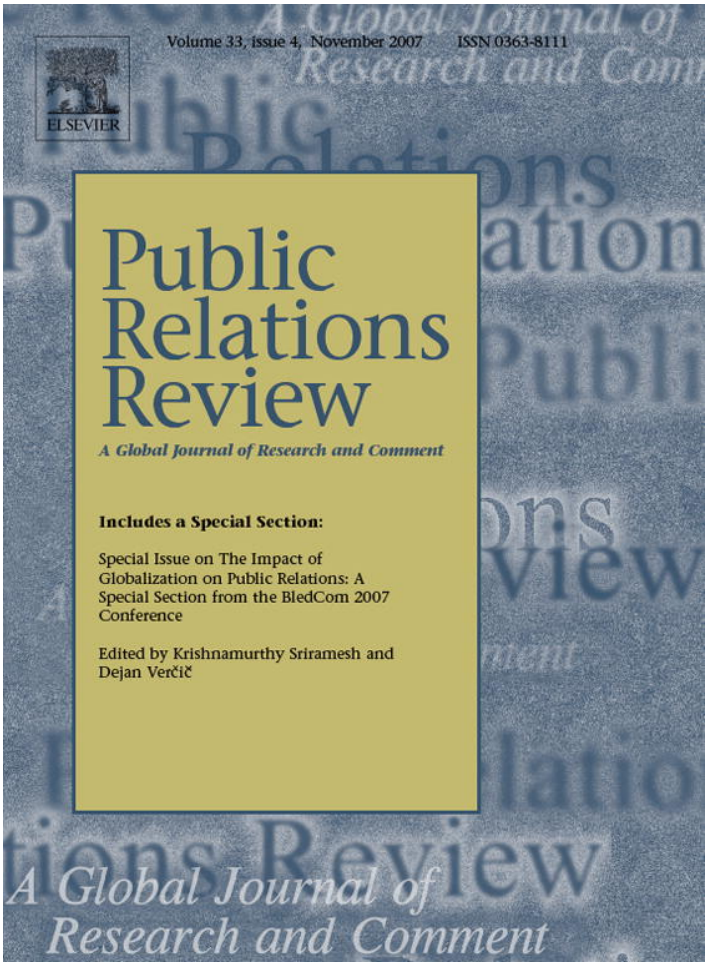
Provided for non-commercial research and education use.
Not for reproduction, distribution or commercial use.



This article was published in an Elsevier journal. The attached copy is furnished to the author for non-commercial research and education use, including for instruction at the author's institution, sharing with colleagues and providing to institution administration.

Other uses, including reproduction and distribution, or selling or licensing copies, or posting to personal, institutional or third party websites are prohibited.

In most cases authors are permitted to post their version of the article (e.g. in Word or Tex form) to their personal website or institutional repository. Authors requiring further information regarding Elsevier's archiving and manuscript policies are encouraged to visit:

http://www.elsevier.com/copyright

Author's personal copy

Available online at www.sciencedirect.com
ScienceDirect
Public Relations Review 33 (2007) 426–428
Public Relations Review

Short communication

Blog bias: Reports, inferences, and judgments of credentialed bloggers at the 2004 nominating conventions☆

Kaye D. Sweetser*

Grady College of Journalism & Mass Communication, 223-C Journalism Building, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602-3018, USA

Abstract

Public relations practitioners awarded bloggers media credentials in 2004 to the summer presidential nomination conventions. Using the Hayakawa–Lowry bias categories, this quantitative content analysis reviewed sentences posted by credentialed bloggers during the convention to examine blogger *reports* (attributed, unattributed), *inferences* (labeled, unlabeled), and *judgments* (attributed and favorable, unattributed and favorable, attributed and unfavorable, unattributed and unfavorable) to analyze potential bias in "coverage".
© 2007 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Bias; Blog; Media relations; Credential; Political public relations; Campaign

1. Introduction

Every 4 years the two major national political parties hold their nominating conventions. New to the coverage at the 2004 U.S. national nominating convention were bloggers, who public relations practitioners from both political parties invited and credentialed as journalists for the event.

This study investigated the credentialed bloggers from both conventions and their subsequent "coverage" of the event on their blogs. Given that blogs are said to be grounded in opinion and bias, this study sought to investigate the level of bias in credentialed blogs. By employing the traditional Hayakawa–Lowry news bias approach, this study is able to establish the level of bias among credentialed bloggers and examined differences based on convention and blogger gender.

2. Method

All of the credentialed bloggers from both national nominating conventions in 2004 served as the population. Only posts related to the proceedings posted the week of the convention were sampled. The sentence served as the unit of analysis.

☆ Full version of this manuscript available upon request. An earlier version was presented at the 2005 National Communication Association's conference in Boston, MA.

* Tel.: +1 706 542 2409.
E-mail address: sweetser@uga.edu.

0363-8111/$ – see front matter © 2007 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2007.08.012

Author's personal copy

Using the Hayakawa–Lowry quantitative content analysis method, sentences were categorized as *reports* (verifiable facts), *inferences* (opinions, predictions), or *judgments* (approval–disapproval, like–dislike, good–bad). Units were recorded as being in one of the following:

1. Report sentence/attributed
2. Report sentence/unattributed
3. Inference sentence/labeled
4. Inference sentence/unlabeled
5. Judgment sentence/attributed/favorable
6. Judgment sentence/attributed/unfavorable
7. Judgment sentence/unattributed/favorable
8. Judgment sentence/unattributed/unfavorable
9. All other sentences.

An inductive list of topics, grounded in previous blog campaign research, was created to determine what the blogger discussed. Finally, the blogger gender and convention for which he or she was credentialed was recorded.

Five trained coders analyzed the units. Differences were reconciled throughout the coding process. Intercoder reliability was established at .87 or better across all categories using Holsit's Intercoder Reliability formula.

3. Results

The Democratic Party credentialed more bloggers ($n = 39$) than the Republicans ($n = 17$). A total of 12,216 items (sentences) from both conventions were analyzed. Female bloggers wrote 11.4% of the units ($n = 1394$) overall.

RQ1 asked if credentialed bloggers use bias in their convention coverage. The Hayakawa–Lowry categorization of each sentence revealed that *reports* made up 35.1% ($n = 4290$) of the items analyzed, *inferences* made up 28.8% ($n = 3529$) of the items, 23.5% ($n = 2869$) were *judgments*, and the remaining 12.5% ($n = 1528$) were classified as other sentences. While *reports* made up the largest percentage of items in this categorization system, 14.2% ($n = 1739$) of these were unattributed *reports*. Previous research of mainstream media coverage found at least 75% of the items contain reports. Comparing previous work on mainstream media to the blog coverage examined here, it is evident that bloggers present more bias in their coverage. However, that interpretation should be understood in the greater context of the findings in that *reports* make up the largest type of coverage by bloggers.

RQ2 asked if blogger bias varied based on convention being covered, and tests revealed statistically significant differences. While the percentages for each category within the Hayakawa–Lowry scale did not differ by more than 5.8%, there were slight rank order differences based on convention. For example, the top category for Republican convention bloggers was attributed *report*, but it was unlabeled *inference* for Democratic bloggers. Regarding favorability, Democratic bloggers posted favorable items about the convention (14.6%), and Republican bloggers less so (13.9%). Looking at unfavorable coverage, 10.2% of the items posted by Republican bloggers were negative, compared to 8.9% from the Democratic bloggers. Though differences were minimal, Democratic bloggers displayed more bias in favor of the credentialing convention/party.

RQ3 asked if there was a difference in bias based on the topic being discussed in the item. This question sought to answer if there were certain topics that would result in more factual coverage and other topics that would be covered by a greater level of bias. A series of statistically significant chi square tests found that attributed reports were most likely used when discussing the blogger's record of the day and daily experiences, interview with a politician, interview with a party official, interview with a journalist, interview with other type of person, the opponent from the other political party, and blogging or the credentialing of bloggers. Items using unlabeled *inferences* were statistically significantly more likely to discuss the mainstream media, political statements, and discussion of the speeches at the convention. *Judgments* that were attributed and favorable were more likely to be blogger endorsements for the party's presidential candidate. Discussion of the party's presidential candidate was equally likely to be either an attributed *report* or an unlabeled *inference*.

RQ4 asked if bias in coverage varied based on gender. A chi square test found females used *reports* 10.2% more often than males. Males used *inferences* 4.4% more often than females. The use of *judgments* differed by 0.2% based on gender. Additional chi square tests investigating the role of gender in regards to the topics discussed in sentences

Author's personal copy

yielded statistically significant results. Females (23.2%) were more likely than males (19.9%) to discuss speeches, record of the day (63.4% vs. 55.7%), make a political statement (14.1% vs. 11.2%), and conduct an interview with a someone such as a delegate (9.5% vs. 7.1%). Males (21.3%) were more likely than females (17.9%) to discuss blogging and credentialed bloggers, discuss mainstream media (11.7% vs. 9.3), ask for reader interaction (6.1% vs. 2.7%), opponent (5.8% vs. 3.2%), and endorse the candidate of the hosting convention (4.2% vs. 0.7%).

4. Discussion

The results presented here can be interpreted in two ways. On one hand, bloggers – compared to previous research on other channels that have been investigated using Hayakawa–Lowry – are biased. On the other hand, the most frequently occurring category for bloggers was *reports*.

Traditional media coverage holds objective reporting sacrosanct. Research reviewed in preparation for this study indicated that even though a quarter of items in the samples examined would contain biased, non-factual content, the majority of media units were *reports*. Here, the data indicated a more level distribution between the occurrence of *reports, inferences,* and *judgments.* If one were to look at the ratio between factual accounts (*reports*) and biased statements (*inferences* and *judgments*), it would be easy to conclude that credentialed blogs contained a higher degree of distortion than traditional media reports.

However, the findings show that *reports* continue to be the most dominant category along this bias continuum. Under this interpretation, these credentialed blogs were technically not as biased as they are factual. Indeed, as the level of bias increased (from *report* to *inference* and *inference* to *judgment*), the reliance on bias in the story declined.

Given the room for interpretation in these findings, it is best to proceed with the understanding that blogs are more biased than news reports. That said, blogs do not contain 100% distortion or biased analysis as some portrayals of the tool have indicated previously. This research found that blogs are in the middle of this continuum of bias where bloggers sample from all types of semantic possibilities. This study further illustrated that bias is, just as Entman suggested, not a comparison to reality but only understood within the context of other stories. This area is ripe for future research and scholars should look deeper and predicting the instances when and where bias might occur on blogs.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Dr. Stephen Banning, Aimee' Cardella, Xiaowei Chen, Ruxandra Guiera, Amanda Sapp, Amy Wilson, and Hana Kim for assistance on this project.