debate transcripts, the candidates produced 621 rhetorical and tone themes combined with 281 from Obama and 340 from McCain.

Table 1- Data from Debate Transcripts

All Debates Both Candidates	Total	Percent
Themes	621	100%
Acclaims	347	56%
Attacks	201	32%
Defenses	73	12%
Issue	439	71%
Character	182	29%

Table 2- Candidate Data from Debate Transcripts

Obama	Total	Percent	McCain	Total	Percent
Themes	281	100%	Themes	340	100%
Acclaims	152	54%	Acclaims	195	57%
Attacks	76	27%	Attacks	125	37%
Defenses	53	19%	Defenses	20	6%
Issue	230	82%	Issue	209	61%
Character	51	18%	Character	131	39%

Data From the Blogs

The data from the six blog samples, produced 643 rhetorical and tone themes combined from the candidates, with 270 made by Obama and 373 by McCain.

Table 3- Data from Blog Samples

Blog Data from All Debates Both Candidates	Total	Percent
Themes	643	100%
Acclaims	367	57%
Attacks	231	36%
Defenses	45	7%
Issue	492	77%
Character	151	23%

According to the data from the blogs, there were 340 combined rhetorical and tone utterances reported for McCain compared to 281 for Obama.

Table 4- Candidate Data from Blog Samples

Obama Blog Data	Total	Percent	McCain Blog Data	Total	Percent
Themes	270	100%	Themes	373	100%
Acclaims	159	59%	Acclaims	208	56%
Attacks	82	30%	Attacks	149	40%
Defenses	29	11%	Defenses	16	4%
Issue	233	86%	Issue	259	69%
Character	27	14%	Character	114	31%

Data From the Online Newspapers

The data from the six online newspaper samples produced 735 rhetorical and tone themes combined from the candidates, with 275 made by Obama and 325 by McCain.

Table 5- Data from Online Newspaper Samples

Online Newspaper Data from All Debates Both Candidates	Total	Percent
Themes	735	100%
Acclaims	409	56%
Attacks	283	39%
Defenses	43	6%
Issue	578	79%
Character	157	21%

According to the data from the online newspapers, there were 275 combined rhetorical and tone utterances reported for Obama compared to 325 for McCain.

Table 6- Candidate Data from Online Newspaper Samples

Obama Online Newspaper Data	Total	Percent	McCain Online Newspaper Data	Total	Percent
Themes	275	100%	Themes	325	100%
Acclaims	134	49%	Acclaims	140	43%
Attacks	106	39%	Attacks	177	54%
Defenses	35	13%	Defenses	8	2%
Issue	231	84%	Issue	212	65%
Character	44	16%	Character	213	35%

See Appendix A for data by individual debate.

Differences Between the Debate, Blog, and Online Newspaper Rhetorical Statements

By comparing the data from the debates, the blogs, and the online newspapers we see that the blogs were very close to the debates on percentage of Acclaims being only one point off. The online newspapers reported ten points lower than the debates and 11 points lower than the blogs.

In the area of Attacks, both the blogs and the online newspaper stories reported a higher percentage than the debates. The blogs reported four points more Attacks than the debates while the newspapers reported 15 points more Attacks.

For Defenses, the debates produced five points more statements than both the blog and online newspaper coverage.

Table 7- Differences Between Debates, Blogs, and Online Newspapers for Acclaim, Attack, and Defense

Overall Results	Debates Total	Debates Percent	Blogs Total	Blogs Percent	Newspapers Total	Newspapers Percent
Total	621	100%	643	100%	600	100%
Acclaims	347	56%	367	57% *	274	46% *
Attacks	201	32%	231	36% *	283	47% *
Defenses	73	12%	45	7% *	43	7% *

The differences in the comparison of the combined debate coverage to the blog coverage for Acclaim, Attack, and Defense statements were significant ($X^2[df = 2] = 8.907, p < .012$).

Table 8- Differences Between Debates and Blogs for Acclaim, Attack, and Defense

Overall Results	Debates Total	Debates Percent	Blogs Total	Blogs Percent	Statistical Significant Differences
Total	621	100%	643	100%	$X^2[df = 2] = 8.907, p < .012$
Acclaims	347	56%	367	57% *	
Attacks	201	32%	231	36% *	
Defenses	73	12%	45	7% *	

The difference between the combined debate coverage of Acclaim, Attack, and Defense statements with the online newspaper coverage was also found to be statistically significant ($X^2[df = 2] = 29.88, p < .0000$).

Table 9- Differences Between Debates and Online Newspapers for Acclaim, Attack, and Defense

Overall Results	Debates Total	Debates Percent	Online Newspapers Total	Online Newspapers Percent	Statistical Significant Differences
Total	621	100%	600	100%	$X^2[df = 2 = 29.88, p < .0000$
Acclaims	347	56%	274	46% *	
Attacks	201	32%	283	47% *	
Defenses	73	12%	43	7% *	

Additionally, there was found a significant difference between the blog coverage and the online newspaper coverage of Acclaim, Attack, and Defense statements ($X^2[df = 2 = 17.332, p < .0000$).

Table 10- Differences Between Blogs and Online Newspapers for Acclaim, Attack, and Defense

Overall Results	Blogs Total	Blogs Percent	Online Newspapers Total	Online Newspapers Percent	Statistical Significant Differences
Total	643	100%	600	100%	$X^2[df = 2 = 17.332, p < .0000$
Acclaims	367	57% *	274	46% *	
Attacks	231	36% *	283	47% *	
Defenses	45	7% *	43	7% *	

Statistical Differences Between Debate, Blog, and Online Newspaper Tone Statements

In comparing the statements of Issue and Character produced from the debates to the blog and online newspaper coverage we see that the blogs reported the highest percentage Issue statements and were six points greater than the statements from the debates. The online newspaper statements were only three

points greater. The Character statements reported by the blogs were six points lower than the statements produced by the debates, while the online newspapers only reported Character statements three points lower than the debates.

Table 11- Differences Between Debates, Blogs, and Online Newspapers for Issue and Character

Overall Results	Debates Total	Debates Percent	Blogs Total	Blogs Percent	Newspapers Total	Newspapers Percent
Total	621	100%	643	100%	600	100%
Issue	439	71%	492	77% *	443	74%
Character	182	29%	151	23% *	157	26%

The differences between the comparison of the combined debate coverage to the blog coverage of Issue and Character statements was significant ($X^2[df = 1] = 5.522, p < .019$).

Table 12- Differences Between Debates and Blogs for Issue and Character

Overall Results	Debates Total	Debates Percent	Blogs Total	Blogs Percent	Statistical Significant Differences
Total	621	100%	643	100%	$X^2[df = 1] = 5.522, p < .019$
Issue	439	71%	492	77% *	
Character	182	29%	151	23% *	

There were no statistical differences found between the debate coverage of Issue and Character statements and the online newspaper coverage.

Table 13- Differences Between Debates and Online Newspapers for Issue and Character

Overall Results	Debates Total	Debates Percent	Newspapers Total	Newspapers Percent	Statistical Significant Differences
Total	621	100%	600	100%	
Issue	439	71%	443	74%	
Character	182	29%	157	26%	

There were no statistical differences found between the blog coverage of Issue and Character statements and the online newspaper coverage.

Table 14- Differences Between Blogs and Online Newspapers for Issue and Character

Overall Results	Blogs Total	Blogs Percent	Newspapers Total	Newspapers Percent	Statistical Significant Differences
Total	643	100%	600	100%	
Issue	492	77%	443	74%	
Character	151	23%	157	26%	

Differences Between Debate, Blog, and Online Newspaper Rhetorical Statements by Candidate

Obama

By comparing the results by candidate, for Obama we see that the blog coverage reported a higher percentage of Acclaims than the debates and the online newspapers, with the debates producing a higher percentage than the online newspapers. Obama's Attacks were reported the greatest by the online newspapers, a full 12 points greater than the debates and nine points higher than the blogs.

Table 15- Differences Between Debates, Blogs, and Online Newspapers for Obama's Acclaims, Attacks, and Defenses

Overall Results by Candidate	Debates Total	Debates Percent	Blogs Total	Blogs Percent	Newspapers Total	Newspapers Percent
Obama	281	100%	270	100%	275	100%
Acclaims	152	54%	159	66% *	134	49% *
Attacks	76	27%	82	30% *	106	39% *
Defenses	53	19%	29	11% *	35	13% *

There were statistical differences found between the debate data and the blog data for Obama ($X^2[df = 2] = 7.193, p < .027$).

Table 16- Differences Between Debates and Blogs for Obama's Acclaims, Attacks, and Defenses

Overall Results	Debates Total	Debates Percent	Blogs Total	Blogs Percent	Statistical Significant Differences
Obama	281	100%	270	100%	$X^2[df = 2] = 7.193, p < .027$
Acclaims	152	54%	159	66% *	
Attacks	76	27%	82	30% *	
Defenses	53	19%	29	11% *	

Statistical differences were also present between the debate and online newspaper data ($X^2[df = 2] = 9.696, p < .008$).

Table 17- Differences Between Debates and Online Newspapers for Obama's Acclaims, Attacks, and Defenses

Overall Results	Debates Total	Debates Percent	Online Newspapers Total	Online Newspapers Percent	Statistical Significant Differences
Obama	281	100%	275	100%	$X^2[df = 2] = 9.696, p < .008$
Acclaims	152	54%	134	49% *	
Attacks	76	27%	106	39% *	
Defenses	53	19%	35	13% *	

There were no statistical differences found between the blog and online newspaper for Obama's statements of Acclaim, Attack, and Defense.

Table 18- Differences Between Blogs and Online Newspapers for Obama's Acclaims, Attacks, and Defenses

Overall Results	Blogs Total	Blogs Percent	Online Newspapers Total	Online Newspapers Percent	Statistical Significant Differences
Obama	270	100%	275	100%	
Acclaims	159	66%	134	49%	
Attacks	82	30%	106	39%	
Defenses	29	11%	35	13%	

McCain

For McCain, the online newspapers reported his Acclaims 14 points lower than the statements produced by the debates with the statements reported by the blogs being very similar to the percent from the debates. McCain's Attacks were reported at a higher percentage than the debates by the online newspapers and just barely off by the blogs. The Defense statements for McCain reported by the

blogs and online newspapers were lower than the actual percentage produced from the debates.

Table 19- Differences Between Debates, Blogs, and Online Newspapers for McCain's Acclaims, Attacks, and Defenses

Overall Results by Candidate	Debates Total	Debates Percent	Blogs Total	Blogs Percent	Newspapers Total	Newspapers Percent
McCain	340	100%	373	100%	325	100%
Acclaims	195	57%	208	56% *	140	43% *
Attacks	125	37%	149	40% *	177	54% *
Defenses	20	6%	16	4% *	8	2% *

There were no statistical differences found for McCain between the debates and the blog data.

Table 20- Differences Between Debates and Blogs for McCain's Acclaims, Attacks, and Defenses

Overall Results	Debates Total	Debates Percent	Blogs Total	Blogs Percent	Statistical Significant Differences
McCain	340	100%	373	100%	
Acclaims	195	57%	208	56%	
Attacks	125	37%	149	40%	
Defenses	20	6%	16	4%	

Statistical differences were found between the debate and online newspaper data for McCain ($X^2[df = 2] = 22.800, p < .000$).

Table 21- Differences Between Debates and Online Newspapers for McCain's Acclaims, Attacks, and Defenses

Overall Results	Debates Total	Debates Percent	Online Newspapers Total	Online Newspapers Percent	Statistical Significant Differences
McCain	340	100%	325	100%	$X^2[df = 2] = 22.800, p < .000$
Acclaims	195	57%	140	43% *	
Attacks	125	37%	177	54% *	
Defenses	20	6%	8	2% *	

Between the blog and online newspaper data there were statistical differences found for McCain's statements of Acclaim, Attack, and Defense ($X^2[df = 2] = 15.130, p < .001$).

Table 22- Differences Between Blogs and Online Newspapers for McCain's Acclaims, Attacks, and Defenses

Overall Results	Blogs Total	Blogs Percent	Online Newspapers Total	Online Newspapers Percent	Statistical Significant Differences
McCain	373	100%	325	100%	$X^2[df = 2] = 15.130, p < .001$
Acclaims	208	56% *	140	43% *	
Attacks	149	40% *	177	54% *	
Defenses	16	4% *	8	2% *	

Differences Between Debate, Blog, and Online Newspaper Tone Statements by Candidate

Obama

Looking at how Obama's Issue and Character statements were reported across the sources we see that they are fairly similar across the board. The percentages of Issue statements reported by the blogs and online newspapers are only

slightly higher than the percentages produced by the debates with the percentages of Character statements just lower than what was produced by the debates.

Table 23- Differences Between Debates, Blogs, and Online Newspapers for Obama's Issue and Character Statements

Overall Results by Candidate	Debates Total	Debates Percent	Blogs Total	Blogs Percent	Newspapers Total	Newspapers Percent
Obama	281	100%	270	100%	275	100%
Issue	230	82%	233	86%	231	84%
Character	51	18%	37	14%	44	16%

No statistical differences were found between Obama's data from the debates compared to the blog data.

Table 24- Differences Between Debates and Blogs for Obama's Issue and Character Statements

Overall Results	Debates Total	Debates Percent	Blogs Total	Blogs Percent	Statistical Significant Differences
Obama	281	100%	270	100%	
Issue	230	82%	233	86%	
Character	51	18%	37	14%	

No statistical differences were found between Obama's data from the debates compared to the online newspaper data.

Table 25- Differences Between Debates and Online Newspapers for Obama's Issue and Character Statements

Overall Results	Debates Total	Debates Percent	Newspapers Total	Newspapers Percent	Statistical Significant Differences
Obama	281	100%	275	100%	
Issue	230	82%	231	84%	
Character	51	18%	44	16%	

There were also no statistical differences found between the blog data and the online newspaper data.

Table 26- Differences Between Blogs and Online Newspapers for Obama's Issue and Character Statements

Overall Results	Blogs Total	Blogs Percent	Newspapers Total	Newspapers Percent	Statistical Significant Differences
Obama	270	100%	275	100%	
Issue	233	86%	231	84%	
Character	37	14%	44	16%	

McCain

McCain's Issue and Character statements produced from the debates compared to the statements reported by the blogs and online newspapers were also very similar. The Issue and Character statements reported by the blogs and online newspapers were only two points off those produced by the debates.

Table 27- Differences Between Debates, Blogs, and Online Newspapers for McCain's Issue and Character Statements

Overall Results by Candidate	Debates Total	Debates Percent	Blogs Total	Blogs Percent	Newspapers Total	Newspapers Percent
McCain	340	100%	373	100%	325	100%
Issue	209	67%	259	69% *	212	65%
Character	131	33%	114	31% *	113	35%

Statistical differences were found between the debate and blog data for McCain's statements of Issue and Character ($X^2[df = 1] = 5.005, p < .025$).

Table 28- Differences Between Debates and Blogs for McCain's Issue and Character Statements

Overall Results	Debates Total	Debates Percent	Blogs Total	Blogs Percent	Statistical Significant Differences
McCain	340	100%	373	100%	$X^2[df = 1] = 5.005, p < .025$
Issue	209	67%	259	69% *	
Character	131	33%	114	31% *	

No statistical differences were found between McCain's data from the debates compared to the online newspaper data.

Table 29- Differences Between Debates and Online Newspapers for McCain's Issue and Character Statements

Overall Results	Debates Total	Debates Percent	Newspapers Total	Newspapers Percent	Statistical Significant Differences
McCain	340	100%	325	100%	
Issue	209	67%	212	65%	
Character	131	33%	113	35%	

There were also no statistical differences found between the blog data and the online newspaper data.

Table 30- Differences Between Blogs and Online Newspapers for McCain's Issue and Character Statements

Overall Results	Blogs Total	Blogs Percent	Newspapers Total	Newspapers Percent	Statistical Significant Differences
McCain	373	100%	325	100%	
Issue	259	69%	212	65%	
Character	114	31%	113	35%	

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION

As discussed in the review of the literature, Presidential debates are important for both the candidates and the voters in that they may be the most authentic forum for the candidates to communicate their positions and for the positions to be challenged by opposing candidates and skillful moderators. Previous research has found that most voters do not watch the debates in their entirety or at all and mostly rely on summaries from traditional media. Research employing the functional theory of political campaign discourse has most often found newspapers have traditionally proven to misrepresent the tone of the debates by under reporting the candidates' Acclaims while over reporting the Attacks and Defenses.

Overall Analysis of H1 Results

The hypothesis that the research will find a significantly greater amount of Attack and Defense utterances with fewer Acclaims coded in the newspaper and blog articles than were coded in the transcripts of the debates was not fully supported.

This hypothesis was partially supported by the results from the online newspapers in that the online newspaper data reported a significant difference in Acclaim and Attack utterances ($X^2[df = 2 = 29.88, p < .0000]$). Even though the online newspapers reported ten less points of Acclaims and 15 more

points of Attacks than were coded from the debates, to prove the hypothesis the online newspapers needed to report more Defenses in which they were lower, which is interesting because these results are contrary to the trends that have been found in the past from newspaper coverage of debates. Although this research did not set out to find how online newspapers particularly cover debates, the fact that the online newspapers reported fewer Defenses than traditional newspapers deserves follow-up research.

A significant difference was found between the overall blog data and the overall debates data ($X^2[df = 2] = 8.907, p < .012$), but was not reflected by greater Attacks and Defenses with fewer Acclaims. The main difference between the blog data and the debate data were among the Defense utterances. In fact, the blogs were only one point different on Acclaims and four points different than Attacks from the debate data. Although the difference in Defenses is significant, it is interesting to note that the blogs reported so closely to the debates on rhetorical statements. With future research to test this, it could imply that the blog coverage is more reliable than online newspaper, and possibly traditional newspaper coverage in reporting rhetorical statements in debates.

Overall Analysis of H1 Results by Candidate

Looking specifically at the data for Obama's overall statements from the debates, the blogs, and the online newspapers, H1 was only supported in that both the blogs and online newspapers reported greater percentages of Attack statements than the debates, but failed to report higher amounts of Defenses.

Statistically significant differences were found between the overall debate data for Obama and the overall blog data ($X^2[df = 2] = 7.193, p < .027$) because the blogs, contrary to H1, reported a much greater percentage of Acclaims for Obama. This means that the bloggers reporting the debate cited a lesser percentage of Obama's Defenses in order to report more Acclaims. This could be in part due to the media focus on Obama's rhetorical skills during the 2008 campaign. Perhaps where newspapers' news value rests on conflict, bloggers apply a higher level a news value to inspiring, eloquent, or intelligent sound bites.

Statistically significant differences were found between the overall debate data for Obama and the overall online newspaper data ($X^2[df = 2] = 9.696, p < .008$) but did not fully support H1. The online newspapers did report a lesser percentage of Acclaims for Obama with a higher percentage of Attacks than the debates but a lesser percentage of Defenses. Again, the implications for the online newspapers' deviation from the norm in over reporting defenses cannot be assumed from this research.

The data for McCain only partially supported H1. Similar to Obama's, the blog coverage of McCain's rhetorical statements were very close to the debate data. No statistical differences were found between the blog and debate data for McCain, and the greatest difference was only by three points. Again, it could imply that the bloggers more accurately reported the rhetorical statements than the online newspapers.

Statistical differences were found between the debates data and the online newspaper data, ($X^2[df = 2] = 22.800, p < .000$) with the debates produced

a higher percentage of Acclaims for McCain overall than the online newspapers while the online newspapers reported a much higher percentage of Attacks, with the online newspapers still deviating from the norm and reporting fewer Defenses.

Overall Analysis of H2 Results

The hypothesis that the research will find significantly more Character utterances coded in the online newspaper and blog articles than were coded in the transcripts of the debates was not supported. From the overall data, the blogs actually reported significantly more Issue statements than the debates ($X^2[df = 1] = 5.522, p < .019$) while the online newspapers also reported a greater amount of Issue tone statements.

Contrary to what has been found in previous research, both the blogs and online newspapers were more positive in tone, even than the debates. The blogs' significant greater amount of Issue tone statements really sets them apart from how research has previously defined traditional newspaper coverage of debates. And once again, the online newspapers deviated from the trends previous research has found for traditional newspapers. With all the attention paid to the 2008 Presidential race, there were considerable variables that came into play. The fact that race was such a sensitive subject among the media could explain for the over emphasis on coverage focused on policy as opposed to personal character and a more all-around professional and positive tone.

Overall Analysis of H2 Results by Candidate

Obama's overall statements of Issue and Character were fairly similar across the board and did not support H2. The blog data were four points greater for Issue statements with the online newspaper two points greater. Again, this over emphasis on Issue statements could be due to the sensitive race variable in the campaign. Also, Obama campaigned from a platform based on "Hope" and "Change" and focused most of his more eloquent rhetoric on these more positive subjects and could have simply produced more sound bite quality statements on Issue than on Character.

McCain's statements of Issue and Character also did not support H2.

There were significant differences found between the debate and blog data ($\chi^2[df = 1] = 5.005, p < .025$), but as the case with Obama, it was from an over emphasis of Issue statements. The online newspapers did actually report a greater percentage of Character and lesser percentage of Issue statements for McCain, but it was not significant enough to support H2.

Overall Analysis of RQ1

Are bloggers consistently reporting candidates' statements in Presidential debates?

There were significant differences between the debate data and the blog data and it can be implied that bloggers are not consistent in reporting the candidates' statements as they are produced by the debates.

Of all the analysis between the debate data and the blog data between the

overall data and within the individual debates, there were ten instances of statistical differences found in comparison. There were instances of statistical differences found in every debate except for the October 15 debate.

Observing the overall data, there was a statistical difference found between the bloggers' data of the overall statements of Acclaim, Attack, and Defense and what was produced by the debates ($X^2[df = 2] = 8.907, p < .012$). The data produced from the blogs was reported five points off at the greatest difference from the debate data.

The differences between the comparison of the combined debate coverage to the blog coverage of Issue and Character statements was also significant ($X^2[df = 1] = 5.522, p < .019$). The blog data reported statements six points off that of the debates.

Although the differences were significant, it is noteworthy that they were contrary to what was hypothesized based on similar research applied to traditional newspapers. And if the rhetorical statements of Acclaim and tone statements of Issue are viewed as more positive, then it can be assumed from the research that the blogs are producing more positive coverage of the debates than what has been found of traditional media. Again, it can be implied that perhaps bloggers apply a different set of values for newsworthiness for political coverage. This could be due to their familiarity and interactivity with their more selective, niche audiences.

Overall Analysis of RQ1 by Candidate

There were statistical difference found between the overall debate data and the blog data for Obama's Acclaim, Attack, and Defense statements ($X^2[df = 2] = 7.193, p < .027$) with the greatest difference being in Acclaims. The blogs reported Obama's Acclaims 12 points higher.

There were no statistical differences found between the overall debate data and the blog data for Obama's Issue and Character statements, although the blogs reported his Issue statements four points greater than what was produced by the debates. Again, it can be implied that the bloggers reported Obama's rhetorical and tone statements more positively than they actually were.

There were no statistical differences found for McCain between the overall debate data and the blog data for his rhetorical statements, but statistical differences were found between the debate and blog data for his statements of Issue and Character ($X^2[df = 1] = 5.005, p < .025$). There was a two-point difference, with the blogs over emphasizing his Issue statements. As previously stated, this difference could be attributed to the sensitive nature of the campaign due to race.

Overall Analysis of RQ2

Are there any trends amongst the bloggers who are not consistently reporting the candidates' statements?

The findings of the analysis of the overall data suggest that bloggers are consistent in reporting the rhetorical statements of Acclaims but report a greater percentage of Attacks and lesser percentage of Defenses than the candidates

actually produce in the debates. The differences found in comparing the overall debate data to the overall blog data was statistically significant ($X^2[df = 2] = 8.907, p < .012$).

The differences between the comparison of the combined debate coverage to the blog coverage of Issue and Character tone statements was also significant ($X^2[df = 1] = 5.522, p < .019$). The analysis of the overall data suggests that bloggers produce a greater percentage of Issue statements and a lesser percentage of Character statements than the candidates actually produce in the debates. As already identified, the trend seems that the bloggers were more positive in their coverage of the 2008 Presidential debates.

Overall Analysis of RQ2 by Candidate

There were statistical difference found between the overall debate data and the blog data for Obama's Acclaim, Attack, and Defense statements ($X^2[df = 2] = 7.193, p < .027$) with the main differences being the blogs reported greater percentages of Acclaims and Attacks and a lesser percent of Defenses than he made in the actual debates. Although the differences are not statistically significant, there was also a consistent trend among the bloggers to report a higher percentage of Issues for Obama than what the candidate produced from the debate data. This trend was consistent among every debate.

It could be implied that the bloggers possibly bought into the positive hype surrounding Obama's campaign and in their trend of emphasizing his positive rhetorical and tone statements, perpetuated it.

There were no statistical differences found for McCain's Acclaim, Attack, and Defense statements between the overall debate data and the blog data. The analysis of the individual debates confirmed there were no trends in how the bloggers reported McCain's statements of Acclaim, Attack, and Defense. Statistical differences were found between the overall debate and overall blog data for McCain's statements of Issue and Character ($X^2[df = 1] = 5.005, p < .025$).

The difference suggests that the bloggers reported a greater percentage of Issue statements and lesser percentage of Character statements for McCain than the candidate actually produced in the debates. Again, this could indicate that the bloggers, many without journalistic training and sensitive to the feedback from their readers, steered clear of possibly sensitive statements directed toward character. Additionally, many of McCain's Character statements were simple and unfounded Acclaims on his history. He repeatedly claimed to have a "history of reaching across the aisle" and being a Maverick. Perhaps the bloggers were not interested in repeating his trite Acclaims on Character.

Overall Analysis of RQ3

Are bloggers reporting candidates' statements more or less consistently than newspapers' online stories?

There were fewer occurrences of significant differences between the debate data and the blog data than the debate data and the online newspaper data.

There were ten occurrences of significant differences between the blog sample and debates while there were 11 occurrences of significant differences between

the online newspaper samples and the debates.

From the analysis of the overall data from the debates, the blogs, and the online newspapers it appears that the blog data are more consistent with the debate data for Acclaim, Attack, and Defense statements, but the online newspaper data are more consistent with reporting the Issue and Character statements.

The differences in the comparison of the combined debate coverage to the blog coverage for Acclaim, Attack, and Defense statements were significant ($X^2[df = 2] = 8.907, p < .012$). But there was a greater statistical difference between the combined debate and the online newspaper coverage ($X^2[df = 2] = 29.88, p < .0000$).

Additionally, there was a significant difference between the overall blog coverage and the overall online newspaper coverage of Acclaim, Attack, and Defense statements ($X^2[df = 2] = 17.332, p < .0000$). There were no statistical differences between the overall blog coverage of Issue and Character statements and the overall online newspaper coverage.

As far as rhetorical statements go, the blogs proved to be more accurate than the online newspapers, but the blogs were less accurate with tone statements. If it could be measured which type of statement, rhetorical or tone, was more influential on voters, it could be possible to make implications as to which medium did more service to the candidates' message.

Overall Analysis of RQ3 by Candidate

There were statistical difference found between the overall debate data and the overall blog data for Obama's Acclaim, Attack, and Issue statements ($X^2[df = 2] = 7.193, p < .027$). Statistical differences were also present between the overall debate and overall online newspaper data ($X^2[df = 2] = 9.696, p < .008$).

Although the differences were not significant, the blogs did report a greater difference from the debates on Obama's Issue and Character statements than the online newspapers.

From the analysis of the data, it appeared that both the blog and online newspaper coverage were inconsistent in reporting Obama's rhetorical statements, and the online newspapers were more consistent in reporting his tone statements. As discussed before, the inconsistencies among the online newspaper stories were more traditional while the inconsistencies among the blogs seemed to trend toward accentuating the positive for Obama, possibly perpetuating the hype and positive energy surrounding his campaign.

From the analysis of the overall data, it appears that blogs were more consistent in reporting McCain's statements of Acclaim, Attack, and Defense than the online newspapers.

There were no statistical differences found for McCain between the overall debate data and the overall blog data for Acclaim, Attack, and Defense statements. Statistical differences were found between the overall debate and overall online newspaper data for McCain ($X^2[df = 2] = 22.800, p < .000$). Between the overall blog and online newspaper data, there were statistical

differences found for McCain's statements of Acclaim, Attack, and Defense ($X^2[df = 2] = 15.130, p < .001$).

Regarding McCain's statements of Issue and Character, the overall data suggests that the online newspapers are more consistent with the overall debate data than the overall blog data. Statistical differences were found between the debate and blog data for McCain's statements of Issue and Character ($X^2[df = 1] = 5.005, p < .025$).

From the analysis of the data it appeared that the blog coverage of the 2008 Presidential debates was more consistent with McCain's actual statements than the online newspaper coverage. The blogs were much more accurate than the online newspapers in reporting his rhetorical statements and reported a similar amount of inconsistencies among McCain's tone statements as the online newspapers. If McCain's more traditional, hype-less campaign can be looked at as a litmus, it could be assumed that the bloggers are generally more consistent in reporting the candidates' statements during presidential debates.

Implications

From the findings it can be implied that candidates employing the functional theory of political campaign discourse will be more consistently reported by political bloggers. Although bloggers consistently over emphasized Acclaim statements, they were more consistent than online newspapers. Put in perspective of similar research observing traditional newspapers, the bloggers portrayed more positive debates.

This research is revealing in that we see the online newspapers, like what has been found of traditional newspapers in previous research, reported lower percentages of Acclaims and greater percentages of Attacks, but unlike traditional newspapers, online newspapers reported a lower percentage of Defenses than the debates. Contrary to H1, both the blogs and online newspaper samples under reported the Defenses. The accentuated Attacks were present in both samples, and the blogs were within one percentage point of the debates for Acclaims.

The lesser presence of Defenses in the blogs and online newspapers could be because the candidates rarely made any strong Defenses. The two most reported Defenses in the debates were actually more Attack-like in nature. In the October 15th debate, after a series of Attacks from Obama on McCain tying McCain's policies to the "failed" policies of President Bush, McCain replied with "I am not president Bush. If you want to run against president Bush, you should have run four years ago." This Defense/Attack was reported in four of the six blog samples and four of the six online newspaper samples.

Obama made a similar Defense/Attack in the October 15th debate when McCain pressed him to explain his associations with the controversial figure Bill Ayers and ACORN. In the debate Obama built a well formulated Defense to both of these accusations and then ended his statement saying, "And I think the fact that this has become such an important part of your campaign, Senator McCain, says more about your campaign than it says about me." Only one blog sample reported this sound bite, but four of the online newspaper samples did.

It was interesting to see that the blogs were only one point off of the debates in reporting Acclaims and reported such a high percentage of Issue statements. In making a case for supporting blogs as viable media, this is important. Previous research has found traditional newspaper coverage to accentuate the negative aspects of the debates, Attacks and Defenses, in their coverage. It has also been speculated that this negative coverage has led voters to believe the debates and candidates to be more negative than they actually were. That this research found the blogs to be more positive in how they report the debates shows that in this area, going to blogs for political information on debates is better than going to newspapers. It could be speculated that because the blogs have a more loyal and regular reader base they are writing towards, they do not believe they need to fall into the pitfalls of reporting the more sensational Attacks and Defenses over the Acclaims. It was observed, but not measured, that the more politically subjective blogs would often accurately report their candidate's opponent's Acclaims as ammunition to make their own commentary and counter points.

Surprisingly, neither the blogs nor the online newspapers supported H2. It was even more unexpected that the blogs reported a significantly greater percentage of Issue statements than the candidates actually produced in the debates. It could be speculated that due to the emphasis mainstream media put on the negative tone of the campaigns that the bloggers, without an editorial process, might have over compensated in taking the high ground. There is not data to back this up.

If the perspective of the entire election year is considered this was the first campaign where race was an issue, the nation was five years into a war that did not show a quick resolve, Americans were still rattled and discussing national security procedures and techniques after the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, and citizens were right on the cusp of an economical recession and housing crisis. The candidates produced 71% statements of Issue in the debates, and it could be that the bloggers, having much more interactivity with their readers, knew what their audiences cared to hear about, and that was how each candidate's policies would fix the current situations.

An example of this can be found in the last debate when McCain introduces a voter he met while campaigning named Joe, who is a plumber by trade. Joe's question about Obama's tax plan was used by McCain as an Attack on Obama, but then "Joe the plumber" resurfaced numerous times in the debate as a representation of a regular voter and how each candidates' policies would affect Joe. Every single blog sample mentioned policy statements including "Joe the Plumber" more than once, with one of them mentioning him ten times. Of the online newspaper samples four of the six mentioned "Joe the Plumber" with two of them mentioning him eleven times. To show the contrast between Issue and Character statements, "Joe the Plumber" was introduced in the same election that McCain was primed to attack Obama on his associations with known terrorist Bill Ayers and ACORN, the political group being accused of fraud, and "Joe the Plumber" statements were reported more often and consistently than McCain's anticipated Attacks.

Concerning the research questions, it was found that there were statistical differences between the debate data and the blog samples, the bloggers did not report the debates accurately, the bloggers did consistently report a greater percentage of Acclaims and Issue statements for Obama, and the blog sample data were slightly closer to the data from the debates than the online newspapers.

It was not a surprise that the blog data were significantly different from the debates, but it was surprising that they were more accurate than the online newspapers. There are two sides to this coin: it could be argued that it is proof that bloggers should be accepted as valid journalists, but this fact could also be a by product from them creating their content “live” as they watch the debates unfold. Based on the exploratory nature of this research, no strong implications of these findings should be made, but does show potential for future research comparing the accuracy and consistency of bloggers against newspapers.

The data that showed the blog samples consistently over reported Obama’s Issue and Acclaim statements plays into the argument often made that Obama garnered more positive media hype than McCain, or Clinton in the primaries. It is also interesting that while the blogs accentuated Obama’s positive statements, they also elaborated McCain’s negative Attacks. Overall, the blogs were more consistent in reporting Obama’s Issue and Character statements, and less consistent in reporting his Acclaim, Attack, and Defense statements emphasizing his Acclaims. While the blogs were less consistent in reporting McCain’s Issue and Character utterances, and more consistent in reporting his

Acclaim, Attack, and Defense statements. Put in perspective, McCain, who bragged of his “straight talk” was most often misreported on his tone, Obama, who was praised and criticized for his eloquence, was more often misreported over his rhetoric.

It was widely discussed how Obama harnessed the media power of the Internet and employed an online grass roots campaign strategy to energize supporters and enlist new ones. His campaign emphasis on using technology and new media could be a large variable in why political bloggers more often accentuated his positive statements of Acclaim and Issue in the debates.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Based on the review of the literature it is known that the information produced by Presidential candidates during debates is valuable and often misrepresented by traditional media. Often, the presidential debates afford the voters some of the most genuine portraits of the candidates, their policies, and their character. It is very important, both for the candidates intended messages, and for the messages the voters receive, that media consistently report what is actually said at the presidential debates.

Simply put, the 2008 Presidential Election was a monumental event. There was a lot at stake for both candidates and both parties. With the recent rise in the percentage of voters going online for information about the candidates and political news in general, the results of this research has yielded valuable information about the reliability and consistency of some of the more popular online sources.

The analysis of collected data revealed that contrary to traditional media, political blogs do not consistently conform to overstating Attacks and Defenses. The blogs' inconsistencies in overstating statements of Acclaim are in contrast to traditional media. From the analysis of all the data, it was found that the political bloggers were more consistent in reporting the candidates' statements from the

2008 Presidential debates than the online newspapers. It was notable that the analysis of the blog data revealed that the bloggers were very consistent in reporting Obama's Issue and Character statements, while that was the most inconsistently reported area for McCain. Similarly, the bloggers were very consistent in reporting McCain's Acclaims, Attacks, and Defenses, but more often than not, reported Obama's inconsistently.

Although the blog samples were slightly more accurate than the online newspapers, it could be assessed that a voter could not trust either source to singularly inform them of what was said during the 2008 presidential debates. As Benoit put it, "In short, it matters where voters learn about debates" (Benoit, et al., 2004, pp 24).

If competition creates a better market place and a better product, then the future of political reporting looks bright. In light of the previous research that shows an increase in voters looking online for political data, the findings that the blog samples were more accurate than the online newspapers will hopefully affect the quality of political reporting as a whole, which in turn could affect the information available to a voter, creating a more informed voter, and finally a better political system.

This research was certainly not without its limitations. With additional time and resources, this research could expand to include a truly random and larger sample of blogs for analysis. Optimally, this type of research would benefit with multiple, well-trained coders coding all the samples, resulting in more consistency and greater inter-coder reliability.

For future research a larger and random sample of blogs could be analyzed and dissected into smaller categories based on variables for comparison. Indicators for political leanings could be created in order to compare the quality and consistency in coverage by highly subjective blogs. It would also be beneficial to analyze how these politically subjective blogs treat the opposing candidate's statements.

Additionally, the research could examine the reported observation of the candidates' body language and non-verbal cues. The bloggers more often than the online newspapers, commented on body language, candidate attire, crowd interaction/lack of interaction, and several other non-verbal variables that were incorporated into their reporting and often framed as Acclaims, Attacks, and Defenses even though they were not statements.

Future research could compare the quality and consistency of coverage from smaller single author blogs with larger multiple staffed blogs. It was observed that the blogs with multiple authors contributing to the live blog produced a greater amount of content than the blogs with single authors.

In conclusion, although both the blog sample and online newspaper sample reported more consistently than traditional newspapers have been found to do, the current state of political media still do not do the candidates' message justice in reporting. From the data analyzed from the 2008 Presidential debates, it must be assumed that at this point in the development of new media a voter must employ multiple and various channels to receive the most accurate coverage of what the candidates actually said.

APPENDIX

Transcript Data by Debate

September 26 Debate

Looking specifically at the September 26th debate at the University of Mississippi, the themes from the first debate were nearly identical with the debates' combined totals.

Data from Debate Transcripts

9-26 Debate Both Candidates	Total	Percent
Themes	240	100%
Acclaims	134	56%
Attacks	70	29%
Defenses	36	15%
Issue	170	71%
Character	70	29%

Candidate Data from Debate Transcripts

9 - 26 Debate Obama	Total	Percent	9 - 26 Debate McCain	Total	Percent
Themes	113	100%	Themes	125	100%
Acclaims	53	47%	Acclaims	77	62%
Attacks	31	27%	Attacks	39	39%
Defenses	29	26%	Defenses	7	3%
Issue	92	81%	Issue	77	62%
Character	21	19%	Character	48	38%

October 7 Debate

According to the indicators the researcher used to code utterances, the candidates combined made fewer statements in the second debate at Belmont University.

Data from Debate Transcripts

10 - 7 Debate Both Candidates	Total	Percent
Themes	146	100%
Acclaims	79	54%
Attacks	56	38%
Defenses	11	8%
Issue	99	68%
Character	47	32%

Candidate Data from Debate Transcripts

10 - 7 Debate Obama	Total	Percent	10 - 7 Debate McCain	Total	Percent
Themes	66	100%	Themes	80	100%
Acclaims	33	50%	Acclaims	46	58%
Attacks	25	38%	Attacks	31	39%
Defenses	8	12%	Defenses	3	4%
Issue	55	83%	Issue	44	55%
Character	11	17%	Character	36	45%

October 15 Debate

The candidates made 235 statements combined at the third debate at Hofstra University.

Data from Debate Transcripts

10 - 15 Debate Both Candidates	Total	Percent
Themes	235	100%
Acclaims	134	57%
Attacks	75	32%
Defenses	26	11%
Issue	170	72%
Character	65	38%

In the third debate Obama made a total of 102 coded statements and McCain made 133.

Candidate Data from Debate Transcripts

10 - 15 Debate Obama	Total	Percent	10 - 15 Debate McCain	Total	Percent
Themes	102	100%	Themes	133	100%
Acclaims	66	65%	Acclaims	68	51%
Attacks	20	20%	Attacks	55	41%
Defenses	16	16%	Defenses	10	8%
Issue	83	81%	Issue	87	65%
Character	19	19%	Character	46	35%

Blog Data by Debate

Blog Data for the September 26 Debate

The blog data specifically for the September 26 debate at the University of Mississippi consisted of 219 coded statements.

Data from Blog Samples

9-26 Debate Both Candidates Blog Data	Total	Percent
Themes	219	100%
Acclaims	121	55%
Attacks	83	38%
Defenses	15	7%
Issue	163	74%
Character	56	26%

The blog samples reported a total of 99 statements by Obama and 120 by McCain from the coverage of the first debate.

Candidate Data from Blog Samples

9 - 26 Debate Obama Blog Data	Total	Percent	9 - 26 Debate McCain Blog Data	Total	Percent
Themes	99	100%	Themes	120	100%
Acclaims	52	52%	Acclaims	69	56%
Attacks	36	36%	Attacks	47	39%
Defenses	11	11%	Defenses	4	3%
Issue	87	87%	Issue	76	63%
Character	12	12%	Character	44	37%

Blog Data for the October 7 Debate

The researcher coded 152 statements from the blog coverage of the October 7 debate at Belmont University.

Data from Blog Samples

10 - 7 Debate Both Candidates Blog Data	Total	Percent
Themes	152	100%
Acclaims	100	66%
Attacks	49	32%
Defenses	3	2%
Issue	124	82%
Character	28	18%

The second debate blog coverage reported a total of 69 statements by Obama and 83 by McCain.

Candidate Data from Blog Samples

10 - 7 Debate Obama Blog Data	Total	Percent	10 - 7 Debate McCain Blog Data	Total	Percent
Themes	69	100%	Themes	83	100%
Acclaims	48	70%	Acclaims	52	63%
Attacks	19	28%	Attacks	30	36%
Defenses	2	3%	Defenses	1	1%
Issue	59	86%	Issue	65	78%
Character	10	14%	Character	18	22%

Blog Data for the October 15 Debate

There were 272 statements reported from the blog coverage of the October 15 debate at Hofstra University.

Data from Blog Samples

10 - 15 Debate Both Candidates Blog Data	Total	Percent
Themes	272	100%
Acclaims	146	54%
Attacks	99	36%
Defenses	27	10%
Issue	205	75%
Character	67	25%

The third debate blog coverage reported a total of 102 statements by Obama and 170 by McCain.

Candidate Data from Blog Samples

10 - 15 Debate Obama Blog Data	Total	Percent	10 - 15 Debate McCain Blog Data	Total	Percent
Themes	102	100%	Themes	170	100%
Acclaims	59	58%	Acclaims	87	51%
Attacks	27	26%	Attacks	73	42%
Defenses	16	16%	Defenses	11	6%
Issue	87	86%	Issue	118	69%
Character	15	14%	Character	52	31%

Online Newspaper Data by Debate

Online Newspaper Data for the September 26 Debate

The researcher coded 182 statements from the online newspaper coverage of the September 26 debate at the University of Mississippi.

Data from Online Newspaper Samples

9 - 26 Debate Both Candidates Online Newspaper Data	Total	Percent
Themes	182	100%
Acclaims	72	40%
Attacks	104	47%
Defenses	6	3%
Issue	133	73%
Character	49	27%

The first debate online newspaper coverage reported a total of 91 statements by Obama and 91 by McCain.

Candidate Data from Online Newspaper Samples

9 - 26 Debate Obama Online Newspaper Data	Total	Percent	9 - 26 Debate McCain Online Newspaper Data	Total	Percent
Themes	91	100%	Themes	91	100%
Acclaims	39	43%	Acclaims	33	36%
Attacks	48	53%	Attacks	56	62%
Defenses	4	4%	Defenses	2	2%
Issue	82	90%	Issue	51	56%
Character	9	10%	Character	40	44%

Online newspaper Data for the October 7 Debate

There were 212 statements reported from the online newspaper coverage of the October 7 debate at Belmont University.

Data from Online Newspaper Samples

10 - 7 Debate Both Candidates Online Newspaper Data	Total	Percent
Themes	212	100%
Acclaims	115	54%
Attacks	89	42%
Defenses	8	4%
Issue	168	79%
Character	44	21%

The second debate online newspaper coverage reported a total of 84 statements by Obama and 128 by McCain.

Candidate Data from Online Newspaper Samples

10 - 7 Debate Obama Online Newspaper Data	Total	Percent	10 - 7 Debate McCain Online Newspaper Data	Total	Percent
Themes	84	100%	Themes	128	100%
Acclaims	42	50%	Acclaims	73	57%
Attacks	35	42%	Attacks	54	42%
Defenses	7	8%	Defenses	1	1%
Issue	71	85%	Issue	97	76%
Character	13	15%	Character	31	24%

Online Newspaper Data for the October 15 Debate

There were 206 statements reported from the online newspaper coverage of the October 15 debate at Hofstra University.

Data from Online Newspaper Samples

10 - 15 Debate Both Candidates Online Newspaper Data	Total	Percent
Themes	206	100%
Acclaims	87	42%
Attacks	90	44%
Defenses	29	14%
Issue	142	69%
Character	64	31%

The third debate online newspaper coverage reported a total of 100 statements by Obama and 106 by McCain.

Candidate Data from Online Newspaper Samples

10 - 15 Debate Obama Online Newspaper Data	Total	Percent	10 - 15 Debate McCain Online Newspaper Data	Total	Percent
Themes	100	100%	Themes	106	100%
Acclaims	53	53%	Acclaims	34	32%
Attacks	23	23%	Attacks	67	63%
Defenses	24	24%	Defenses	5	5%
Issue	78	78%	Issue	64	60%
Character	22	22%	Character	42	40%

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VITA

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