



Cable News and American Democracy  
*Moving Forward or Falling Back*

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**by**

Robert C. Walter

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## ABSTRACT

### CABLE NEWS AND AMERICAN DEMOCRACY: MOVING FORWARD OR FALLING BACK

by Robert Christopher Walter

This paper examines traditional theories on how television news media operates in a democratic society and their application to a twenty-four hour cable news cycle. The study explores whether the switch to a twenty-four hour cable news cycle has enhanced or diminished the ability of television news to fulfill its theoretical role in the democratic process. The switch to a cable news format was found to have potential to enhance the positive role of television news media in democratic society, but was found not to have done so in practical application.



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by Robert C. Walter

Approved by:

\_\_\_\_\_, Advisor  
Dr. Richard Campbell

\_\_\_\_\_, Reader  
Christopher S. Kelly

\_\_\_\_\_, Reader  
Dr. Vaughn P. Shannon

Accepted by:

\_\_\_\_\_, Director,  
University Honors Program



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## **Introduction**

Throughout history, the American news media have had such a significant impact on American democracy, that it is often viewed as the fourth branch of government or the 'fourth estate.'<sup>1</sup> Though there are disagreements about what role the media should play and how well the media meet democratic expectations, it is impossible to ignore, at the very least, the potential of the media to affect the workings of American government. A study of American government must then not be wholly separated from a study of the media and vice versa.

With the advent of television, a new medium became available for news and it did not take long to develop and grow. With the development of network news programming, the modern television news media was born. Network news continued to grow and developed until it seemed to dwarf all other forms of news media. By the early 90s, a single network's news programming reached over 9 million homes every night while the largest newspaper in circulation reached fewer than two million.<sup>2</sup>

As network news grew, it became the focus of news media study. Scholars began to praise the networks for their successes in creating an informed public and criticize them for their shortcomings. A 'telemetry' began to grow about the dangerous powers of television to impact government

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<sup>1</sup> Farnsworth, Stephen J. and S. Robert Lichter. *The Nightly News Nightmare*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003. pp. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Fensch, Thomas. *Television News Anchors: An Anthology of Profiles of the major Figures and Issues in United States Network Reporting*. McFarland & Company, 1993. pp. 96.

rooted in the Nixon Kennedy debates, Vietnam coverage, and the election of President Regan.<sup>3</sup> Government itself perpetuated these beliefs as members of Congress often have a tendency to overestimate the importance of the media in the democratic process because they live in a world which is full of cameras.<sup>4</sup> Several factors even indicated that the television did indeed have such power. Three main perspectives on the media's influence then developed: the 'hypodermic effects' model where the media's effect is immediate and powerful, the minimal effects model where the media only impacts the formation of elite opinion, and the 'media effects' model where the media's main strength lies in agenda setting and the creation of salience.<sup>5</sup> In response to these theories, signs, and fears, people began asking was television news good for American democracy and if not, what could be done?

Television news itself changed, however, when CNN went on the air June 1, 1980.<sup>6</sup> With the advent of CNN, the twenty-four hour news cycle was born. Americans had the ability to view live images of events occurring all over the world at any time of day. Waiting until the networks' evening news blocks was no longer needed as citizens could check the news whenever they happened to be in front of a television. Because of CNN and other cable news networks, network

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<sup>3</sup> Schudson, Michael. *The Power of News*. Harvard University Press, 1995. pp. 117.

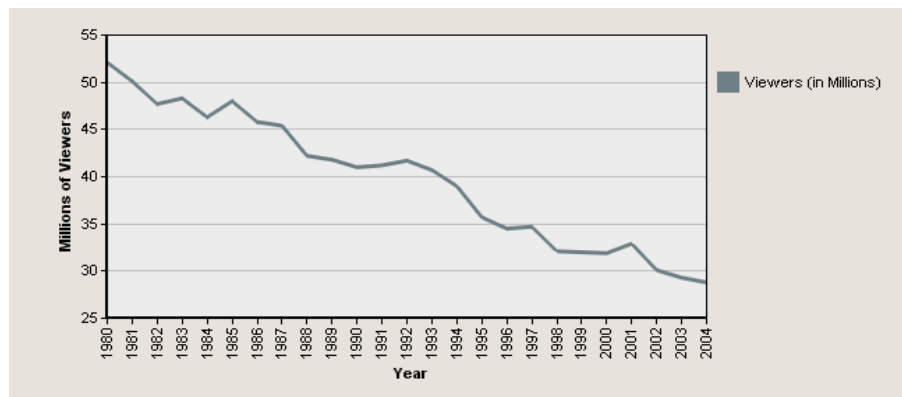
<sup>4</sup> Hess, Stephen. *News & Newsmaking*. The Brookings Institution, 1996. pp. 64.

<sup>5</sup> Farnsworth, Stephen J. and S. Robert Lichter. *The Nightly News Nightmare*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003. pp. 16-21.

<sup>6</sup> Johnston, Carla Brooks. *Winning the Global News Game*. Butterworth-Heinemann, 1995. pp. 61.

television news's audience has been slowly eroding.<sup>7</sup>(Figure 1) Even the White House now gets its television news from CNN and not the networks.<sup>8</sup> The result of this transition has been the assumption of the twenty-four hour news cycle as the dominant standard for modern journalism.

**Figure 1: Network Evening News Viewership in the Month of November<sup>9</sup>**



The thesis of this paper is that the switch to a twenty-four hour news cycle, as manifested by the advent modern cable television news, has not been a positive change in terms of television news' ability to fulfill the vital roles of news media in American democratic society. The transition has decreased story accuracy and the accountability of government officials. It has encouraged the proliferation of low value news programming and has hindered democratic debate through the development of a culture of assertion which discourages

<sup>7</sup> Farnsworth, Stephen J. and S. Robert Lichter. *The Nightly News Nightmare*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003. pp. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Fensch, Thomas. *Television News Anchors: An Anthology of Profiles of the major Figures and Issues in United States Network Reporting*. McFarland & Company, 1993. pp. 91.

<sup>9</sup> The Project for Excellence in Journalism, *State of the News Media 2005*, <[http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/2005/chartland.asp?id=211&ct=line&dir=&sort=&coll\\_box=1#](http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/2005/chartland.asp?id=211&ct=line&dir=&sort=&coll_box=1#)> Overview Conclusions.

compromise and understanding. Though the full impact of the switch to a twenty-four hour news cycle has yet to be realized, in terms of cable news programming, the transition has been negative.

In the conclusion of its annual review of American journalism, the “State of the News Media” report, the Project for Excellence in Journalism stated that the challenge before the American news media in 2005 is to reassert its position as the provider of something distinct and valuable for citizens.<sup>10</sup> This paper will explore whether the switch to a twenty-four hour news cycle brought about by cable news is a tool to meet such a challenge or a reason to fail. The “State of the News Media” report will be used as the primary indicator of the current state of cable news. It will then be determined whether, in its current state, the twenty-four hour news cycle better fills the traditional roles of the news media in American democracy than its predecessors by examining both the benefits and drawbacks of the new medium in five specific areas. The areas which will be considered are the accuracy of information presented, the comprehensiveness of issue and event coverage, the fairness and comprehensiveness election coverage, the assumption of a narrative structure, and capabilities for international coverage and broadcasting.

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<sup>10</sup> The Project for Excellence in Journalism, *State of the News Media 2005*, <[http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/2005/narrative\\_overview\\_conclusion.asp?cat=8&media=1](http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/2005/narrative_overview_conclusion.asp?cat=8&media=1)> Network Evening News Viewrship.

## **Methods**

This exploration will rely almost exclusively on the “State of the News Media Report” produced by the Project for Excellence in Journalism in 2005 as an indicator of the current state of cable news media. This source was selected for a number of reasons. First, it was the most current measure of cable news available at the time this examination was conducted. Second, the Project for Excellence in Journalism is a bipartisan group with no particular political agenda. This helps to assure that the information presented in their report is not subjected to any particular ‘spin’ or biases. Third, the “State of the News Media” report provides one of the most comprehensive content studies available. Though other resources offer equally valuable economic, ownership, and developmental analysis, this exploration is largely dependant on examining the value of what is presented, making this the most beneficial resource. Lastly, the 2004 “State of the News Media” report has been widely praised for its accuracy and value predisposing the 2005 report to be of a similar quality.

The five areas of consideration were selected as the result of a review of existing literature on the subject of news media’s role in democratic society. Throughout all of the literature, election coverage, accuracy, international coverage, and comprehensiveness were either recognized as theoretical points of interest or were actually used as points of measure for gauging the news media’s effectiveness through various points in history. These then made natural



areas of consideration for analyzing the effectiveness of cable news and the twenty-four hour news cycle. The impact of the development of narratives and frames in news media on the ability of news to fulfill its role in democratic society was not as well represented in the traditional literature. This exploration then hopes to add to what is now a growing body of work in that subject area and examine how those impacts and narratives have been affected by the switch to a twenty-four hour news cycle.

As for the limits of this study, this exploration will not examine C-SPAN as a cable news provider. C-SPAN's almost exclusive reliance on live broadcasts of government function set it apart from other cable news providers. Though a study of C-SPAN is valuable to a broader understanding of both the development and current state of cable television news, it is not included in the "State of the Media Report" and does not have Viewership equal to the other cable news providers. Also, C-SPAN, unlike other cable news providers, is not a commercial venture, furthering the distinction between the two. To allow for a more focused and detailed study, it will then be excluded.

This exploration will also not examine topics of media ownership and a great majority of work considering media economics. Though such topics do have relevance to the news media's ability to fulfill its role in democratic society and also represent some of the underlying causes of the current cable news deficiencies and achievements examined, moving into this area would make the

scope of this examination overly broad. Such issues will then be largely disregarded for the purpose of this study.

## **Accuracy and Retention of Information Presented**

Television can be matched by no other medium when it comes to conveying a sense of “being there.” No print story can hope to convey the emotion of the *Challenger* explosion as well as the video broadcast did on January 28, 1986.<sup>11</sup> Television as a medium has all of the immediacy of radio, but with the added benefit of allowing the audience to see events as they transpire.<sup>12</sup> In terms of audience immersion in moving picture, there is simply nothing like it. This allows for an added dimension of accuracy other news mediums cannot hope to reach.

Accuracy as an expectation of American democracy for news media, for the purpose of this exploration, will be a measure of a news media outlet’s ability to get a story factually correct. Also measures of a news media outlets ability to have the audience meaningfully retain the information which is presented will be examined in this section.

### **Benefits**

TV news is fast. The average anchor speaks at more than two hundred words per minute. Without reinforcement through repetition, the average viewers

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<sup>11</sup> Levy, Mark R. “Learning from Television News.” *The Future of News*. By Cook, Gomery, and Lichty. The Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1992. pp. 69-71.

<sup>12</sup> Parker, Richard. *Mixed Signals: The Prospects for Global Television News*. Twentieth Century Fund Press, 1995. pp. 3.

have little chance of remembering what they are told.<sup>13</sup> In order to truly be informed, citizens must not only hear what is happening and what has happened, but they must also remember it when it comes time to vote or become involved in democratic debate. Repetition then becomes a critical tool the television news media must use if its audience is to retain the information presented. An increase or decrease in repetition with the switch to a twenty-four hour news cycle would then indicate an enhanced or diminished ability to meet this expectation.

Cable news literally 'has all day' to present the news. Twenty-four hours is a lot of time to fill and a cable news provider would be short on time only under the most extreme of circumstances. This leaves these providers free to go over the same story multiple times throughout the course of a single day. The "State of the News Media Report" for 2005 clearly indicates that cable news providers are in fact taking advantage of this luxury. The report found that 60% of the stories covered by a cable news provider throughout the course of any given day were repetitions of stories that had already been reported.<sup>14</sup> The result is a greater potential for audience retention in a twenty-four hour news cycle.

## **Drawbacks**

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<sup>13</sup> Levy, Mark R. "Learning from Television News." *The Future of News*. By Cook, Gomery, and Lichty. The Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1992. pp. 69-71.

<sup>14</sup> The Project for Excellence in Journalism, *State of the News Media 2005*, <[http://www.stateofthemedias.org/2005/narrative\\_cabletv\\_contentanalysis.asp](http://www.stateofthemedias.org/2005/narrative_cabletv_contentanalysis.asp)> Repetition vs. Updating

The switch to a twenty-four hour news cycle has made news a much hastier affair. What to show and what to say, especially when there is 'breaking news,' are decisions which must be made on the fly. A director need only say "ready four, take four" and images are being broadcast to American citizens. There is simply not much time to mull over what are the best images to describe an event. It is a matter of impulse and no person really has time to think of whether or not the way a story is being presented best informs the public and is the most accurate means of presentation. In these situations, anchors are also often left to fend for themselves. They jump to conclusions, offer their personal opinions, and sometimes mischaracterize an event. There is no time to carefully edit their words for accuracy as such time would result in the audience hearing nothing. Time spent editing together video clips is time when the audience sees nothing.

As Eric Sevareid, a former CBS News commentator, put it, "The real trouble with our business, both in print and in broadcasting, is not bias, but haste. It is a very hasty business. We make an awful lot of mistakes for that reason."<sup>15</sup> When a news provider is constantly streaming out news twenty-four hours a day, a great number of hasty decisions will and in many ways must be made. Studies have shown that the news is self-correcting, meaning it fixes its own inaccuracies when it discovers them. The result of this is that a story becomes more complete

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<sup>15</sup> Daly, John Charles. *The Press and Public Policy*. The American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1979. pp. 8.

and accurate as time passes.<sup>16</sup> Seeing as little to no time often passes between when an event occurs and when it is aired by cable news, the potential for inaccuracies is very high. These inaccuracies have the potential to be ultimately ironed out as the news cycle continues, but the mistakes have already been funneled into the public consciousness. Even if the audience members who were misinformed are made aware of the correction, it is difficult to erase the lingering thoughts that perhaps the original inaccuracy is in fact the real story. A simple mistake can then seriously impede the ability of a citizen to make steadfast political choices and cable news providers can be more susceptible to making such mistakes.

What is even more concerning about the switch to a twenty-four hour news cycle is that there are indications that even with the expanded ability to repeat and update stories, stories are not be updated or substantively changed over time. The “State of the News Media Report” for 2005 found that only 6% of stories repeated throughout the day were substantively updated.<sup>17</sup>

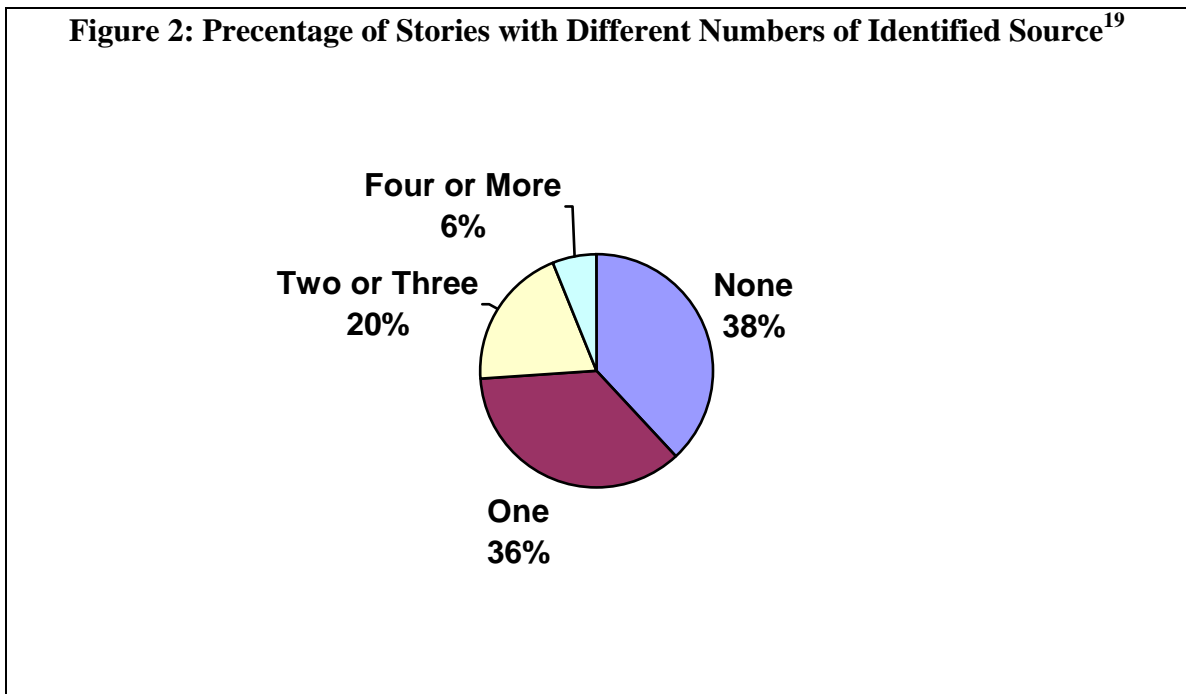
The switch to a twenty four-hour news cycle has also led to a decrease in the news media’s ability to meet the expectations for stories to be factual correct by preventing the audience from properly judging the legitimacy of sources. Of all forms of news media, cable news is the least likely to provide multiple properly identified sources. In fact, only a quarter of cable news stories have more than

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<sup>16</sup> Daly, John Charles. *The Press and Public Policy*. The American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1979. pp. 23.

<sup>17</sup> The Project for Excellence in Journalism, *State of the News Media 2005* <[http://www.stateofthemedia.org/2005/narrative\\_cabletv\\_contentanalysis.asp](http://www.stateofthemedia.org/2005/narrative_cabletv_contentanalysis.asp)> Repetition vs. Updating

one identified source. (Figure 2)<sup>18</sup> Without even knowing where information came from, an audience member can not comprehensively judge the likelihood that said information is correct. The lack of adequate sourcing and the tendencies towards inaccuracy discussed previously are both serious drawbacks for the switch to a twenty-four hour news cycles ability to meet American democracy's need for accuracy.



### Comprehensiveness of Issue and Event Coverage

Studies have shown that informed citizens are more likely to participate in democratic debate.<sup>20</sup> People over the age of 55, America's most active political

<sup>18</sup> The Project for Excellence in Journalism, *State of the News Media 2005* <[http://www.stateofthemedial.org/2005/narrative\\_cabletv\\_contentanalysis.asp](http://www.stateofthemedial.org/2005/narrative_cabletv_contentanalysis.asp)> Thinner Reporting on Cable

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

demographic, on average, watch over 39 hours of television a week. That is over 9 hours more than those ages 35 to 54.<sup>21</sup> Informing the public of politically meaningful events and information is then central to the ability of the news media to meet the traditional expectations of American democracy.

In order to properly meet democratic expectations, news media must then be comprehensive. For the purpose of this study, comprehensiveness will be a measure of the value of the subject matter a news provider covers as well as the extensiveness of that coverage. The question is then whether or now the switch to a twenty-four hour news cycle has had any significant impact on the types of stories covered by the news media and the extensiveness of such coverage.

### **Benefits**

The networks are restricted to presenting the news during predetermined times. ABC, CBS, and NBC can report news as it develops only when it just so happens to correspond with their scheduled news slots. Otherwise, they can only interject occasional updates in-between the morning game shows and soaps.<sup>22</sup> Beyond the fact that this costs the networks audience share in times of high news interest, this also impacts what the news does show when there is developing news. CNN, however, is capable of operating outside of the “tyranny

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<sup>20</sup> Gans, Herbert J. *Democracy and the News*. Oxford University Press, 2003. pp.57.

<sup>21</sup> Ansolabehere, Stephen, Roy Behr, and Santo Iyengar. *The Media Game: American Politics in the Television Age*. Macmillam Publishing Company, 1993. pp. 14.

<sup>22</sup> Diamond, Edwin. *The Media Show*. The MIT Press, 1991. pp. 55-56.



of the clock,” giving it the opportunity to transmit much more information.<sup>23</sup> Cable news does not need to cram all of its coverage into a small news block as the entire day is devoted to news. This means that, at the very least, a twenty-four hour news cycle allows for the ability to cover far more stories more closely than the old network model. If realized, this potential could be a benefit of the transition to a cable news format.

Cable news’ flexible schedule also can impact what cable news providers elect to show. CNN will not cut away from live broadcasts even if they reflect the boring tedium the networks generally edit out for their viewers: waiting for White House briefings, waiting for a plane to land, or simply showing the Baghdad skyline and waiting for explosions.<sup>24</sup> They can afford to make these decisions because when they show such footage, the audience is not missing the *Price is Right* or their afternoon soaps. This results in the audience having a more pure understanding of the event as it happens. It may not be exciting or even incredibly informative, but it is genuine. Such coverage allows the audience to draw their own conclusions and attach their own significance to events. The audience is able to develop a sense of not only what the news is, but how it is gathered. This increased transparency with a switch to cable news may help dispel some of the poor source identification related concerns regarding accuracy

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<sup>23</sup> Maines, Patrick D. Foreword. *CNN vs. The Networks: Is More News Better News* by The Media Institute. The Media Institute, 1983. pp. v.

<sup>24</sup> Diamond, Edwin. *The Media Show*. The MIT Press, 1991. pp. 60.

as the twenty-four hour news cycle allows for a greater presentation of the methods used to gather information.

The fact that modern television news, both network and cable, is a business, leads many to believe that television news providers are only concerned with maintaining their audience share. It would then make sense that they would only air that which was the most entertaining or could best hold audience interest. Though one could argue that news outlets simply air that which is most interesting or sensational, one can not ignore the fact that more mundane events such as visits from foreign dignitaries still receive a great deal of coverage.<sup>25</sup> This indicates that despite increasing the size and power of corporations which own media resources, the advent of the twenty-four hour news cycle has not necessarily completely altered news priorities.

### **Drawbacks**

Unfortunately, the benefits discussed above, in practical application, are not all actually manifesting themselves in modern cable news. Though a twenty-four hour news provider may not balk from showing tedious live footage, it is important to recognize that live event coverage makes up a very small percentage of modern cable news programming. The "State of the News Media" report found that only 6% of cable news programming for any given day was

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<sup>25</sup> Fensch, Thomas. *Television News Anchors: An Anthology of Profiles of the major Figures and Issues in United States Network Reporting*. McFarland & Company, 1993. pp. 191.

actually live event coverage.<sup>26</sup> This benefit is then atypical of a majority of what an American citizen can expect to receive from any given twenty-four hour news provider.

Likewise, though cable news' twenty-four hour news cycle may have more time to expand its coverage, it does not do so. The "State of the News Media" report for 2005 found that cable news covers a much narrower range of topics than other forms of news media.<sup>27</sup> This indicates that the potential benefit of more expansive coverage mentioned earlier remains unrealized even after over two decades of twenty-four hour cable news.

Beyond the shortcomings in the perceived benefits of a twenty-four hour news cycle in filling the need for comprehensiveness, the switch to such a format also presents a number of distinct drawbacks. Though the news priorities of CNN and the networks may not have differed significantly in the early 1980's, the "State of the News Media" report indicates that things have changed.<sup>28</sup> Networks and cable news providers are no longer likely to adopt the same stories and events as news or present similar stories in the same manor. What are the implications of this change for the likelihood of the twenty-four hour news cycle to provide valuable subject mater?

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<sup>26</sup> The Project for Excellence in Journalism, *State of the News Media 2005* < [http://www.stateofthemedial.org/2005/narrative\\_cabletv\\_contentanalysis.asp?cat=2&media=5](http://www.stateofthemedial.org/2005/narrative_cabletv_contentanalysis.asp?cat=2&media=5) > Story Origination on Cable News

<sup>27</sup> The Project for Excellence in Journalism, *State of the News Media 2005* < [http://www.stateofthemedial.org/2005/narrative\\_cabletv\\_contentanalysis.asp?cat=2&media=5](http://www.stateofthemedial.org/2005/narrative_cabletv_contentanalysis.asp?cat=2&media=5) > Breadth of Topic

<sup>28</sup> The Media Institute. *CNN vs. The Networks: Is More News Better News*. The Media Institute, 1983. pp. x.

Unfortunately, the current state of cable news indicates that the change is an unfavorable one. The push for profits has led to a proliferation of 'soft' news, that news which is not necessary for citizens to have in order to perform their democratic duty.<sup>29</sup> All indications point to the fact that the switch to a cable news format has only exacerbated to this proliferation. CNN currently airs five general interest shows ranging from healthy living advice, money management techniques, and even home improvement.<sup>30</sup> These programs in no way enable citizens to better fulfill their role as American citizens and the information they provide has very little democratic value. Even beyond these programs, the percentage of coverage devoted to high value news on cable has slipped behind that of the networks. The amount of time devoted to hard news, that news which pertains directly to government function, action, or policy, in the twenty-four hour news cycle has been on the decline to such an extent that celebrity and lifestyle related coverage now fills a greater percent of cable news programming than network news programming. Coverage of government actions has also declined. In the past, the morning news shows of the networks, with their magazine format, were notorious for only briefly overviewing the headlines of the previous day before going to cooking segments or celebrity interviews.<sup>31</sup> Now, however, the "State of the News Media" report for 2005 indicates that cable news providers may be falling behind even these programs in terms of providing "hard," valuable

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<sup>29</sup> Gans, Herbert J. *Democracy and the News*. Oxford University Press, 2003. pp.29.

<sup>30</sup> *Programming Schedules*. CNN. 14 April, 2005. <[www.cnn.com/CNN/Programs](http://www.cnn.com/CNN/Programs)>

<sup>31</sup> Diamond, Edwin. *The Media Show*. The MIT Press, 1991. pp. 59.

news.<sup>32</sup> (Table 1) These programming and news selection choices demonstrate that the arrival of cable news and the switch to a twenty-four hour news cycle has not furthered the extent to which news media presents material which has significant democratic value.

**Table 1: Topics on Cable and Network News<sup>33</sup>**

	Cable	Network Evening	Network Morning
Government	17%	29%	25%
Defense/Military	7	1	0
Foreign Affairs	9	14	8
Elections	14	11	8
Domestic Affairs	11	20	15
Business	1	4	1
Crime	3	1	5
Science/Technology	1	4	3
Celebrity	14	2	4
Lifestyle	9	4	7
Accidents/Disasters	2	4	3
Other	12	6	21
<i>Totals may not equal 100 due to rounding.</i>			

After the O.J. Simpson case, CNN realized their audience would be small, generally less than half a percentage point, unless an event of major importance

<sup>32</sup> The Project for Excellence in Journalism, *State of the News Media 2005* < [http://www.stateofthemedial.org/2005/narrative\\_cabletv\\_contentanalysis.asp?cat=2&media=5](http://www.stateofthemedial.org/2005/narrative_cabletv_contentanalysis.asp?cat=2&media=5)> Topics on Cable and Network News.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid

was happening.<sup>34</sup> Cable news providers realize that on a normal day devoid of any major events or stories, they will lose out to the networks' regularly scheduled broadcasts. During times of crisis and when major world events occur, however, CNN's ratings and advertising costs go up to more than five times their normal levels.<sup>35</sup> Thus one could argue that a majority of cable news programming is irrelevant as there is only significant viewer-ship when there are high-salience events occurring and during such events, cable news providers will often shift away from their regular programming to exclusive coverage of the event. Though this is a valid argument, such coverage still does not make up the bulk of cable news programming and is then not necessarily representative of the shift to a twenty-four hour news cycle as a whole. This paper will then examine all of what is shown on cable news providers and the aspects of twenty-four hour news which affect these choices.

The nature of cable news programming also affects what is shown. The programming schedule of a twenty-four hour news provider is highly flexible which allows for them to devote an entire day of coverage to a single event. This can be warranted, but often results in media saturation of trivial stories.<sup>36</sup> A cable news provider has the ability to spend an entire day covering a major world conflict or a national crisis. In these circumstances, a full day's coverage of the

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<sup>34</sup> Barkin, Steve M. *American Television News: The Media Marketplace and the Public Interest*. M. E. Sharp, 2003. pp. 111.

<sup>35</sup> Johnston, Carla Brooks. *Winning the Global News Game*. Butterworth-Heinemann, 1995. pp. 73.

<sup>36</sup> Barkin, Steve M. *American Television News: The Media Marketplace and the Public Interest*. M. E. Sharp, 2003. pp. 105.

single event may be a necessity if the provider wants to comprehensively explore the event. When the event is a celebrity trial or pregnancy, however, such coverage is excessive and detrimental to democratic discourse as the public consciousness is saturated with relatively meaningless information.

Hundreds of studies have confirmed that those issues which get the most media coverage become the issues that the public thinks are the most important.<sup>37</sup> When a cable news provider spends an entire day covering a celebrity trial, the American public cannot help but assume the trial to be a matter of great importance. Rather than discussing other truly significant events, these 'media circuses' become the sole point of discourse for as long as news providers hold onto them. As these events often have little meaningful political implications, knowledge of them in no way encourages civic involvement or improves the quality of a citizen's involvement in the democratic process. They then not only fill time which could otherwise be devoted to more valuable topics and events, but also alter the public's perception of what is important and run directly contrary to the ideal of comprehensiveness. Also, the news media's constant coverage not only has the ability to establish an event as significant, but also can impact the perception of causes and solutions.<sup>38</sup> If largely irrelevant and atypical occurrences are presented as causes or results of broader social problems, movements to correct those problems can be misguided.

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<sup>37</sup> Chiasson, Lloyd Jr. *The Press in Times of Crisis*. Greenwood Press, 1995. pp. 219.

<sup>38</sup> Chiasson, Lloyd Jr. *The Press in Times of Crisis*. Greenwood Press, 1995. pp. 223.

The switch to a twenty-four hour cable news cycle has also broken the traditional ties between network news providers and local news affiliates. A cable news provider does not have the benefit of a local 'branch' operating in every major metropolitan area across the nation. In a study of the coverage of the 1988 Democratic and Republican national conventions, it was found that the extensiveness of a news provider's coverage of an event was directly proportional to its ability to easily provide personnel.<sup>39</sup> Partnerships with local affiliates facilitate the ability of large news providers to have personnel in place when significant events occur. There is then a greater likelihood of more extensive coverage, a likelihood which has been decreased with the advent of cable news and the loss of affiliate-network partnerships.

Another measure of comprehensiveness which seems to indicate that the switch to a twenty-four hour news cycle has been a negative one is the examination of the number of different viewpoints provided during the presentation of a story. Just as hard news has declined on cable news, so has the issuance of multiple views on a given story. This decline has also been significant enough to result in cable news falling behind the old network model. (Table 2). Currently only approximately one quarter to one third of all cable news stories have a balance of different viewpoints represented, with over half the

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<sup>39</sup> E. Albert Moffett, "Satellite News Gathering at the National Conventions: The Coming of Age of Local Television News," paper presented at the Broadcast Education Association Annual Convention, Las Vegas, April 28, 1989.



stories presenting only a single view.<sup>40</sup> Cable news, therefore, currently covers its stories less extensively, from fewer viewpoints than news providers who assume the traditional network model do, illustrating the shift to a twenty-four hours news cycle to be a step backwards in terms of comprehensiveness.

**Table 2: Range of Viewpoints on Cable and Network News<sup>41</sup>**

	<b>Cable</b>	<b>Network Evening</b>	<b>Network Morning</b>
<b>Mix</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>72%</b>	<b>86%</b>
<b>Mostly One View</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>3%</b>
<b>Only One View</b>	<b>52%</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>11%</b>

### **Fairness and Comprehensiveness of Election Coverage**

Television news has always taken an interest in electoral contests. Even as early as the 1952 Republican National Convention, there were over twelve hundred television personnel to capture the event.<sup>42</sup> The media's focus on the electoral cycle remains strong to this day. The role the switch to a twenty-four hour news cycle plays in the way the media present electoral contests is then an important point of study for this exploration.

Many would argue that one of the most important roles of the news media is to keep the public informed by monitoring government and reporting its

<sup>40</sup> The Project for Excellence in Journalism, *State of the News Media 2005* < [http://www.stateofthemedial.org/2005/narrative\\_cabletv\\_contentanalysis.asp?cat=2&media=5](http://www.stateofthemedial.org/2005/narrative_cabletv_contentanalysis.asp?cat=2&media=5) > Range of Viewpoints

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Mickelson, Sig. *The Decade That Shaped Television News*. Praeger Publishers, 1998. pp. 83.

actions. When this role is properly filled, news media help to develop a rich informational environment which leads to more responsible government officials because of an increased sense of accountability.<sup>43</sup> This is because when it comes time for elections, the electorate can punish or reward officials for what they have done.

It is also the responsibility of the news media to inform the public about challengers in electoral contests. Though these individuals may or may not have a record to stand on, the public needs to be made aware of their platforms and positions if they are to cast an informed and meaningful vote. Levels of news coverage do drastically affect public awareness of a candidate, especially in tight races where incumbents face viable challengers.<sup>44</sup> For many Americans, a candidate is not even considered a viable challenger until they receive recognition by the media.

It is important to recognize, however, that some researchers assert that the media have little effect on swaying a voter one way or the other because people tend to make their voting decisions based on the opinions of family and friends or their own party affiliations.<sup>45</sup> Though they recognize that the media does bring a candidate to the public's attention, these researchers argue that the influence of the media ends there. This assertion seems reasonable when one

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<sup>43</sup> Arnold, R. Douglas. *Congress, The Press, and Political Accountability*. Princeton University Press, 2004. pp. 245.

<sup>44</sup> Clark, Peter and Susan H. Evans. *Covering Campaigns*. Stanford University Press, 1983. pp. 87-88.

<sup>45</sup> Shaw, David. *Journalism Today: A Changing Press for A Changing America*. Harper's College Press, 1977. pp. 45.

considers that studies have demonstrated that even direct editorial endorsements are likely to do little more than crystallize existing preferences.<sup>46</sup> Though it is possible that the belief that news coverage affects how citizens actually perceive the candidates is just another part of the ‘telemetry’ mentioned earlier, this paper will assume that quality election coverage is actually possible and beneficial.

For the purpose of this examination, providing quality election coverage will consist of treating the candidates in an electoral contest fairly with respect to both their individual positions and one another, providing meaningful information about the candidates in an electoral contest, and increasing/maintaining political accountability for incumbents.

### **Benefits**

Studies have illustrated that citizens in cities where there is more news media tend to be more interested in electoral contests and better informed about the candidates.<sup>47</sup> The expansion of television news into the twenty-four hour news cycle and the growth of cable news conglomerates would then theoretically be more likely to encourage such interest and allow for a more informed

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<sup>46</sup> Shaw, David. *Journalism Today: A Changing Press for A Changing America*. Harper's College Press, 1977. pp. 73.

<sup>47</sup> Arnold, R. Douglas. *Congress, The Press, and Political Accountability*. Princeton University Press, 2004. pp. 221.

electorate. This is of course entirely dependent on this correlation remaining constant regardless of the nature of the coverage itself.

Also, just as the twenty-four hour news cycle allows more time for more comprehensive coverage, it also allows for more coverage of the actions of officials in office and coverage of the platforms of challengers. This would then give cable news the opportunity to engage in more valuable and meaningful election coverage. As before, however, whether or not twenty-four hour news providers take advantage of this potential remains to be seen.

The “State of the News Media” report for 2005 also demonstrated that, in terms of treating candidates fairly, election news coverage by cable news providers has been relatively effective in not attaching an independent negative or positive connotation to election stories. They found that candidate and election issue stories were unlikely to have any clearly identifiable ‘spin.’<sup>48</sup>(Table 3) Though the nature of the medium itself in no way necessarily predisposes it to maintaining such a balance, it is important to note that a relative balance has been maintained in the twenty-four hour news cycle.

**Table 3: Tone of Election Coverage on Cable News<sup>49</sup>**

	<b>CNN</b>	<b>Fox</b>	<b>MSNBC</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Positive</b>	10%	16%	17%	15%
<b>Neutral</b>	62	55	32	47
<b>Negative</b>	17	17	8	13
<b>Multi-Subject</b>	11	12	43	25

<sup>48</sup> The Project for Excellence in Journalism, *State of the News Media 2005* < [http://www.stateofthemedias.org/2005/narrative\\_cabletv\\_contentanalysis.asp?cat=2&media=5](http://www.stateofthemedias.org/2005/narrative_cabletv_contentanalysis.asp?cat=2&media=5) > Tone of Election Coverage

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

## **Drawbacks**

Media outlets greatly favor incumbents in pure volume of coverage. This means the public will almost always be less aware of challengers in any given contest. This is natural when one considers that incumbents have the advantage of having a constant platform for coverage, where challengers must demonstrate to the press that they have 'earned' coverage.<sup>50</sup> Though this shortcoming is not unique to cable news providers, the switch to a twenty-four hour news cycle may have exacerbated the problem.

As mentioned previously, a cable news channel has twenty-four hours of programming to fill. This means it can extensively cover more action by government officials, expanding the already existing platform available to incumbents. The discrepancy between public awareness of incumbents then grows with the switch to a twenty-four hour cable news format as officials in office have an even broader platform to stand before the public on. This drawback, however, is contingent on the fact that cable news outlets do in fact devote more coverage to government officials.

Current evidence indicates that cable news outlets do not tend to exercise their ability to more extensively cover more elected government officials. First of all, as discussed in the section on comprehensiveness, the percentage of cable

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<sup>50</sup> Clark, Peter and Susan H. Evans. *Covering Campaigns*. Stanford University Press, 1983. pp. 113-114.

news programming time devoted to coverage of the government is low, only 17 percent.<sup>51</sup> What is even more concerning is that a comparison of the “State of the News Media” reports for 2004 and 2005 demonstrates that this percentage is on a sharp decline, dropping over 12% in a single year.(See Page 11)<sup>52</sup> This indicates that the situation can only be expected to decline in coming years. Beyond the general lack of government coverage, it is important to realize that most of the media’s coverage of elected officials is focused exclusively on the president. Even less coverage is devoted to the Senate with only the major Senate players receiving any sort of significant coverage. Members of the House of Representatives receive almost no coverage. When there is no actual quality coverage of incumbents, there may be no increase in coverage discrepancy between incumbents and challengers, but there is also no increase in accountability.

Evidence actually indicates that the growth and development of news organizations has actually decreased political accountability by prioritizing media management and debate over action.<sup>53</sup> It is more important for a government official to look and sound good on television than it is to take responsible actions which are in line with the public. This is, in part, due to what the news media elects to cover during campaigns. Research has shown that cable news’

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<sup>51</sup> The Project for Excellence in Journalism, *State of the News Media 2005* < [http://www.stateofthemedial.com/2005/narrative\\_cabletv\\_contentanalysis.asp?cat=2&media=5](http://www.stateofthemedial.com/2005/narrative_cabletv_contentanalysis.asp?cat=2&media=5)> Topics on Cable and Network News.

<sup>52</sup> The Project for Excellence in Journalism, *State of the News Media 2004* < [http://www.stateofthemedial.com/2004/narrative\\_cabletv\\_contentanalysis.asp?cat=2&media=5](http://www.stateofthemedial.com/2004/narrative_cabletv_contentanalysis.asp?cat=2&media=5)> Topics on Cable News

<sup>53</sup> Ansolabehere, Stephen, Roy Behr, and Santo Iyengar. *The Media Game: American Politics in the Television Age*. Macmillan Publishing Company, 1993. pp. 3.

campaign coverage tends to favor scandal coverage.<sup>54</sup> Those candidates who are able to best avoid or bounce back from scandal then have the advantage in an electoral contest. Though these tendencies are evident on both twenty-four hour news outlets as well as network news providers, the effects have been slightly amplified by the switch to a twenty-four hour news cycle. A cable news outlet can bury itself even deeper in scandal coverage by having the ability to dwell on a single meaningless media snafu for an entire twenty-four hour news cycle.

### **Capabilities for International Coverage**

One of the traditional functions of the press is to inform the citizenry of world events.<sup>55</sup> The details of such events are well beyond what a citizen could simply ascertain by their own devices, yet an understanding and awareness of these events is often needed for effective participation in the democratic process. What differences, if any, exist in network and cable news' ability to cover international news is than an important point of study for making a judgment in favor of one or the other. Also, in an ever globalizing world, the impact of the switch to a twenty-four hour news cycle on international broadcasting is also highly significant.

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<sup>54</sup> Farnsworth, Stephen J. and S. Robert Lichter. *The Nightly News Nightmare*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003. pp. 12.

<sup>55</sup> Jamieson, Kathleen Hall and Paul Waldman. *The Press Effect: Politicians, Journalists, and the Stories That Shape the Political World*. Oxford University Press, 2003. pp. 197.

## Benefits

It has been established that the size of a news provider's market directly correlates with their levels of national and international news coverage.<sup>56</sup>

Currently, CNN's market dwarfs that of its network counterparts. The availability of cable news channels has been steadily on the rise for the past decade resulting in an ever growing domestic audience for cable news providers.<sup>57</sup>

(Figure 3) The ad revenues of all of the major cable news providers have also been on the rise.<sup>58</sup> There is an even greater discrepancy in the market share of CNN and its network counterparts because though CNNi (CNN International), the cable news provider has extensive access to both domestic and international markets. Though the networks also tap into international markets, they are not as developed or expansive as that which the switch to a twenty-four hour news cycle CNN has achieved. Income from this broader market allows CNN to more thoroughly cover international events.

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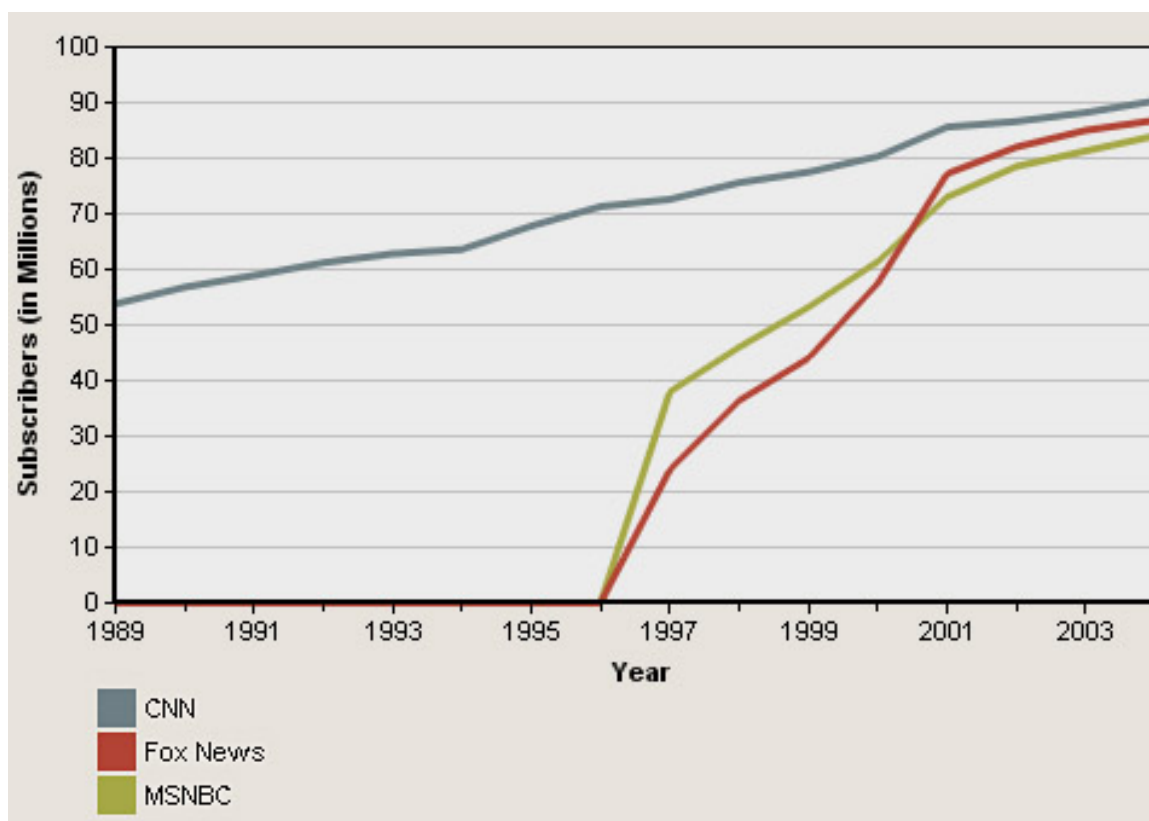
<sup>56</sup> Carroll, Raymond L. "Market Size and TV News Values," *Journalism Quarterly* 66 (Spring 1989): pp. 49-56.

<sup>57</sup> The Project for Excellence in Journalism, *State of the News Media* < [http://www.stateofthemedia.org/2005/narrative\\_cabletv\\_audience.asp](http://www.stateofthemedia.org/2005/narrative_cabletv_audience.asp) > Availability of Cable News Channels

<sup>58</sup> The Project for Excellence in Journalism, *State of the News Media* < [http://www.stateofthemedia.org/2005/narrative\\_cabletv\\_economics.asp](http://www.stateofthemedia.org/2005/narrative_cabletv_economics.asp) > Net Ad Revenue of Cable News Channels



**Figure 3: World-Wide Cable News Subscribers<sup>59</sup>**



The resource discrepancy between CNN and the networks is further compounded by the fact that the networks, in response to shrinking audiences, have cut budgets for news coverage. These cuts often are aimed at foreign coverage causing some network foreign news bureaus to be cut down to a single person.<sup>60</sup> CNN is then able to devote more resources to international coverage which increases international interest in CNN. This then causes even further growth of the news provider's international market and the discrepancy perpetuates and exacerbates itself. The end result is that CNN is has the

<sup>59</sup> The Project for Excellence in Journalism, *State of the News Media* < [http://www.stateofthemedias.org/2005/narrative\\_cabletv\\_audience.asp](http://www.stateofthemedias.org/2005/narrative_cabletv_audience.asp) > Availability of Cable News Channels

<sup>60</sup> Gans, Herbert J. *Democracy and the News*. Oxford University Press, 2003. pp.23.

potential to better inform the American public of international events than the networks.

As mentioned before, CNN is well established in international markets. This is because recent technological advancements have made such a venture possible. The expense incurred by bringing in these new technologies allowing for the leap to global transmission, makes any other such leap unlikely in the near future.<sup>61</sup> International broadcasting then represents the height of technology available to news networks at least for the near future. In broadcasting to foreign nations, CNN is able to benefit American Democracy in a way which is increasingly important in a globalizing world, by pushing cultural exchange. The U.S. exports more than 120,000 hours of programming to Europe every year and global programming trade has been growing at over 15 percent per year.<sup>62</sup> All of this programming, news or otherwise, helps other nations better understand U.S. culture and, in many ways, become tied to it. As an example, one can look to Japan. There are more televisions in Japan than there are flush toilets.<sup>63</sup> They also consume large amounts of American television and are one of America's closest allies in terms of supporting U.S. foreign policy. For the most part, this exchange eases international tensions and opens up international markets to even more American products and services. CNN's expansive international

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<sup>61</sup> Johnston, Carla Brooks. *Winning the Global News Game*. Butterworth-Heinemann, 1995. pp. 15.

<sup>62</sup> Parker, Richard. *Mixed Signals: The Prospects for Global Television News*. Twentieth Century Fund Press, 1995. pp. 5.

<sup>63</sup> Parker, Richard. *Mixed Signals: The Prospects for Global Television News*. Twentieth Century Fund Press, 1995. pp. 5.

market then has the potential to positively affect American trade and diplomacy and represents a benefit of the shift to a twenty-four hour news cycle.

### **Drawbacks**

Though the proliferation of cultural exchange brought about by the shift to a twenty-four hour news cycle has many potential positive results, it also has drawbacks. When there are strongly established cultural, social, or religious barriers which make such exchange unfavorable, the entrance of CNN and other U.S. programming into foreign markets can be perceived as a threat to be met with force. Thus cable networks can actually perpetuate the “war of cultures” rather than increasing cultural understanding.

As mentioned in the benefits section, twenty-four hour cable news providers have more resources which they could devote to international coverage. Unfortunately, however, a content analysis of the major cable networks reveals that very little programming time is devoted to covering foreign affairs. In fact, less than one-tenth of stories on cable news are related to foreign affairs. Network news, despite its resource deficiency, still manages to produce 5 percent more foreign affairs coverage than its twenty-four hour cable news counterparts.<sup>64</sup> The benefits of a switch to a twenty-four hour news cycle in

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<sup>64</sup> The Project for Excellence in Journalism, *State of the News Media 2005* < [http://www.stateofthemedial.org/2005/narrative\\_cabletv\\_contentanalysis.asp?cat=2&media=5](http://www.stateofthemedial.org/2005/narrative_cabletv_contentanalysis.asp?cat=2&media=5) > Topics on Cable and Network News.

terms of informing the American public of international events may then simply be unrealized increases in potential.

### **The Application of a Narrative Structure and Frames**

“Every news story should...display the attributes of fiction, of drama. It should have structure and conflict, problem and denouement, rising and falling action, a beginning, a middle, and an end.”<sup>65</sup> In this comment, former NBC news president Reuven Frank acknowledges that his business is one of storytelling and narrative. In preparing news for audience consumption, journalists take events and make them stories. These individual events are then fit into larger social narratives, with dominant themes developing and directing the manner in which future news is presented. This process of narrative development fundamentally alters the understanding audience members have of events. The process itself is also affected by the limitations of television as a medium for news.

Certain aspects of a story simply cannot be easily conveyed through electronic images.<sup>66</sup> Though a single stationary camera can easily convey basic facts about a city council meeting, who was there, what was discussed, and who said what, it cannot so easily inform the audience of the atmosphere surrounding

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<sup>65</sup> Reuven, Frank. “Memorandum from a Television News-man,” reprinted as Appendix 2 in A. William Bluem, *Documentary in American Television* (New York: Hastings House, 1965), pp. 276.

<sup>66</sup> Seidman, M.L. *The News Media – A Service and A Force*. Memphis State University Press, 1970. pp. 26.

the issue. The camera provides no background information to help the audience understand the complex circumstances underlying a discussion. The camera can tell one nothing of a city councilman's character or history. The camera can tell one only what happened and not why. Pure television coverage is full of gaps which leave the audience with a selective and incomplete narrative. This leads to the question of what, if anything is to be done to complete the narrative for the audience and what is the impact of such adjustments.

The public has no way to know that the Congressman is delivering a speech to an empty gallery so long as C-SPAN's camera stays locked on the podium. If someone decides to pan the gallery, however, the audience's understanding of the event changes dramatically. This decision, on its face, seems to simply expand the audience's understanding of the objective circumstances surrounding the speech itself, filling in necessary holes in the narrative. The gallery is in fact empty. What, however, if the Congressman's shoes are un-shined? The shoes are hidden by the podium and the audience would never know, leaving their understanding of the events incomplete. This could be brought to the audience's attention as easily as the empty gallery was by a camera zooming in on the Congressman's shoes. Is, however, a shot of the Congressman's shoes necessary for the audience to be informed about the speech? Most journalists would argue that it is not because the condition of the Congressman's shoes is trivial. The empty gallery, on the other hand, is a significant fact, as is the character of the Congressman or the broader debate

surrounding the topic of the speech. How the narrative is completed is ultimately a value judgment which must be made by the news provider.

A news outlet visually consumes an event, determines what information is pertinent to the broader narrative surrounding an event, and then passes on only that information to the audience. That broader narrative is a media frame, the structure of expectation inside of which any given story is considered and presented.<sup>67</sup> These frame adjustments have the potential to significantly impact an audience's understanding of an event by both intentionally limiting the facts an audience member is made aware of and by telling that member which elements of an event are worthy of attention. The obvious effects on the news media's information providing function then give these narrative adjustments and frames the potential to affect the democratic process. How has the switch to a twenty-four hour cable news cycle affected the use and development of narratives in television news?

### **Benefits**

When providing live coverage, a cable news provider shows events as they happen. There is no time to squeeze an event into any particular frame or categorize what is occurring into any one of a number of developing narratives. In the absence of a prepared and developed angle for any given story, the

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<sup>67</sup> Iyengar, Shanto. *Is Anyone Responsible: How Television Frames Political Issues*. The University of Chicago Press, 1991. Introduction.

audience is largely free to take an event as they will. Any potential negative distortions which could accompany a story being placed in a broader narrative can then be avoided. This benefit of cable news, however, only holds true when such news is actually covering breaking events live. As addressed before, a current content analysis of cable news outlets reveals that only 6% of a day's programming is devoted to live event coverage.<sup>68</sup> This benefit then applies only to less than one-sixteenth of what any given cable news provider produces.

Even when cable news providers do assume narrative frames, the results can be positive. Such expectations and categorizations make events easier to understand and discuss. If multiple citizens have a common understanding of an event, debate becomes easier and more natural. There is no confusion over how a story should be discussed or in which context other references should be made as the media has already set forth the parameters for the debate. The drawbacks of media framing must then be considered with respect to this benefit.

## **Drawbacks**

The 'talk-show culture' which awards those who assert the most poignant and controversial opinions has been seeping into cable journalism since the early

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<sup>68</sup> The Project for Excellence in Journalism, *State of the News Media 2005* < [http://www.stateofthemedial.org/2005/narrative\\_cabletv\\_contentanalysis.asp?cat=2&media=5](http://www.stateofthemedial.org/2005/narrative_cabletv_contentanalysis.asp?cat=2&media=5) > Story Origination on Cable News

1990s.<sup>69</sup> Such a conflict oriented manor of presentation focuses on simply telling the audience what has been said with little respect for whether claims are correct. The fact that the statements were made is news, what is said is outside of the cable news journalist's concern. The assumption of conflict oriented narrative frames as the dominant form of news presentation has also lead to a pundit invasion of cable news networks. Producing shows where pundits simply spew extremist doctrines at one another's deaf ears is also highly cost effective and results in a product which American viewers will consume. This form of news media, however, actually runs contrary to the news media's traditional goals in a democratic society. It is not informative and it discourages true democratic debate by glorifying the steadfast defense of a single extreme position even when that position cannot be logically defended. The growth of television punditry and the assertive media culture is largely the product of the switch to a twenty-four hour news cycle.

As mentioned earlier, the cable news networks have a lot of time to fill. Filling an entire twenty-four hour programming schedule with nothing but hard news is both costly and difficult. Rather than allowing themselves to be pushed into extensive general interest programming, the cable news networks have gone the way of the pundit. CNN currently has four separate programs which adopt what the network dubs a 'debate' format or frame and two other interview style

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<sup>69</sup> Rosenstiel, Thomas B. "Talk-Show Journalism." *The Future of News*. By Cook, Gomery, and Lichty. The Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1992. pp. 73-82.



programs.<sup>70</sup> Beyond simply filling time which could be devoted to hard news coverage, the creation of a “culture of assertion” which has resulted from these programs has caused a conflict frame to be assumed for non-debate cable news coverage.<sup>71</sup> Currently nearly a quarter of all stories aired on cable news are given a conflict oriented narrative frame with only 3% focusing on some sort of consensus.<sup>72</sup>(Table 4) The fact that these narrative frames hinder democratic debate by discouraging compromise and understanding makes their proliferation in a twenty-four hour news cycle a matter of concern. The development of this assertive culture, however, has negative effects beyond discouraging meaningful and productive debate.

**Table 4: Story Frames on Cable News<sup>73</sup>**

Conflict	23%
Consensus	3
Winners/Losers	5
Problem to Solve	4
Good Yarn	10
Reality Check	2
Underlying Principles	2
Other	4
None	45

<sup>70</sup> *Programming Scheduling*. CNN. 14 April, 2005. <[www.cnn.com/CNN/Programs](http://www.cnn.com/CNN/Programs)>

<sup>71</sup> Kovach, Bill and Tom Rosenstiel. *The Elements of Journalism*. Three Rivers Press, 2001. pp. 73-92

<sup>72</sup> The Project for Excellence in Journalism, *State of the News Media 2005* <[http://www.stateofthemedial.org/2005/narrative\\_cabletv\\_contentanalysis.asp?cat=2&media=5](http://www.stateofthemedial.org/2005/narrative_cabletv_contentanalysis.asp?cat=2&media=5)> Story Frames on Cable News

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

It has been proven that if an audience member has no particular opinion on an issue, they are likely to simply embrace whatever media assert so long as it does not conflict with already developed biases.<sup>74</sup> This demonstrates that though studies have demonstrated that media are rarely able to override deeply held opinions about government officials and policies, it can still generate those opinions when they have not yet been established. A media culture which is preoccupied with making assertions would then preempt members of society from drawing their own conclusions about a number of important social and political issues. The fact that cable news personalities are in fact making such assertions was confirmed by the “State of the News Media” report for 2005. It was found that for over a quarter of stories presented on a twenty-four hour cable news provider included the opinion of the journalist involved.<sup>75</sup>

The narrative structure which has developed as a result of the switch to a twenty-four hour news cycle, the culture of assertion, then represents a significant change for the worse in terms of the news media’s ability to meet democratic expectations. It is also clear that such a narrative structure is in full bloom on the modern cable news media.

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<sup>74</sup> Parenti, Michael. *Inventing Reality: The Politics of News Media Second Edition*. St. Martin’s Press, 1993. pp. 22.

<sup>75</sup> The Project for Excellence in Journalism, *State of the News Media 2005* < [http://www.stateofthemedial.org/2005/narrative\\_cabletv\\_contentanalysis.asp?cat=2&media=5](http://www.stateofthemedial.org/2005/narrative_cabletv_contentanalysis.asp?cat=2&media=5) > Journalists Opinion on Cable News

## Conclusions

In the end, the shift to a twenty-four hour news cycle has not enhanced the ability of the news media to fulfill the expectations of American democracy. The drawbacks which have accompanied such a shift easily outweigh the benefits as a majority of the benefits are only increases in potential and not practice. Though the shift to a twenty-four hour news cycle and the proliferation of cable news providers has increased the convenience of accessing the news, in terms of the value of that which is presented, there is nothing to distinguish it as something of value. The case of cable news is then a case of success in theory, but failure in practical application.

Perhaps, however, the discussion of twenty-four hour cable news media is an entirely moot point as Americans may be moving away from television news media, be it cable or network, to fulfill their democratic expectations. Take learning about the candidates and their campaigns as an example, in 2000, 20% of Americans reported learning about the presidential campaigns from late night comedy talk shows.<sup>76</sup> Also the internet has become a major campaign resource with candidate sponsored websites providing specific platform information and internet only advertising gaining in popularity with each passing election. Even in terms of learning about major world events, audience members are moving away from cable news as their primary source of information. Based on levels of

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<sup>76</sup> Farnsworth, Stephen J. and S. Robert Lichter. *The Nightly News Nightmare*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003. pp. 171

viewership, television viewers were nearly as likely to learn of the missile strikes against the Sudan and Afghanistan in August of 1998 on *The Tonight Show* or *Entertainment Tonight* as on a network newscast.<sup>77</sup> Such shows and their cable counterparts are actually the sole source of information on the day's events for many younger demographics. Cable news, like network news before it, may then also be only a temporarily strong media institution.

Though ratings may indicate cable news Viewership is growing, it would be incorrect to assume that because televisions around the nation are tuned to the cable news programming, citizens are actually watching. The average American has the television in their home on for approximately seven hours out of every day, but only watches four.<sup>78</sup> Even when they are at the television, short attention spans and the ever growing number of programming options available to an American citizen at any given time makes it unlikely that an audience member will sit and watch an entire cable or network news broadcast. In fact, studies have found that 62% of news watchers actually watch news programming with remote in hand.<sup>79</sup> These findings cut into the legitimacy of twenty-four hour cable news audiences. As talk and debate shows continue to grow and multiply, cable may even begin to see some of the audience diminishing effects which have plagued network news. Networks news programming is surrounded by other non-news programming which draws in

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<sup>77</sup> Baum, Matthew A. *Soft News Goes to War: Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy in the New Media Age*. Princeton University Press, 2003. pp. 1.

<sup>78</sup> Ansolabehere, Stephen, Roy Behr, and Santo Iyengar. *The Media Game: American Politics in the Television Age*. Macmillam Publishing Company, 1993. pp. 13.

<sup>79</sup> Gans, Herbert J. *Democracy and the News*. Oxford University Press, 2003. pp.31.

large audiences. Studies have shown that a large portion of network news viewers are actually inadvertent viewers simply waiting for non-news broadcasting to come on.<sup>80</sup> As general interest programming grows on cable news, a greater percent of its audience will become inadvertent viewers, audience members who neither fully absorb nor react to the information which is presented.

The fact that Americans may not be actually watching television news to an extent that they can be truly informed by it is highly significant as it leaves television news providers of any kind incapable of filling their roles in American Democracy. Though it is possible that the potential to fill a positive role in American Democracy is simply a part of the popular 'telemetry,' the "State of the News Media" report for 2005 found that a majority of Americans are still reporting that television news as plays a significant role in their information gathering, though no longer as a sole source of information.<sup>81</sup> The switch to a twenty-four hour television news cycle would then still have some potential significance.

Perhaps the greatest significance of the shift to a twenty-four hour news cycle lies not in television, but on the internet. Nearly half of all Americans now have internet access in their homes.<sup>82</sup> Between 42 and 59 percent of all

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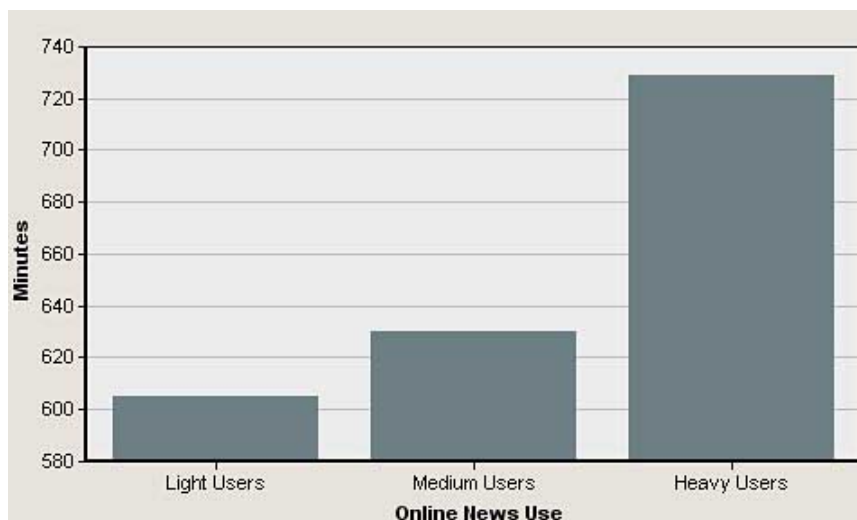
<sup>80</sup> Ansolabehere, Stephen, Roy Behr, and Santo Iyengar. *The Media Game: American Politics in the Television Age*. Macmillan Publishing Company, 1993. pp. 47.

<sup>81</sup> The Project for Excellence in Journalism, *State of the News Media 2005* < [http://www.stateofthemedia.org/2005/narrative\\_overview\\_audience.asp?cat=3&media=1](http://www.stateofthemedia.org/2005/narrative_overview_audience.asp?cat=3&media=1) > Audience

<sup>82</sup> The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, "Pew Research Center Biennial News Consumption Survey," June 8, 2004, page 12.

Americans reported going online for news at some point in the year 2004.<sup>83</sup> Also, high level internet users are also major consumers of television news media.<sup>84</sup> (Figure 4) The internet shares the twenty-four hour news cycle of cable television with the added convenience of immediate informational gratification and many television news producers, both network and cable, have moved into the business of providing internet news. Unfortunately, an examination of the impact of online news is beyond the scope of this examination and some of the farther reaching consequences of the shift to a twenty four hour news cycle must go unknown. From what is known about the current state of television news media, however, the shift to a cable news format has been a negative one in terms of enabling news media to meet democratic expectations.

**Figure 4: Amount of Time Internet Users Watch Television**<sup>85</sup>



*Light use is under 60 minutes per week, medium is 60 to 199, and heavy is more than 120 minutes.*

<sup>83</sup> The Project for Excellence in Journalism, *State of the News Media 2005* < [http://www.stateofthemedia.org/2005/narrative\\_online\\_audience.asp?cat=3&media=3](http://www.stateofthemedia.org/2005/narrative_online_audience.asp?cat=3&media=3) > Online Audience

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

At the conclusion of the examination, it is important to realize that this exploration is far from exhaustive. There are a number of other different factors and concerns which are altering the modern news media which go beyond the switch to a twenty-four hour news cycle. The news media is undergoing broad economic and ownership changes which have the potential to impact all forms of media, not just television. Also a number of the changes taking place in the twenty-four hour news cycle are also being experienced by more traditional network style news outlets for similar or different reasons. It is also important to remember that television is not the exclusive means by which the needs of American democracy are met. To comprehensively study the news media, one must also explore other mediums for news such as print and even other broadcast mediums such as radio. This study was not intended to completely analyze the "State of the News Media," only one particular aspect of that broader institution. To that effect, this examination is valuable as it adds one element to the broader body of work which makes up modern media study.

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