Mixed Signals? Gender and the Media’s Coverage of the 2008 Vice Presidential Candidates

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The 2008 presidential election was one of the most watched campaigns in American history, and prominently featured the vice presidential candidates, Governor Sarah Palin and Senator Joseph Biden. This election contest presents an exciting opportunity to expand and test our current understandings of the relationship between gender and media coverage. We examine this relationship using computer-assisted content analysis of major newspapers, television news broadcasts, and political blogs. These three media are analyzed in terms of both quantity and substance of coverage received by Palin and Biden. Using a multiple medium perspective in our investigation of the contest between Palin and Biden, this article finds differences in volume of coverage (Governor Palin receives more), substance of coverage (roughly reflecting gender-based stereotypes), and medium (with differences in volume and substance of coverage across newspapers, television, and blogs). Implications for future contests and for American politics in general are discussed.

Keywords: Gender, Media Coverage, 2008 Election, Stereotypes, U.S. Vice Presidential Candidates, Content Analysis, Sarah Palin, Joe Biden.


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On August 29, 2008, Governor Sarah Palin of Alaska became the first woman in the history of the United States to be named as the vice presidential candidate for the Republican Party. At a press conference announcing her nomination, she acknowledged this historical moment with the following reflection.

I think as well today of two other women who came before me in national elections. I can’t begin this great effort without honoring the achievements of Geraldine Ferraro in 1984 and of course Senator Hillary Clinton, who showed such determination and grace in her presidential campaign. It was rightly noted in Denver this week that Hillary left 18 million cracks in the highest, hardest glass ceiling in America but it turns out the women of America aren’t finished yet and we can shatter that glass ceiling once and for all. (Roll Call 2008)

At a time when women hold less than 17 percent of Congressional seats, approximately 23 percent of statewide elective executive offices, and have yet to be elected to the offices of president and vice president, this moment, as noted by
Governor Palin, was indeed an important political achievement for women in the United States (Center for American Women and Politics 2010).

The electoral contest between Governor Palin and the Democratic pick for vice president, Senator Joseph Biden from Delaware, presents an exciting opportunity to expand and test our current understandings of the relationship between gender and media coverage. This article examines this relationship using computer-assisted content analysis of major newspapers, television news broadcasts, and political blogs. These three media are analyzed in two ways. First, we investigate differences in the quantity of coverage received by Palin and Biden. Second, we analyze the substance of the media coverage in terms of multiple forms of gender stereotypes. Using a multiple medium perspective allows a unique comparison across conventional media and new forms of political communication, thus providing a useful understanding of the portrayal of this most recent political achievement for women in the United States.

The importance of this research is threefold. First, the electoral contest between Palin and Biden was one of the most-watched and most-covered vice presidential campaigns in history. Discussion of McCain’s choice of Palin alone represented a full 7 percent of the television election coverage of the entire 2008 presidential campaign (Center for Media and Public Affairs 2009), and Governor Palin—fifth—and Senator Biden—thirteenth—were both among the top 20 news makers in 2008, outranking the likes of Governor Rod Blagojevich—sixth—and the Pope—sixteenth—(Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism 2009). The debate between Palin and Biden was the most-watched vice presidential debate in United States history, drawing 69.9 million viewers (Gorman 2008). This represents 33 percent more viewers than the first debate between Obama and McCain, and 61 percent more viewers than the 2004 vice presidential debate between Cheney and Edwards. It is essential that we understand the media coverage of this vice presidential contest simply because the public and the media decided how important a contest it was.

Second, the nomination of Sarah Palin as the first female vice presidential running mate for the Republican Party marks a new political achievement for U.S. women. As a new level of political success, this achievement suggests a possible shift in the role of women in the political system, which warrants a thorough examination of how political factors, such as media coverage of women candidates, may shift alongside the changing roles of women. It also allows an important point of comparison to 1984—the only other vice presidential contest featuring a female candidate. Without an examination of vice presidential contests, our understanding of the intersection of political communication and the experience of women as political candidates is incomplete.

Finally, this research examines the Palin–Biden case across three different media. While there is a growing collection of research examining the roles of online media in politics (Herrnson, Stokes-Brown, and Hindman 2007; Howard 2005), there is a lack of research that takes into consideration how campaign
coverage by political blogs compares with that of other media, such as newspapers and television. Even less attention is paid to the relationship of gender and media coverage across this divide of “newer” (blogs) and “older” (newspapers, television) media. Whereas most extant research addresses only a single medium, we examine both the volume and substance of coverage Palin and Biden received across newspapers, television, and political blogs.

**Gender and Media Coverage**

The relationship between gender and media coverage has served as the starting point for a growing body of research. The results of these studies reveal a great deal regarding the amount and substance of coverage men and women running for office receive. Although attention to this relationship continues to grow, questions remain concerning whether differences exist in the amount and type of coverage that male and female candidates receive.

Leading work examining gender and media coverage shows that female candidates tend to receive less coverage than their male counterparts (Kahn 1992, 1994a, 1994b; Kahn and Goldenberg 1991). For example, in an analysis of presidential campaigns, Falk (2008, 101) finds that newspapers printed “fewer stories and fewer words per story about women than they did about men who had similar credentials and polled about the same.” This lack of parity in quantity of media coverage has also been detected in the coverage of women officeholders (Carroll and Schreiber 1997).

However, the question of whether or not differences exist in the amount of coverage between men and women candidates is far from settled. While historically women running for president tended to receive less coverage (Falk 2008), recent scholarship suggests this may not hold true for contemporary races for U.S. president (Lawrence and Rose 2010). This finding has been suggested in research examining other office levels as well. The discussion of gender and candidate communication by Bystrom and others (2004) highlights a possible shift in how women candidates are covered by the media. These authors found that in the 1998 senatorial and gubernatorial races, women received less newspaper coverage than their male colleagues, but in the 2000 and 2002 races, a shift in quantity of coverage occurred, with candidates of both genders receiving similar amounts of coverage (Bystrom et al. 2004). Results suggesting similar amounts of media coverage between men and women candidates have been found in studies of senatorial and gubernatorial races (Jalalzai 2006; Smith 1997), in mayoral races (Atkeson and Krebs 2008), as well as in comparative work on gender and media coverage (Hinojosa 2010; Kittilson and Fridkin 2008; Semetko and Boomgaard 2007).¹

¹ In an article of *Globe and Mail* coverage of the 1976, 1993, and 2004 Canadian Conservative party leadership races, women candidates received more news attention than their men counterparts (Trimble 2007).
As our understanding of how the quantity of coverage received continues to evolve, scholarship is also building upon what we know concerning the substance of media coverage of men and women candidates. The work of Jamieson (1995) maps the various “double binds” women face as public, political figures and the preference for masculine traits in political leaders over those traits typically associated with women. A wealth of scholarship supports this instrumental understanding of masculine and feminine traits, and how the preference for masculine traits over feminine can translate into stereotypes women face in the political sphere (Huddy 1994; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Koch 2002; Rosenwasser and Dean 1989).

Stereotypes invoking masculine and feminine traits, as well as traditional notions of male/female roles, consistently arise in studies analyzing differences in the substance of coverage of men and women candidates (Everitt and Gidengil 2003; Kahn 1996; Lawrence and Rose 2010). More mentions of emotions, family, and personal background information in relation to female candidates are ways the media have reinforced stereotypical notions of appropriate feminine traits and female roles in coverage of women candidates (Aday and Devitt 2001; Falk 2008; Jamieson 1995; see also Foreit et al. 1980). The media raise questions of campaign viability and experience for almost all political candidates, yet these questions are raised more often in cases of female candidates (Kahn 1996; cf. Jalalzai 2006). Highlighting family and electability when covering women candidates are ways the media perpetuate notions of traditional male/female roles, which can disadvantage women in the political realm where masculine traits are preferred.

Another way stereotypes emerge in media coverage of women candidates is the linkage of certain types of issues and policies to women candidates and others to men candidates. This delineation of issues falls along social definitions of masculinity and femininity with men being linked to more “masculine” issues, such as the economy, foreign affairs, and defense, while women tend to be linked to more “feminine” issues, such as education, health care, and poverty (Bystrom, Robertson, and Banwart 2001; Carroll and Schreiber 1997; Kahn 1996; Kittilson and Fridkin 2008; Murray 2010).

Discussions of physical appearance are yet another way media coverage has differed in covering men and women candidates. In research on women who have run for president, senator, and governor, scholars have found more physical appearance descriptions of attire or age in newspaper coverage of the women candidates than of their male opponents (Devitt 1999; Falk 2008; Heldman, Carroll, and Olson 2005; Hinojosa 2010; Kahn 1992; 1996; Kahn and Goldenberg 1991).

Research Hypotheses

Previous work analyzing the relationship between gender and media coverage tells us to expect differences in the media coverage of female
candidates, in both amount and substance of coverage. Although scholarly attention to these potential differences has grown, it is unclear whether these differences will apply to the case of vice presidential candidates. Given the competing hypotheses regarding the specifics of when and in what form coverage differences arise between male and female candidates, current scholarship does not provide a clear projection of what the presence of a female candidate in a contest, such as the 2008 Palin–Biden contest, “should” hold.

The importance of testing the Palin–Biden case is clear. This campaign was heavily covered by the media, and we know media coverage is influential in shaping the political landscape (Ansolabehere, Behr, and Iyengar 1993; Bartels 1993; Iyengar and Kinder 1987). If differences in media coverage exist, then an uneven field could have negative effects on the campaigns of certain candidates. Research has shown that stereotypes of women can negatively influence both their potential for election success and their political careers (Alexander and Andersen 1993; Heflick and Goldenberg 2010; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Rosenwasser and Seale 1988; Sapiro 1982). If gender stereotypes in media coverage have the ability to negatively affect women candidates, this calls into question the American political system’s ability to produce elected representatives in a fair and democratic manner. Moreover, although vice presidential candidates receive less media coverage than their presidential counterparts, research shows that perceptions of vice presidential candidates may have an impact on vote choice, especially when the vice presidential candidates are unique in some way (Ulbig 2009; Wattenberg 1995). Given the potential implications of unbalanced media coverage in the political world, we consider three ways where coverage might be different across issue and medium.

As highlighted above, male and female candidates in more recent elections appear to be moving toward parity in the amount of coverage they receive (Bystrom et al. 2004; Smith 1997). We expect this trend toward parity to continue in the 2008 contest concerning the vice presidential candidates. We anticipate the amount of coverage Palin receives in comparison to Biden to be greater due to the fact that she is the first female vice presidential candidate to be nominated by the Republican Party. The novelty of Palin’s nomination, therefore, makes for an interesting story that could increase the amount of attention she receives by the media. This “first woman” effect was detected in media coverage of the campaigns of other political firsts for women, including those of Elizabeth Dole and Geraldine Ferraro (Heith 2003; Heldman, Carroll, and Olson 2005). Although scholarship has suggested women candidates generally receive less media coverage than their male peers, we expect the novelty of Palin’s candidacy to outweigh any factors that would produce less coverage of her candidacy as compared with Biden.

Hypothesis 1: The amount of coverage Sarah Palin received from the media was greater than the amount of coverage her opponent Joseph Biden received as a vice presidential candidate.
In addition to differences in volume, it seems clear from the literature that differences in substance also tend to arise when comparing the coverage of male and female candidates. The literature informs us, however, that not all gender stereotypes are detected in the races of all women candidates. This may be a result of changes in the political landscape and the accumulation of political success by women over time, or may be a function of individual races (Jalalzai 2006). Vice presidential contests including a female candidate, such as that of 2008, allow for an entirely new case with which we can test conflicting explanations, adding an important data point to the ongoing attempt to discern whether and when gender stereotypes persist in media coverage of electoral candidates.

To determine whether such stereotypes emerge in the substance of the Palin–Biden media coverage, we examined the coverage in terms of four gender stereotypes identified throughout the literature on gender and media coverage, based on the following topics: family, electability, policy issues (of which we considered education, foreign policy, health care, social issues, and taxes/economy), and physical appearance. If gender stereotypes were to emerge in this article, we would expect to see Palin’s coverage include more discussion of family, electability, physical appearance, and the “feminine” policy issues of education, health care, social issues, and physical appearance, whereas Biden’s coverage would be more closely linked with discussions of “masculine issues,” such as foreign policy, taxes, and the economy.

Hypothesis 2: Gender stereotypes will be reflected in the substance of the coverage Sarah Palin and Joseph Biden received from the media as vice presidential candidates. These stereotypes are likely to emerge when comparing the candidates’ coverage in four areas: family, electability, policy issues, and physical appearance.

We began our project with the assertion that the medium matters and could certainly matter when it comes to the relationship between gender and media coverage.\(^2\) This article contributes to the greater discussion of gender and media coverage by examining the Palin–Biden coverage across three different media: television, newspapers, and political blogs. We expect to see differences in the coverage of Palin and Biden across these three media. This approach is grounded in the understanding that all three media not only influence the political sphere, but also do so by working in different ways for different audiences. For instance, citizens gain different types of information from television than from newspapers (Chaffee and Frank 1996). The different effects

\(^2\) This expectation regarding the importance of the medium is grounded in the research of McLuhan (1994). His work, summed appropriately with his “the medium is the message” phrase, suggests that the medium used to communicate a message, not just the content of the message, can influence how that message is perceived. The notion that differences in media can matter can be linked directly to McLuhan’s seminal work *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. 

on citizens of television as compared with newspapers span a variety of areas, including differences in decision making (Clarke and Fredin 1978), as well as differences in political knowledge and behavior (Garramone and Atkin 1986). Research on online political news coverage and blogs shows that users of online media are also influenced in different ways as compared with traditional media like newspapers and television (Atkinson 2007; Johnson and Kaye 2004).

Blogs are a relatively new way of communicating, and we have yet to learn their full effect in conveying political information, or whether and how that effect may differ from that of traditional forms of media. Some scholarship examining differences between traditional and new media coverage of political issues suggests that blog coverage is different from traditional media sources: Blogs with partisan leanings judge the newsworthiness of stories using a partisan lens while traditional media, such as wire services, adhere to more conventional journalistic standards in determining newsworthiness (Baum and Groeling 2008). Other studies suggest that the coverage between blogs and traditional media is more similar than different, both in terms of volume and content (Haynes and Pitts 2009; Lee 2007). These contradictory conclusions emphasize the need to include blogs as a part of additional investigations into possible differences across media. Any differences detected between old and new media are particularly important and relevant given the continued growth of new media use—blog readership increased from 13 percent in 2006 to 24 percent in 2008 (Ketchum and USC Annenberg Strategic Public Relations Center 2009).

Hypothesis 3: The amount and substance of coverage Sarah Palin and Joseph Biden received as vice presidential candidates will differ across media.

Research Design

We assembled a universe of media coverage of Governor Palin and then-Senator Biden by making use of the LexisNexis database, which provides access to five billion searchable documents from more than 40,000 legal, news and business sources (LexisNexis 2009). Through the use of LexisNexis, we gathered a distinctive collection of coverage that spanned three separate media: newspapers, television, and blogs. We chose to examine the time period of August 16-November 11, which roughly consists of one week before the Democratic National Convention until one week post election. Because Palin was added to the McCain ticket so late, this minimizes the amount of time (about two weeks) when only Biden was a vice presidential candidate, but still includes the lead-up to the Democratic National Convention which we felt was important for parallel coverage of the two candidates. Likewise, the time period extends just past the election to capture any post-election discussion that may have taken place with regard to either of the vice presidential candidates. This time frame results in about three months of coverage of the vice presidential candidates across newspapers, television news, and blogs.
To establish our universe of newspaper coverage, we selected three of the largest, most widely read national newspapers in the United States: *The New York Times* (daily circulation: 1,000,665), *The Washington Post* (daily circulation: 673,180), and *USA Today* (daily circulation: 2,284,219). This is certainly not a complete look at all newspaper coverage of the vice presidential candidates, but it offers a view of what many people seeking national news were seeing during the 2008 election. We performed three searches—for those articles that mentioned *both* Palin and Biden, only Palin and only Biden—which yielded a total of 1,676 articles. While this is a somewhat crude search technique, and surely includes articles not focused primarily on the vice presidential candidates, it ensures that every potential article covering Palin and Biden is included in our sample.

Similar procedures were conducted for selection of television news media coverage. We included LexisNexis transcripts of the three major networks’ evening news broadcasts (NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams, ABC World News with Charles Gibson, and CBS Evening News with Katie Couric), as well as CNN and Fox News equivalents (CNN Situation Room and Fox Special Report with Brit Hume), which together encompass the vast majority of national television evening news available to the average media consumer. Again, three searches were performed for transcripts mentioning both candidates, only Palin and only Biden, for a total of 697 stories.

Finally, we turned to blogs. Selection for this medium was more complex, since the potential universe of blogs is essentially infinite and always changing—thus it is impossible to even sample from a known universe, let alone ensure a random or representative sample. Instead, we chose a purposive sample of blogs, representing those easily available to the average online citizen. To keep parallel structure with the other media samples, we looked within the realm of blogs archived by LexisNexis. We then took a sample from that population to focus on our subject matter of interest, by looking only at Newstex Government & Politics Blogs. This is a subset of blogs collected by Newstex LLC via their service, “Blogs on Demand,” which pertains to government and politics topics, and consists of a total of 391 separate blogs, varying in topic, length, format, ideology, and agenda. Of those 391 blogs, 55 mentioned Palin, Biden, or both candidates over our collection time period. To ensure a relatively unbiased sample, those 55 blogs were hand-coded by two coders to determine their

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3 This selection also has the benefit of capturing both “elite” (*New York Times* and *Washington Post*) and more mass-based (*USA Today*) newspapers.

4 Exact search strings available from the authors upon request at leticiabode@gmail.com.

5 MSNBC transcripts would also have been included but were unavailable from LexisNexis.

6 LexisNexis archives only a selection of blogs. Newstex is a content archival service that allows bloggers to opt into having their content syndicated through Newstex, and by extension, through LexisNexis. When that content is viewed through Newstex, bloggers receive small royalties. There is no reason to believe that bloggers would opt into this service in any kind of systematically biased way. For more information, see Newstex (2009).
ideological slant, if any. This revealed a remarkably balanced sample, with 22 liberal blogs, 20 conservative blogs, ten neutral blogs, and three that could not be determined (94.5 percent coder agreement, see Appendix B for more information). Again, we are not looking at the entire “blogosphere,” but this assures us that our sample allows us a glimpse of how political blogs generally covered the 2008 vice presidential candidates. Searching as above, we generated a universe of LexisNexis blog coverage, divided by those blog entries that mentioned both candidates, those mentioning only Palin and those mentioning only Biden, for a total of 1,187 blog entries.

Content Analysis

To understand how each candidate was covered by various media during the 2008 election cycle, we needed to analyze the content of our collected material. Because we are fortunate enough to have a large volume of coverage to work with, which spans three separate media, hand coding of our sample was not practical. Instead, we used a computer-assisted content analysis program that allowed us to systematically examine the volume of coverage we collected to investigate the media’s treatment of Palin and Biden. We employed Yoshikoder, a program for performing computer-aided content analysis which allows users to generate their own dictionaries, allowing for a great deal of flexibility in what one can analyze (Lowe 2006). It offers frequencies, proportions, and statistical comparisons between two subsets of text. Use of computer-assisted content analysis allows us to examine a much larger sample of news coverage than traditional hand coding, and also facilitates replication to a much greater extent.

We generated our own dictionary of over 200 words based on information from previous literature and building off of other content analysis dictionaries, including the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) dictionary, and Laver and Garry’s policy positions dictionary. For each area of interest—family, electability, policy issues (including education, foreign policy, health care, social issues, and taxes and the economy), and physical attributes—a dictionary “pattern” (or category) was created, containing a series of words associated with that concept. For each category we created, we performed a validity check. Sixty-three respondents were shown word lists from each category and asked to match them to a concept. The agreement was extremely high, ranging from 89 percent to 100 percent, and averaging 95 percent, giving us a great deal of confidence that we are, in fact, capturing the concepts we

7 Examples of these blogs include The Moderate Voice at http://themoderatevoice.com/ (neutral), ComMITTed to Romney at http://committedtoromney.com/ (conservative), and Barack Oblogger at http://www.barackoblogger.com/ (liberal).

8 These dictionaries have been extensively analyzed and validated. Regarding LIWC, see Kahn and others (2007) and Pennebaker, Mehl, and Niederhoffer (2003). See Laver, Benoit, and Garry (2003) and Laver and Garry (2000) for more information on the Laver and Garry policy positions dictionary.
We then compared the “Palin-only” material with the “Biden-only” material, and each to the coverage of both candidates, within each medium. The final dictionary employed can be found in Appendix A. There are trade-offs for using any technique, and computer-assisted content analysis is no exception. While we are able to consider a large volume of media coverage, the analysis is not as fine-grained as it would be with traditional hand coding. However, the law of large numbers allows us confidence that any trends we find are not due to chance, but rather systematic differences between types of coverage.

We report differences between the candidates in two ways. First, we use risk ratios, which are a measure reflecting the probabilistic differences between proportions of words used in the first sample (Palin-only coverage) and the second sample (Biden-only coverage). In essence, the first is divided by the second, producing a ratio. If the ratio is greater than one, it means the proportion is greater in the first sample, thus reflecting greater likelihood of the content occurring in Palin coverage rather than Biden coverage. The ratio of proportions has the benefit of being independent of disparities in volume candidates receive, allowing us to compare across different sample sizes with ease. A 95 percent confidence interval is generated, and if that interval does not cross one, the difference is statistically significant (Lowe 2006). The further the ratio is from one, the greater the difference between the two samples (i.e., between Palin coverage and Biden coverage).

For ease of interpretation, percent change is also reported. This simply indicates how much more likely content is to occur in one candidate’s coverage versus the other—positive percent changes reflect a greater likelihood of the content occurring in Palin content. The risk ratios and percent changes of differences that are not significant are less clear to interpret. While they may indicate parity in coverage, insignificant risk ratios may also be an artifact of a sample too small. Risk ratios, reported with 95 percent confidence intervals and percent difference between samples, subdivided by medium, are found in Tables 1a and 1b.

Results

Amount of Coverage

Our first hypothesis predicted that Palin would receive more news coverage due to the novelty of her candidacy. Was this the case? The answer is a resounding yes. In overall coverage, in every medium, in every submedium, and in every individual source we examined, Palin received more media coverage.
### Table 1a. Risk Ratio and Percent Changes of Differences of Palin-only and Combined Media Coverage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Newspaper Coverage</th>
<th>Television Coverage</th>
<th>Blog Coverage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% Change</td>
<td>Risk Ratio</td>
<td>% Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>36.64</td>
<td>1.37 [1.27, 1.47]</td>
<td>28.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electability</td>
<td>-30.09</td>
<td>.77 [.72, .82]</td>
<td>-2.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical appearance</td>
<td>15.11</td>
<td>1.15 [1.06, 1.25]</td>
<td>-3.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>11.84</td>
<td>1.12 [1.02, 1.23]</td>
<td>-2.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign policy</td>
<td>-25.49</td>
<td>.80 [.74, .86]</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health care</td>
<td>-5.47</td>
<td>.95 [.83, 1.08]</td>
<td>4.035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social issues</td>
<td>10.17</td>
<td>1.10 [1.01, 1.20]</td>
<td>79.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxes/economy</td>
<td>-3.35</td>
<td>.97 [.90, 1.04]</td>
<td>-16.80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** Reported values are risk ratios, or the proportion of words in that category in Palin coverage divided by the proportion of words in that category in combined coverage (mentions both Palin and Biden). Ratios > 1, thus, reflect a greater tendency of those words to appear in Palin-only coverage, whereas ratios < 1 reflect a greater tendency of those words to appear in the combined coverage. The further the ratio is from 1, the greater the difference between the two. * p < .05
Table 1b. Risk Ratio and Percent Changes of Differences of Biden-only and Combined Media Coverage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Newspaper Coverage</th>
<th>Television Coverage</th>
<th>Blog Coverage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% Change</td>
<td>Risk Ratio</td>
<td>% Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>78.57</td>
<td>1.79 [1.57, 2.03]*</td>
<td>18.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electability</td>
<td>-43.50</td>
<td>0.70 [.64, .76]*</td>
<td>7.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-5.91</td>
<td>.94 [.81, 1.09]</td>
<td>-26.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign policy</td>
<td>51.04</td>
<td>1.51 [1.36, 1.68]*</td>
<td>49.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health care</td>
<td>-47.96</td>
<td>.68 [.57, .81]*</td>
<td>-32.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social issues</td>
<td>27.91</td>
<td>1.28 [1.10, 1.49]*</td>
<td>34.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxes/economy</td>
<td>-22.22</td>
<td>.82 [.73, .91]*</td>
<td>-183.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Reported values are risk ratios, or the proportion of words in that category in Biden coverage divided by the proportion of words in that category in combined coverage (mentions both Palin and Biden). Ratios > 1, thus, reflect a greater tendency of those words to appear in Biden-only coverage, whereas ratios < 1 reflect a greater tendency of those words to appear in the combined coverage. The further the ratio is from 1, the greater the difference between the two. * p < .05.
than did Biden. This was true across time and at almost every point in time after Palin was announced as the Republican vice presidential candidate (see Figure 1). Although the trends for both candidates tended to run together, Palin coverage was more than 100 percent greater than Biden coverage—the average number of stories per day in overall coverage, for instance, was 14.9 for Biden and 36 for Palin. Keeping in mind that Biden had a two-week head start in coverage due to the fact that the Democrats announced their vice presidential candidate before the Republicans, this is even more impactful. This trend continued across all media. Palin outpaced Biden in blogs (14.2-3.2 stories per day), newspapers (15-8.2 stories per day), and television (8.8-4.6 stories per day).

Natural spikes in coverage of both candidates occur across all media at the main events of the campaign. Biden’s only comparative coverage advantage occurs during the Democratic National Convention (August 25-28, 2008), before Palin was announced as the Republican vice presidential nominee (August 29, 2008). Palin coverage undergoes an enormous uptick at the time of her announcement, and again during the Republican National Convention (September 1-4, 2008). Both candidates received greater amounts of coverage at important points in the campaign and election cycle, especially near the vice presidential candidate debate (October 2, 2008). While there are some differences between media, the clear pattern is that Palin received more coverage than Biden at every point following McCain’s announcement of her as his running mate (Table 2).

Because the 2008 vice presidential contest is only one race, it is difficult to say whether or not the differences observed in volume of coverage of Palin and Biden are gender-related, related to some other aspect like party affiliation, or completely normal for a vice presidential race. To gain leverage on this question, we made two descriptive comparisons to other similar races.

First, we compared the Palin–Biden coverage with the most similar case available—the most recent vice presidential election without an incumbent, in 2000, featuring Dick Cheney and Joe Lieberman. While Palin received 2.3 times as much coverage as Biden overall, Cheney received slightly less coverage than did Lieberman. Because both candidates in 2000 received similar amounts of coverage, it suggests that the Palin–Biden phenomenon is somewhat unusual for a vice presidential contest, and also signifies that the disparity in coverage between Palin and Biden was not simply due to partisan affiliation—seeing as Republicans and Democrats were covered roughly equally in 2000.

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11 Articles including both candidates followed similar trends.
12 Although Lieberman was the first Jewish vice presidential candidate, he was still a relatively typical candidate, as a white, experienced senator.
13 The 2000 sample uses the same newspapers and television programs as does that of 2008, but does not include blogs as their archival does not extend back that far. Search strings were identical to those for the main sample but replacing names as appropriate.
Figure 1.
Volume of Coverage by Day of Palin and Biden across Media

All Media Coverage

Blog Coverage

Newspaper Coverage

Television Coverage

Number of Stories

Number of Stories

Number of Stories

Number of Stories

16-aug 23-aug 30-aug 06-sep 13-sep 20-sep 27-sep 04-oct 11-oct 18-oct 25-oct 01-nov 08-nov

16-aug 23-aug 30-aug 06-sep 13-sep 20-sep 27-sep 04-oct 11-oct 18-oct 25-oct 01-nov 08-nov

16-aug 23-aug 30-aug 06-sep 13-sep 20-sep 27-sep 04-oct 11-oct 18-oct 25-oct 01-nov 08-nov

16-aug 23-aug 30-aug 06-sep 13-sep 20-sep 27-sep 04-oct 11-oct 18-oct 25-oct 01-nov 08-nov

Biden ---- Palin

Biden ---- Palin

Biden ---- Palin

Biden ---- Palin
Second, perhaps it was just the novelty of Palin as a candidate, rather than her gender, which drove the differences in coverage. To explore this possibility, we compared the overall coverage of Palin and Biden with that of the 1984 vice presidential contest, where Geraldine Ferraro became the first woman nominated for the vice presidency, and the only other woman ever nominated. If differences in coverage between Palin and Biden were due to Palin as an individual, rather than as a woman, we would expect the Ferraro–Bush coverage to more closely resemble the coverage of Cheney and Lieberman in 2000 than that of Palin and Biden in 2008.

The coverage of Ferraro outpaced that of Bush in 1984 by about 33 percent, available coverage was limited to the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. While this difference is not as drastic as that of 2008, it is also quite removed from the parity of coverage observed in 2000. This strongly suggests that gender is a driving factor in the differences of coverage of vice presidential candidates seen in both 1984 and 2008.

**Substance of Coverage**

The clear disparity in amount of coverage has the potential to exacerbate any differences in the substance of that content, which brings us to the second part of our analysis (Tables 1a and 1b). Our second hypothesis suggested that gender stereotypes would emerge in specific content and issue areas. We anticipated that Palin would receive more coverage speaking in terms of experience, family, and physical appearance, and dealing with “feminine” issues, such as education, health care, and social issues. The 2008 media coverage we examined offers a mixed perspective (see Table 3 for risk ratios and percent changes, and Table 2 for an overview of trends). The media did tend to talk about family (newspapers and television) and physical appearance (newspapers and blogs) significantly more in coverage of Palin than in coverage of Biden. Additionally, they were more likely to refer to social issues in Palin’s
Table 3. Risk Ratio and Percent Changes of Differences of Media Coverage of Palin and Biden

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Newspaper Coverage</th>
<th>Television Coverage</th>
<th>Blog Coverage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% Change</td>
<td>Risk Ratio</td>
<td>% Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>44.86</td>
<td>1.45 [1.35, 1.56]*</td>
<td>12.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electability</td>
<td>-27.85</td>
<td>.78 [.74, .83]*</td>
<td>5.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical appearance</td>
<td>17.73</td>
<td>1.18 [1.09, 1.28]*</td>
<td>-2.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>12.27</td>
<td>1.12 [1.02, 1.23]*</td>
<td>-28.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign policy</td>
<td>-29.52</td>
<td>.77 [.72, .83]*</td>
<td>51.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health care</td>
<td>-5.79</td>
<td>.95 [.83, 1.07]</td>
<td>-42.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social issues</td>
<td>22.51</td>
<td>1.23 [1.12, 1.34]*</td>
<td>33.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxes/economy</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>1.01 [.95, 1.09]</td>
<td>-161.69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Reported values are risk ratios, or the proportion of words in that category in Palin coverage divided by the proportion of words in that category in Biden coverage. Ratios > 1, thus, reflect a greater tendency of those words to appear in Palin-only coverage, whereas ratios < 1 reflect a greater tendency of those words to appear in Biden-only coverage. The further the ratio is from 1, the greater the difference between the two. *p < .05.
coverage than in that of Biden. We also anticipated Biden would receive greater coverage referencing “masculine” issues, including foreign policy and the economy. Our results strongly confirm these expectations, in that Biden received significantly greater coverage dealing with foreign policy (newspapers and blogs) and the economy (television and blogs). Each of these trends is confirmation of our second hypothesis.

Our hypothesis was disconfirmed in certain areas as well. While we anticipated Palin would receive more coverage dealing with education and health care, typically considered women’s issues, Biden actually received significantly more coverage in each of those realms (in television and blogs for each; see Tables 2 and 3).

One element we examined was how the issue of family emerged in the substance of candidate coverage. We used terms spanning various familial relations, such as “mom,” “husband,” “parent,” and “wife,” to analyze the content of media coverage in relation to family (see Appendix A for full dictionary of terms). Women are traditionally associated with increased coverage of family and motherhood, and between Palin’s new baby and her oldest daughter’s pregnancy, we expected to find a great deal of coverage associating Palin with family. As illustrated in Tables 2 and 3, these expectations were confirmed with Palin-oriented coverage in newspapers and television being more associated with family-related language (risk ratio = 1.45 in newspapers and 1.13 in television). However, Biden was more likely than Palin to be associated with family in the realm of blogs (risk ratio = .75).

Perhaps the most interesting component of this finding confirms the importance of examining gender and media coverage across media. Moving away from associating women more with family and reversing this gender stereotype could be a result of how blogs as a medium work. Political blog readers, for instance, tend to be more politically interested than the consumers of traditional news, so perhaps bloggers cater to that interest by providing more issue coverage and less soft news content concerning personal background (Veenstra 2007). Moreover, political blogs often try to cover information not being reported by the mainstream media (Ekdale et al. 2010). Because Palin’s background and family were covered well in traditional media outlets, perhaps bloggers took it upon themselves to provide similar coverage of her Democratic counterpart. One such example can be found in bloggers’ discussions of a family tragedy involving Biden’s first wife and children.

Five weeks after Biden’s improbable victory, school-teacher wife Neilia and their children, Beau, 3, Hunter, 2, and Naomi, 1, were crossing Limestone Road after Christmas shopping. Their car was T-boned, killing wife and daughter and critically injuring the boys. All of a sudden a political career seemed unimportant to the bereft Biden, who told his family and
Democratic leaders that he would have to relinquish his Senate seat in waiting. (Mullen 2008, emphasis added)

The explanation for this finding could be any of these or a combination of them all. Either way, this result lends support to calls of further cross-medium examinations.

The literature is particularly strong in leading us to expect significant differences between coverage of male and female candidates with regard to physical appearance. This section of our analysis dictionary included a variety of terms, including different types of clothing, such as “dress,” “shirt,” “shoe,” and “tie” as well as adjectives like “attractive,” “handsome,” and “pretty.” Depictions of outward appearance, which are typically covered disproportionately with female candidates, were covered fairly consistently across the various media sources we examined. In both newspapers and blogs, Palin was covered more heavily with regard to physical appearance than was Biden—see Table 2: “+” indicates terms more likely in Palin-oriented coverage and “−” indicates more likely in Biden-oriented coverage. This finding confirms our expectations of seeing Palin linked to coverage regarding physical appearance and suggests some stereotypes are alive and well—risk ratios vary from 1.18 to 1.39; television failed to reach significance. Interestingly, this difference only surfaces in newspapers and on blogs, suggesting yet again that there exist important differences in coverage across media.

The question of electability arose throughout the course of the 2008 campaign and was often couched in terms of “experience” or “viability.” This was particularly evident in public opinion polls asking about the two vice presidential candidates. When asked to describe the vice presidential candidates in one word, “experienced” was the word used the most to describe Biden, while “inexperienced” was at the top of the list of words for Palin (Pew Research Center 2008). This attention to experience and electability in general features in our findings as well.

References to electability were significantly associated with the vice presidential candidates in the coverage they received across all three media, but the associations varied by medium. Mentions of experience were more likely in Biden-oriented coverage in newspapers, whereas Palin-oriented blog coverage was more likely to include such references. We expected Palin’s coverage to be more closely associated with discussion of this type; thus these results provide only partial confirmation of our expectations. When comparing individual coverage to combined coverage, articles discussing both candidates were more likely to include discussions of electability as compared with either Palin-only or Biden-only coverage (see Tables 1a and 1b). This makes sense given the nature of the topic of experience—discussions of electability are more likely than other issues to be comparative in nature, and thus would be more abundant in coverage that mentions both candidates as opposed to single-candidate coverage.
While we cannot be certain about the associated tone of discussions of experience, further analysis of the actual texts reveal some trends. In blogs, where they discussed experience in Palin coverage more often than in Biden coverage, a typical example of an experience discussion might look like this one from Matthew Kilburn:

> Can anyone name me a single benefit provided by Palin? She failed to bring Hillary supporters to the ticket, she added no additional experience or expertise to the ticket, and was zero help in any state. In fact, poll after poll has shown that, not only did the vast majority of voters believe Palin to be unqualified, but in some areas, she actually had a NEGATIVE approval rating. (COMMITTED to Romney 2008)

A typical discussion of experience in Biden coverage looked more like this:

> Biden was direct, not verbose, and his answers came crisply in contrast to Obama’s more studied and sometimes pausing style of speaking. That he knew his brief was less surprising, given his experience, but he avoided speaking in the kind of senatorial vernacular that often hampers someone who has been in the capital as long as he has. (Balz 2008)

In each article (of any medium) we randomly selected to examine, Biden was never negatively associated with experience, whereas Palin was consistently discussed in terms of a lack of experience.

While our results do not indicate definitively whether or not experience and electability were discussed more negatively or positively with either candidate, they do show that electability was significant in the political discussion of these two candidates as presented by the media. The differences across media can perhaps be seen as indirect confirmation that the stereotype of women lacking experience and experience as candidates was not a driving force in all coverage of Sarah Palin. If it were, we would expect mentions of electability to be more likely in all Palin-oriented coverage than in Biden’s coverage. The differences between newspapers and blogs with regard to experience indicate another reason to examine multiple media in investigations of gender and media coverage.

In terms of the coverage differences examined with substantive policy issues, several trends emerge. For some issues, things are as we might expect. Palin is strongly associated with “feminine” topics, such as social issues (in every medium), and Biden is strongly and consistently covered with respect to foreign policy (newspapers and blogs) and the economy (television and blogs). Moreover, one of these relationships—social issues—is the most consistent we see across all content areas (see Table 3). Social issues were 23-48 percent more likely to occur in Palin-only coverage, depending on the medium, the low is newspapers, and the high is blogs. Palin, who many suspected was chosen to energize the Republican base, was extremely strong on social issues, so this is
likely an effect of the candidate as much as the gender (Spangler 2008). The differences in foreign policy coverage are quite pronounced: The foreign policy pattern was more likely to occur in Biden-only coverage by as much as 100 percent (blogs) and about 30 percent (newspapers). Again, this is not surprising given Biden’s well-acknowledged wealth of foreign policy experience, especially when compared with his Republican counterpart (Kranish 2008).

As the economy was reported on so extensively in 2008, it is particularly interesting that differences between the candidates’ coverage emerged at all, because everyone had to speak about the economy to even have a chance at the election (Spangler 2008). Even so, Biden-only television and blog coverage was more likely to be associated with language linked to taxes and to the economy than Palin-only coverage. This finding, in combination with the solid foreign policy results, suggests that gender stereotypes regarding male candidates are strongly at work in coverage of the 2008 vice presidential candidates.

In other policy areas, our expectations were disconfirmed. We expected Palin’s coverage to be linked more closely with discussions of health care and education due to the notion that these issues are stereotypically considered more “feminine.” Although Palin’s newspaper coverage was more likely to be linked to education, Biden’s television and blog coverage was more closely tied to both health care and education issues. This may be explained by a second dimension of issue coverage, in that health care and education, although “feminine” issues, are also generally associated with Democrats, which might indicate that Biden’s connection to these issues is based on partisan ties as opposed to gendered associations (Petrocik 1996). As the number of potential cases to study increases with future vice presidential contests, research should consider the interplay of gender and partisan identification in the distribution of media coverage between candidates.

Overall, we found evidence of gender stereotypes in much of the substance of coverage of the 2008 vice presidential candidates, partially confirming our second hypothesis. The coverage of Palin was more likely to include references to family, physical appearance, and social issues. However, not all our expectations of likely instances of gender stereotypes were realized. We did not see Palin covered more in terms of electability or “women’s issues,” such as education and health care. This may be a result of partisan influences, or artifacts of this particular case and these specific candidates. However, these unrealized expectations may also be a sign that gender stereotypes in relation to women candidates are not static and are not ever-present.

To attempt to tease out the driving forces behind these trends, and to what extent they are motivated by gender as opposed to partisan identification, we perform an additional descriptive comparison, again to the 1984 contest between Geraldine Ferraro and George H. W. Bush. This is a convenient case, as it again offers a contest between a female and a male candidate, but in the 1984 contest, the partisanship of the candidates is reversed from that of 2008. Unfortunately, only newspaper coverage is available going back to 1984 (and only two of our
three newspapers, as *USA Today* did not yet exist), but we feel the comparison is still worthwhile. Analysis of the coverage of Ferraro and Bush by issue area is available in Table 4.

Four issue areas are consistent across electoral context in achieving disparate coverage by candidate gender, including family, education, and social issues, for which the female candidate received greater coverage, as well as foreign policy, for which the male candidate received greater attention. This suggests that these issues, at least, are not driven by partisanship, but rather by the candidate’s gender. The two topics for which we coded that are inconsistent between 1984 and 2008 are quite interesting—electability and physical appearance. These are strongly suggested by the literature to be topics covered with regard to female candidates, but we find inconsistent results depending on the election. Whereas Palin was covered by newspapers more than Biden in terms of physical appearance, Bush surprisingly outpaced Ferraro in this realm. And while Biden received the bulk of newspaper coverage related to experience, Ferraro actually received more experience-related coverage than Bush. This suggests that the expectations of the literature may not apply as easily to the vice presidential context, at least in the case of coverage of physical appearance and experience.

These results, although preliminary, could also point to a shift where gender stereotypes of women as candidates are no longer necessarily pervasive in media coverage. Moreover, this shift may have begun as early as the 1980s—far earlier than most scholarship has suggested in the past. Both of these possible explanations serve as starting points for further investigation.

Table 4. Risk Ratio and Percent Changes of Differences of Media Coverage of Ferraro and Bush

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper Coverage</th>
<th>% Change</th>
<th>Risk Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>42.64</td>
<td>1.43 [1.36, 1.49]*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electability</td>
<td>42.43</td>
<td>1.42 [1.33, 1.52]*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical appearance</td>
<td>−8.48</td>
<td>0.92 [.88, .96]*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>6.19</td>
<td>1.06 [1.00, 1.12]*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign policy</td>
<td>−52.90</td>
<td>0.65 [.62, .69]*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health care</td>
<td>−11.90</td>
<td>0.89 [.81, .99]*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social issues</td>
<td>35.35</td>
<td>1.35 [1.29, 1.42]*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxes/economy</td>
<td>−25.27</td>
<td>0.80 [.77, .83]*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes: Reported values are risk ratios, or the proportion of words in that category in Ferraro coverage divided by the proportion of words in that category in Bush coverage. Ratios > 1, thus, reflect a greater tendency of those words to appear in Ferraro-only coverage, whereas ratios < 1 reflect a greater tendency of those words to appear in Bush-only coverage. The further the ratio is from 1, the greater the difference between the two. * p < .05
An additional avenue to consider when evaluating the use of gender stereotypes in political candidates’ media coverage is to note how gender stereotypes, and any changes in their usage, are applied to both women and men candidates. If the gender stereotypes used in the coverage of women are shifting, or perhaps even fading, what is happening to the stereotypical notions typically associated with male candidates? Are the changes in how women political candidates are covered by the media reflected in any way by corresponding shifts in the coverage of men? Although not addressed directly by our article, these questions are worthy of further discussion and academic attention.\textsuperscript{14}

Differences among Media

Our third hypothesis dealt specifically with the three media sources we examined. As a result of different norms, motivations, and standards, we expected variation of candidate coverage by medium. Again, the picture is mixed, but we see partial support for our third hypothesis. We see significant differences between media in about half the areas we examined, including coverage of family, electability, education, and foreign policy. In other areas, however, there are no significant differences between the medium considered and the tilt of the coverage toward one candidate or another. This is true for most policy areas we examined, including the issues of health care, social issues, and the economy, as well as for coverage dealing with physical appearance.

When we made the decision to examine media coverage from a number of sources, we did so because we expected to see differences in how various media formats covered the 2008 vice presidential election. Overall, we saw more agreement between sources than we expected to find. Slightly more than half of the areas we examined saw a clear trend toward coverage of one candidate or another in at least two of the three types of media we examined. Yet differences in volume of coverage of the candidates and the proportional attention paid to each varied widely between media outlets. Moreover, as indicated above, many of these differences are notable.

While each media outlet covered Governor Palin by herself much more than they covered only Senator Biden, the extent to which such differences emerged varied quite a bit between newspaper, television, and blog coverage. Newspapers

\textsuperscript{14} Scholarship on the intersection of celebrity politics and gender considers such questions. This intersection has been examined by van Zoonen (2006) in her analysis of media coverage of two female, European heads of state (Finland’s Tarja Holonen and Germany’s Angela Merkel). For example, while van Zoonen (2006, 287) argues that the “increasing presence of popular culture in politics presents a complex and often unfavorable arena to women,” she notes that the media’s emphasis on appearance and style may no longer be a gendered phenomenon, but a focus put upon both men and women politicians due to a general shift in the role of celebrity and fame in media coverage of politics (297-8).
in our sample had a total of 924 Palin stories, or 2.3 times more coverage than that referring to Senator Biden. For television, the differences are similar, with 324 Palin-only stories, 3.3 times the amount of Biden-only coverage. For blogs, these differences are even more pronounced, with Palin’s 950 blog posts representing a surprising 80 percent of total blog coverage of the 2008 vice presidential candidates. This is more than seven times the amount of content blogs devoted to Biden during our time period. While each of these differences indicates a strong bias toward coverage of Palin, they also show to what extent volume disparities emerge by medium. Just in terms of volume, for instance, a blog reader would have seen a very different picture of the 2008 vice presidential candidates than might a newspaper reader. When considered in combination with the differences in content, this becomes exceedingly important.

Volume aside, we found significant differences in the substance of coverage between media in several areas, including family references, education, and foreign policy. It is not immediately clear why differences would emerge on these specific issues. They are a mix of policy issues, including both “feminine” and “masculine” issues, as well as coverage of personal matters and background. Where there were no differences between media, there is similarly little obvious pattern, including several policy areas as well as coverage of physical appearance.

The differences between media are not consistent across issue areas. For some issues, such as education, newspapers appear to be the exception to the rule. For coverage based on foreign policy, television news seems to cover candidates differently than other media outlets. And for coverage of the candidate’s family, blogs are the exception. There is no clear hard news versus soft news, or old versus new media divide. For several of these issues, including coverage of foreign policy and family, the results are somewhat strange. Biden was specifically chosen for his foreign policy experience, so it is odd that television news would cover foreign policy and Governor Palin more often than they would cover Biden and foreign policy. Similarly, Palin’s family was a hot topic of conversation during the election season, and yet our sample of blogs was less likely to cover her in conjunction with language concerning family than with Biden. Our data do not allow us to completely understand these anomalies, but future research should both replicate our methods and push further on the question to understand when and how differences in coverage emerge between media.

Again, while these differences are not necessarily intuitive, we think the most important thing to note is that they exist at all. Our results indicate that coverage of candidates varies not only by issue area, but also by medium, and future research should consider both factors when studying how vice presidential candidates are covered by the media. Failing to do so will result in an incomplete picture of electoral media coverage. As media options proliferate, this becomes even more important to consider, as the choices people make concerning where to gain information may have strong implications for what kind of candidate coverage they receive.
Limitations

While this article represents an important expansion of the literature on gender differences in media coverage, it is limited by several factors. First, there is the issue of the dictionary we created for computer-assisted content analysis. Obviously, not every potential word in each category was included, and this could take away some degree of certainty from our results. Additionally, our examination does not capture the tone of the coverage analyzed, which prohibits us from saying conclusively exactly how coverage treated each candidate. However, the risk ratios, by comparing proportions of words rather than simple counts, allow us to assess the relative frequency of our categories of interest, which should help to mitigate the problem of missing words and sentiment. Moreover, our reliance on other dictionaries in building our own and our validity checks of dictionary categories should help remove any systematic bias in pattern creation.

A second limitation is that of our sample. While our television sample is relatively complete with regard to national television news, we analyzed the transcripts only and not the visual components of these broadcasts, and included national but not local broadcasts. Also, we examined only three newspapers, and a systematic sample of blogs. The three newspapers are all national in scope, thus removing any local news coverage from our universe of media coverage. We think this makes sense, given that this article is one of the few to consider a truly national contest, but there are likely to be systematic differences in coverage between national and local newspapers, and this is something for which we cannot account (Rozell 1991). However, given local news’ limited resources, it is likely that national news drives local coverage, especially through the provision of wire stories, which may make differences between national and local coverage less pronounced. We also chose a convenient sample of blogs from a larger universe of all blogs. It is possible that this sample is systematically biased in some way, and thus fails to present a true picture of blog coverage. Nevertheless, the number of blogs included, as well as their obvious diversity (conservative and liberal, local and national, Democrat and Republican, and issue-oriented) assures us that this is a suitable sample of blog coverage (see Appendix B).

Additionally, we consider only two election contests, for a single office, and one with limited available coverage. While this provides for an interesting and important test case, it offers an N of only two, which decreases our ability to generalize from our results. We also cannot say to what extent our results are driven by associations between vice presidential and presidential candidates. However, these races have the potential to affect perceptions of candidates, parties, and genders, and are important as coverage and perceptions of both races will affect which candidates are chosen in the future, and how they are perceived and covered.
Future Research

We think future research should similarly focus on differences between media when considering other levels of office seeking, including statewide and local races. Differences between “old” and “new” media are particularly ripe for continued observation, and these considerations may be expanded beyond the realm of blogs to consider other online news sites, and soft news coverage on the web. Concomitantly, future research should consider drawing connections between media coverage and other content. For instance, it would be of use to consider how media coverage compares to campaign-generated content, such as speeches and press releases, to better understand the differences in media coverage. Comparing volume and substance of media coverage over time to polling data on the vice presidential candidates might also reveal interesting patterns, and addressing classic questions of agenda setting: Do polls lead the media or does the agenda setting power of the media influence the public and drive poll results? Comparing coverage over time to public perceptions of candidates through opinion polls, and public perception of the most important problem facing the country might help reveal the impact of media coverage of the vice presidential candidates in 2008. Finally, differences in media coverage uncovered by this article might be paired with experiments to determine what the effects of such differences might be on the voting public.

Conclusion

Our article represents an important step forward in research on gender differences in media coverage. Most notably, we add an important case—that of the vice presidential contest—to consider. The Palin–Biden case is particularly relevant given the attention it received by the media, and offers a unique comparison to the legendary 1984 contest. Perhaps even more important, our article includes three separate media and uncovers noteworthy differences in coverage between and within them. The importance of these findings becomes even more transparent when we consider the implications of the differences we discovered in media coverage of the vice presidential candidates (see Table 5).

What are the substantive effects of these differences? Depending on one’s preference for or access to different media, the information to be gained concerning the 2008 vice presidential candidates differs markedly. Three key differences should be noted. First, across the three media the substance of coverage differs for each candidate. Second, across the three media one candidate receives more coverage than the other. Between Palin and Biden, the amount of coverage Palin received outweighed the amount received by Biden. Finally, not only did one candidate receive more coverage than the other, but the differences are quite large.
Each of these differences could have had important influences on public opinion formation and the public’s voting decisions in this particular race, and our findings are generally replicated with the case of 1984, although with limited data. If future research finds similar differences in coverage in other races, the implications could significantly affect the election process, particularly for female candidates. The key to revealing the extent of such differences, and the resulting implications for candidates of any gender is continued analysis of political coverage across all media.

Table 5. Amount and Substance of Palin and Biden Media Coverage by Medium

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Newspapers</th>
<th>Television</th>
<th>Blogs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Palin</strong></td>
<td>Amount: 924 articles</td>
<td>Amount: 324 stories</td>
<td>Amount: 950 entries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Substance</td>
<td>Substance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mentions of family</td>
<td>Mentions of family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mentions of physical appearance</td>
<td>Issue coverage: foreign policy, social issues</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Issue coverage: education, social issues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Biden</strong></td>
<td>Amount: 402 articles</td>
<td>Amount: 97 stories</td>
<td>Amount: 123 entries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Substance</td>
<td>Substance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mentions of electability</td>
<td>Issue coverage: education, health care, taxes/economy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Issue coverage: foreign policy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix A: Content Analysis Dictionary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FAMILY</th>
<th>Physical Appearance</th>
<th>Taxes/Economy</th>
<th>Social Issues</th>
<th>Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>aunt*</td>
<td>son’s</td>
<td>eye*</td>
<td>pre-school</td>
<td>educat*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brother*</td>
<td>spouse*</td>
<td>leg*</td>
<td>preschool</td>
<td>school*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cousin*</td>
<td>step-</td>
<td>arm*</td>
<td>test*</td>
<td>learn*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dad*</td>
<td>stepfat*</td>
<td>hand*</td>
<td>teach*</td>
<td>college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>daughter*</td>
<td>stepmot*</td>
<td>feet</td>
<td></td>
<td>university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ex</td>
<td>uncle</td>
<td>jewelry</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>families*</td>
<td>uncles</td>
<td>watch</td>
<td></td>
<td>K-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>family</td>
<td>wife*</td>
<td>cufflinks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>father*</td>
<td>wive*</td>
<td>jeans</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>folks</td>
<td>teen*</td>
<td>blouse*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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### HEALTH CARE
- health*
- doctor*
- hospital*
- medicine
- medical
- insurance
- medicaid
- medicare
- prescription
- drug
- nurse

### SOCIAL ISSUES
- abort*
- punishment
- marijuana
- drug*
- pray*
- gay
- homosexual
- civil
- rights
- pro-life
- pro-choice
- immigrant
- immigrat*
- religio*
- god
- jesus
- lord
- christ
- church
Appendix B: Source Information

Newspapers Included:
- New York Times
- USA Today
- Washington Post

Television Transcripts Included:
- ABC
- CBS
- CNN
- FOX
- NBC

Blogs Included: Newstex Government & Politics Blogs*

List of Blogs Covering Vice Presidential Candidates, August 16-November 11, 2008

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* Please contact the authors at leticiabode@gmail.com for a list of the 391 blogs archived by LexisNexis in the Newstex Government & Politics Blogs section.
About the Authors

Leticia Bode is a PhD candidate in the Department of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her research interests span the fields of political science and communication, and include political communication, political behavior, and new media and politics. Her current major research project focuses on the flow of political information between mass and elites via social media.

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References


