



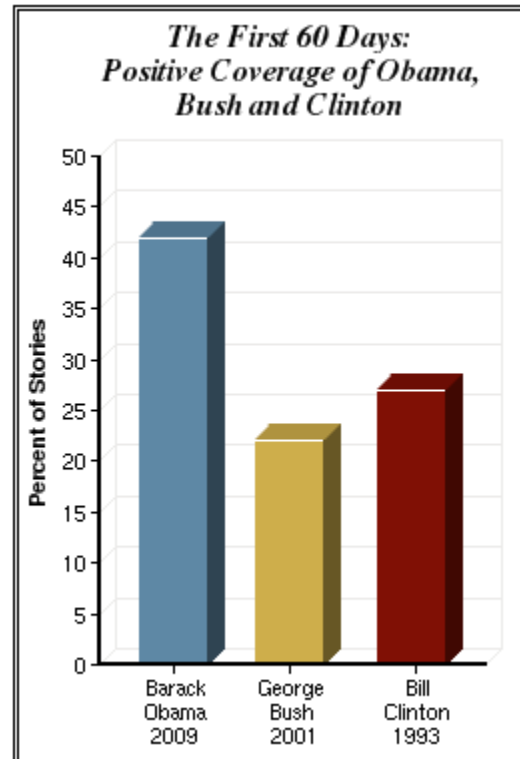
Obama's First 100 Days How the President Fared In the Press vs. Clinton and Bush

As he marks his 100th day in office, President Barack Obama has enjoyed substantially more positive media coverage than either Bill Clinton or George Bush during their first months in the White House, according to a new study of press coverage.

Overall, roughly four out of ten stories, editorials and op ed columns about Obama have been clearly positive in tone, compared with 22% for Bush and 27% for Clinton in the same mix of seven national media outlets during the same first two months in office, according to a study by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism.

The study found positive stories about Obama have outweighed negative by two-to-one (42% vs. 20%) while 38% of stories have been neutral or mixed.

When a broader universe of media—one that includes 49 outlets and reflects the more modern media culture of 2009, is examined, the numbers for Obama's coverage are similar, though somewhat less positive and somewhat more negative. In this expanded universe of media—which includes news websites, additional regional and local newspapers, plus cable news, network morning news, and National Public Radio, 37% of Obama's coverage has been positive, 40% neutral and 23% negative.



Several factors may be at play in the favorable tone Obama has received during these first months. One element is the pace and sweep of Obama's activities. Bush and Clinton both started their presidencies pursuing policy agendas much more of their own making than Obama has. But the data suggest the current president has managed the media narrative anyway by responding to the economic crisis with so many new proposals and doing so many events that it has been hard for both his critics and the media to keep up.

Another factor may be the media reflecting, and in turn, influencing public opinion. President Obama at this point in his presidency is more popular than were either Bush or

Clinton. Past studies have shown a recurring pattern of press coverage tending to follow favorability ratings.¹

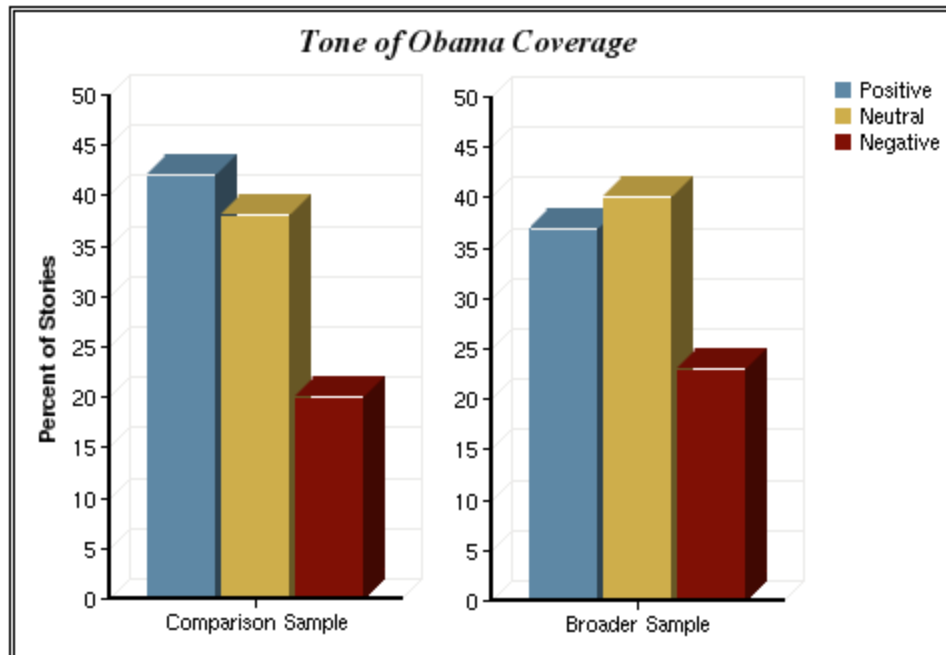
Obama also entered office with a stronger popular mandate than either of his two predecessors. He is the first President since George H.W. Bush in 1988 to be elected to his first term with more than 50% of the popular vote. He also succeeded a president leaving office with historically low favorability ratings.

Finally, those who see the press as ideologically motivated toward liberals will likely see that phenomenon as a factor here as well.

Among other differences, the tone of Obama's coverage has also proven to be more consistent over time than his predecessors'. Sixteen years ago, Bill Clinton stumbled badly his first month in office and then began to recover; George Bush started well in the press and then began to see his coverage become more skeptical as his policy agenda rolled out, often to substantial controversy. Obama, by contrast, while he has had good weeks and bad in the media, has shown a capacity to recover from the rough ones by changing tactics and redirecting the narrative.

These are a few of the findings of the new study, which compared coverage of the first 60 days of the Obama Administration to coverage in the same outlets during the same time period in the first days of the Bush Administration and the Clinton Administration. The comparative component of the study includes an examination of 1,261 stories in two national newspapers, the three commercial network evening newscasts, a prominent newsweekly and the NewsHour on PBS.

¹ Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, "Obama at 100 Days: Strong Job Approval, Even Higher Personal Ratings Better Ratings for Foreign Policy than Domestic Issues," April 23, 2009. Obama's approval rating at roughly the 100 day mark was 63%, compared with 56% for George W. Bush and 55% for Bill Clinton.



The new study also looked at an expanded universe of media outlets that more fully reflects the new media culture. That larger universe also includes the three cable news channels, the three commercial network morning news programs, National Public Radio, 12 news websites, and 11 additional newspapers.

Among the findings in the study:

- In contrast with Clinton and Bush, Obama’s treatment was more favorable than skeptical both in news coverage and on newspaper opinion pages. For Clinton, on the other hand, news coverage tilted toward the negative, while newspaper op eds and editorial offered favor. The treatment went the other way for Bush, with news coverage leaning positive, while op ed and editorials studied were decidedly negative.
- The topics covered have also has been different for Obama versus his predecessors. Roughly twice as much of the coverage of Obama (44%) has concerned his personal and leadership qualities than was the case for Bush (22%) or Clinton (26%). Less of the coverage, meanwhile, has focused on his policy agenda.
- Thanks in part to Obama’s getting out of Washington and meeting directly with the public, far more of the coverage has dealt with his relationship with the American people (31% of all stories) than was the case with Clinton (16%) or Bush (8%). Much more of Bush’s coverage centered on his relations with Congress and ways in which he wanted to change the reputation of the office of the president—largely institutional issues, while Clinton’s coverage scattered in many directions. This focus on the public has also been a factor in

the positive tone of the coverage, both because it plays to one of Obama's political strengths and because the citizen voices have often been so favorable.

- There are significant variations in how the different media sectors have covered the Obama presidency. Newspapers and evening network television were most positive in their treatment of Obama. Online news sites were more neutral. Within the cable news universe, MSNBC and Fox News offered strikingly different portrayals of the young presidency, while CNN more closely reflected the tone of the media overall. Meanwhile, NPR and PBS offered the highest percentage of neutral stories of any outlets studied.

This study was designed to examine how the press assessed the new president, to break down the basis of those assessments and to compare this early period with both Clinton and Bush.

To accomplish this, the study examined the following:

1. How many stories were done?
2. What was the basic topic of each story?
3. What underlying area of the presidency was the story assessing—was it the president's leadership abilities, his ideological agenda or his personal character?
4. What was the tone of the coverage—neutral/balanced, demonstrably positive or demonstrably negative?
5. What narrative frame was the story built around—conflict, explaining policy, explaining tactics, a reality check, etc.?
6. What political relationship did the story focus on—the president's relationship to his staff, to members of Congress, to the office, to interest groups, to citizens?

Stories that were very short—under 30 seconds on television and under 100 words in print, were excluded.

Total Amount of Coverage

Given his popularity, some might imagine that Obama has generated media attention like few presidents before him. It isn't so.

Actually, Clinton was the dominant figure in more stories than Obama in their first two months when the same media outlets are compared.² Overall, there were 566 Clinton stories, 333 for Bush and 362 for Obama.

One major reason for the difference is that the space in newspapers even among the country's biggest has gotten so much smaller. There were 324 stories about Clinton in the first two months of his presidency in the Washington Post and New York Times, 202 about Bush and 176 about Obama.

² For an individual to be considered the dominant newsmaker, 50% percent of the story must be about that person.

Yet the shrinking print newshole does not completely explain the smaller number of Obama stories. Clinton was also the dominant subject more frequently than Obama in stories on the three commercial network newscasts and the NewsHour with Jim Lehrer on PBS as well—193 Clinton stories, 111 for Bush and 156 stories for Obama. Our sense is that the economy and its myriad problems are such a dominant story that the Obama Administration was often a part but not always the dominant subject of the reports.

TONE

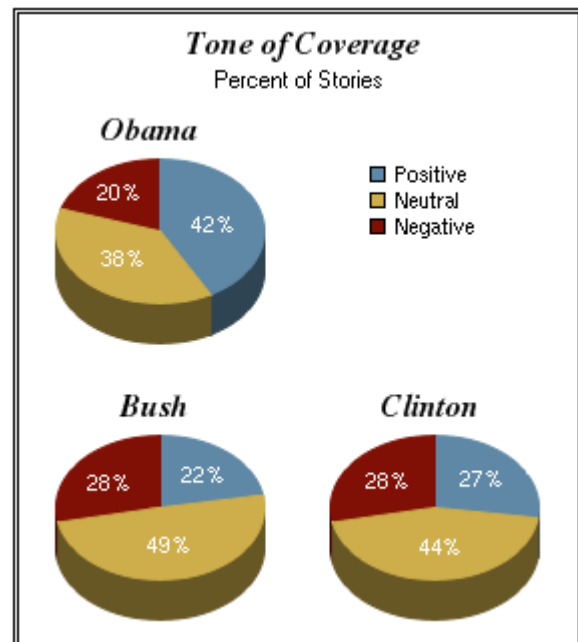
The most striking difference in Obama’s media narrative is the degree to which he has enjoyed considerably more positive press than either of his predecessors at the beginning of their first terms.

Overall, positive stories outnumbered negative ones by better than two-to-one (42% to 20%). Another 38% were neutral or mixed.

For both President Bush and President Clinton, by contrast, the bulk of the coverage was neutral, and negative coverage slightly outweighed positive.

For President Bush in 2001, for instance, just 22% of the stories carried a clearly positive tone, nearly half that of Obama, while 28% were negative. Roughly half of all Bush’s coverage was neutral.

Eight years earlier, the tone of President Clinton’s coverage was just slightly more positive. In the same outlets during the same time period, 27% of stories were clearly favorable, while 28% were negative and 44% were neutral.

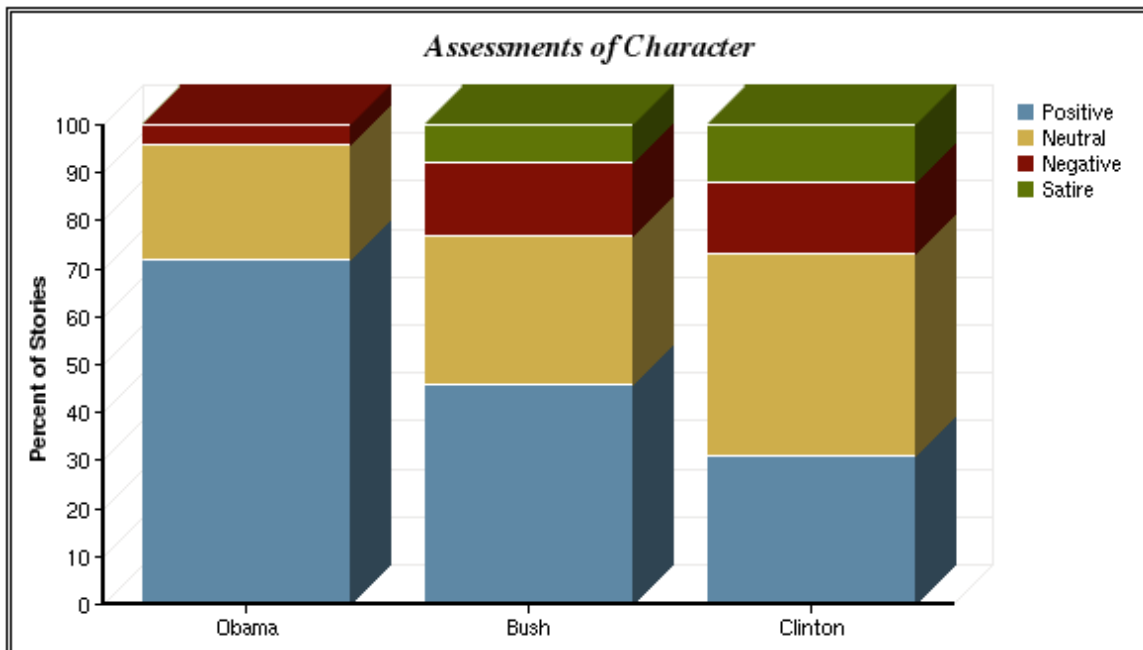


There were also differences in the context in which the three presidents earned favorable notice. For Bush, his broad image as a skillful manager determinedly pursuing a conservative agenda scored him points on leadership but generated more negative coverage when it came to his ideology.

Clinton’s early coverage created the image of a president connected to people but through often highly calculated actions that were designed to win him popularity. The calculated leadership style brought criticism while his policy assessments were more mixed.

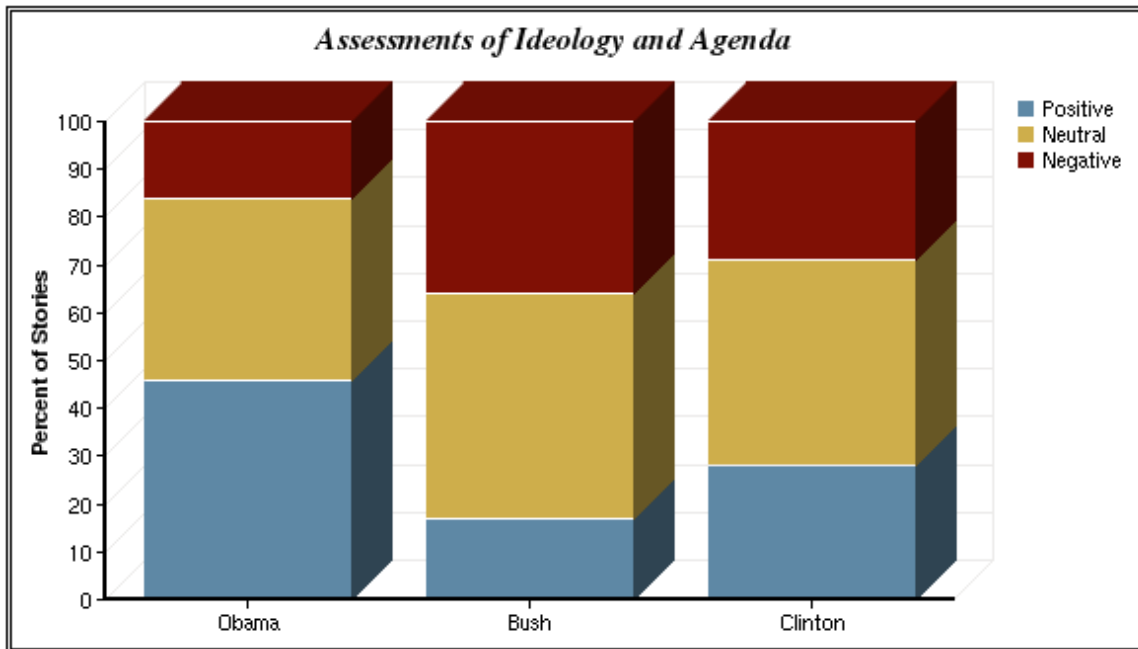
Obama, on the other hand, was praised on all fronts—policy, leadership and character. With the challenge of addressing both his own campaign agenda of change and that which history brought upon him—the economy—coverage boiled down to the broad question of whether he was succeeding. Whether assessed by his policy choices, leadership and personality, the answer was largely, ‘yes’.

The most positive coverage—though it represented the smallest share—was focused on Obama’s character: his honesty, temperament and personality. Fully 72% of all stories here were positive in nature. That is far better than Clinton (31%). Yet it is even better than Bush, whom the press in these early days assessed quite favorably on character (46% positive and 15% negative).



Some of the praise came from the press itself, but much also came from the voices of those Obama interacted with on the road. In reporting on Obama’s trip to Fort Myers, Fla., on February 11, for instance, CBS World News correspondent Julie Chen interviewed a man, Julio Asegueda, who had been at the event. “When I voiced my problem to the president of the United States,” Asegueda said, “I was so shocked at the answer that he gave me. The answer that he gave me was so, so sincere and so motivational to me that it just—I had such a surreal feeling that I’ve never had in my life.”

Obama also won the battle for coverage when it came to stories about his political agenda and ideology. These stories were nearly three times as positive as negative (46% versus 16% negative).



In many outlets the praise was simple and straightforward. In a February 27 World News Tonight report, Charles Gibson summed up Obama’s announced timetable for troop withdrawal from Iraq. “Obama took a giant step toward ending it. After six years of war, a most significant movement.”

When it came to ideology and political agenda, Obama’s positive image again far outweighed Clinton’s (whose core ideology coverage was 28% positive and 28% negative) and even more so Bush’s (for whom only 17% of stories were positive while 36% were negative).

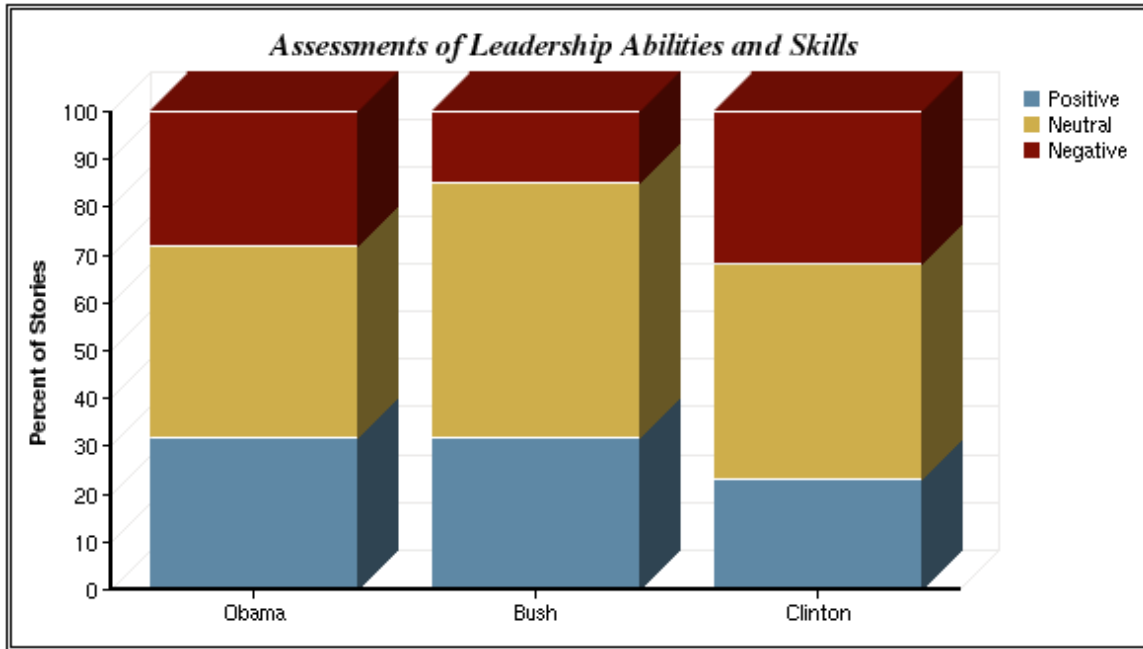
Among the reasons for Bush’s problems when it came to ideology and agenda were his sometimes contradictory remarks, and questions, at times, about his grasp of details.

A March 15, 2001 page one story at the Washington Post, for instance, read, "Bush appeared to send mixed signals about the U.S. economy. To reporters, he said he was concerned about the market turmoil but has ‘great faith in our economy.’ Later, in a speech, he declared: “Our economy is beginning to sputter.” Soon after Bush became much more guarded when the issue of the economy arose.

Assessments of Clinton’s policies were more divided. He was largely praised for his pledge on welfare reform. A Washington Post story quoted Republican governors Tommy Thompson and John Engler, as “very excited,” Senator Moynihan as “hugely gratified,” and welfare analyst Robert Rector as calling it “a very dramatic departure from Democratic proposals in the past.”

But he also received harsh criticism for other policies like in gays in the military.

The most mixed assessments of Obama came in coverage that assessed his leadership abilities and skills. Some of the criticism came over a lack of clarity in explaining himself to the people. Warren Buffet in a March 10 segment by Chuck Todd on the Today Show remarked, “You need the president of the United States to make it clear, because if people aren’t clear they are going to be confused and if they’re confused they’re going to be scared stiff.”



But others like Newsweek’s Jonathan Alter praised his leadership skills. In explaining his confidence in the President, Alter wrote that Obama has “a firm grasp of the psychological and substantive challenges of the presidency. Equally important, his 2008 campaign proved that he possesses a superior sense of timing. He knows that now is not the moment to cheerlead, not when the financial players are lying dazed on the field.”

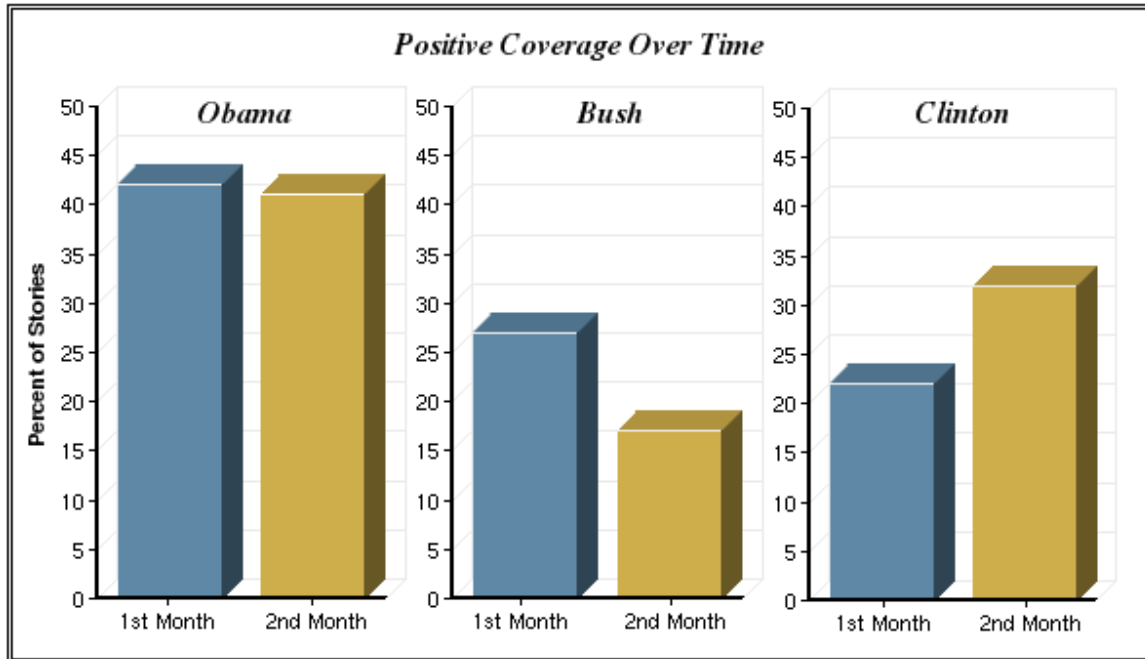
Overall, positive evaluations of Obama on leadership slightly outweighed negative ones (32% to 28%), and most 40% were balanced or neutral. In contrast, Bush earned his highest praise here (32% positive vs. 14% negative) while Clinton earned his lowest marks (30% versus 23%).

A CONSISTENTLY POSITIVE IMAGE

More differences in the early coverage of the last three presidents emerge in how their evaluations changed over the course of those first 60 days.

Clinton began his term with intense criticism over his handling of gays in the military and flawed cabinet appointments. But during the second month in office his coverage became more positive with well-received policy positions on the budget, free trade, health care and welfare reform.

For Bush, the reverse occurred. He started off strong, with praise for managing a smooth transition. But in his second month, as he articulated his budget plan and positions on issues such as global warming, water pollution and bankruptcy law, the tone began to shift.



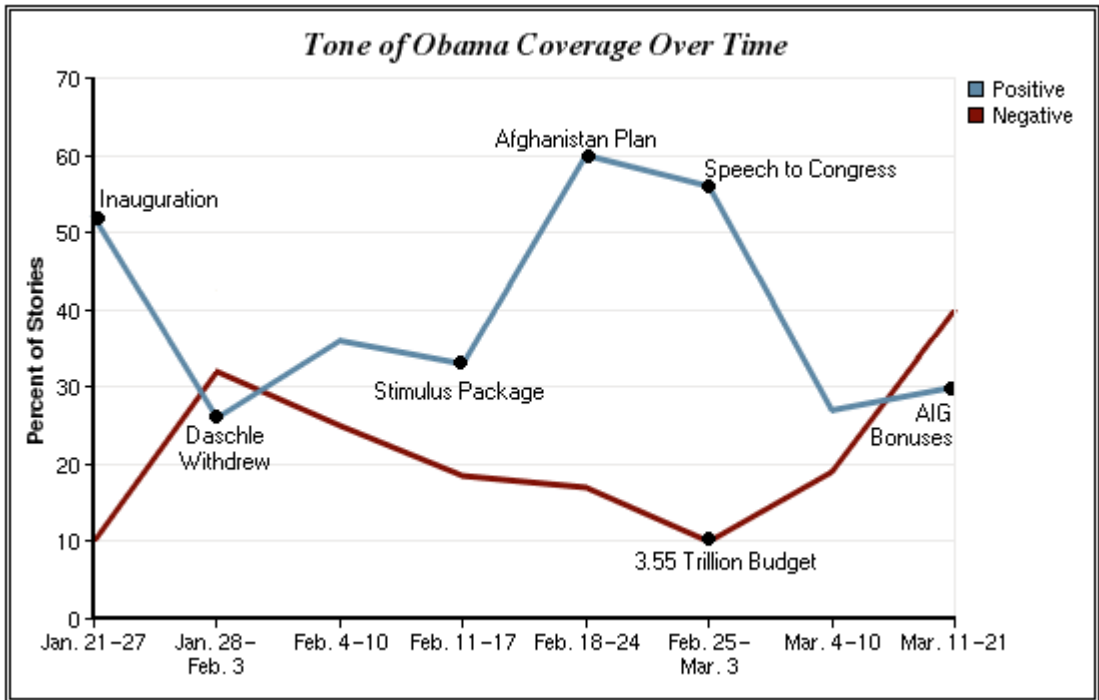
Obama had yet a different experience. The tone of his coverage was nearly identical for both months. Looking week by week, though (a breakdown not available for the earlier studies), reveals some dips and peaks along the way.

The inauguration itself was extremely well-received, with a majority of the coverage that week (52%) clearly positive in tone.

Just a week later, though, when the nomination of Tom Daschle for Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services blew up and Obama admitted on network TV that he had made mistakes, positive stories declined by half, to just 26%. And with reports like one in the New York Times on February 3 which stated, “the Obama team finds itself being criticized by bloggers on the left and the right, mocked by television comics and questioned by reporters about whether Mr. Obama is really changing the way Washington works or just changing which political party works it,” his negative stories tripled to a third of all coverage.

The Obama camp quickly took action, publicly working to turn the tide. And by the third week of February, with announced plans to send 17,000 troops to Afghanistan, his first official trip abroad to Canada and a crucial prime time speech to a joint session of Congress, the president’s positive press was back up to 60%.

Mid-March, however, brought more broad challenges and another dip in his positive coverage, including new, negative economic figures, a controversial \$410 billion spending bill and the discovery that AIG had paid \$165 million in bonuses. But others, such as a poor choice in making a joke on the Jay Leno Show about the Special Olympics and the administration’s missteps in handling the AIG bonuses, were more tied to Obama himself. And as the first 60 days came to a close, the president’s positive coverage had dropped back down to 30% and his negative coverage jumped to 40%—the only week in which negative stories outweighed positive.

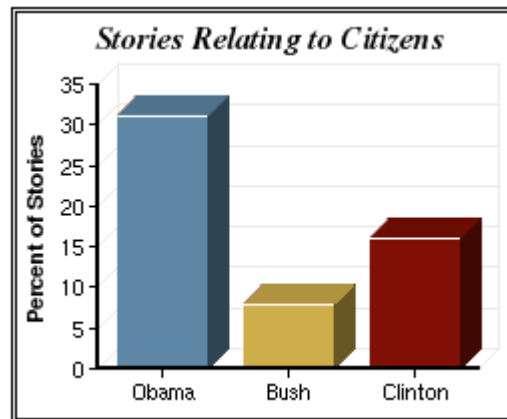


More than areas of vulnerability, though, what this points to is the extent to which the Obama team has taken an active role in affecting the president’s public image. As occurred throughout the campaign, when events turned against them, the team actively reached out to the public, Obama’s supporters and worked to get things back on track.

THE GRASSROOTS PRESIDENT

The public interaction from Obama comes through in another element of the coverage—the stakeholders with whom the president was associated in stories. The President’s grassroots appeals and activities have been clearly reflected in the press.

Overall, Obama stories were roughly twice as likely as Clinton stories and four times as likely as Bush stories to deal with the president or his actions in relation to the American

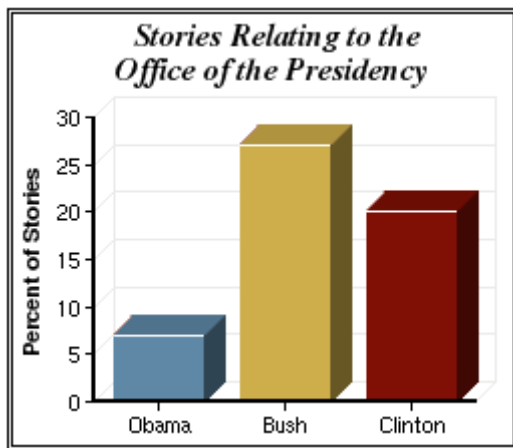


people. About three in ten stories (31%) during the first two months of Obama’s presidency tied his actions to the people—more attention than any other sub-group received. This compares to 16% of Clinton’s coverage in 1993 and 8% of Bush’s coverage in 2001.

Much of this stemmed from Obama’s personal trips to Middle America where he personally met with citizens. One such trip was to Elkhart, Ind. on February 9 to show how real people were suffering from the economic crisis. “We’re not just talking numbers, we’re talking about Ed, we’re talking about people in the audience here today,” quoted World News Tonight’s report on the trip. “I know that the new overpass downtown,” continued Obama, “would make a big difference for businesses and families right here in Elkhart.

The Situation Room that same day, ran a different clip, but with the same connection to citizens there. “You didn’t send us to Washington because you were hoping for more of the same; you sent us there to change things, the expectation that we would act quickly and boldly to carry out change and that’s exactly what I intend to do as president of the USA.”

In contrast, there have been far fewer stories focusing on the office of the presidency itself, such as his approach to long-standing traditions or the reputation of the office. Just



8% of the stories related primarily to these subjects. That is less than a third of the attention (27%) seen in 2001 after Bush took office and less than half that (20%) in the Clinton launch.

Unlike President Bush, who spoke publicly of efforts to restore dignity to the office, the Obama team has focused little on the title or the office itself. Instead, it has actively worked to put the focus outside the office, outside of Washington and inside the communities of American citizens.

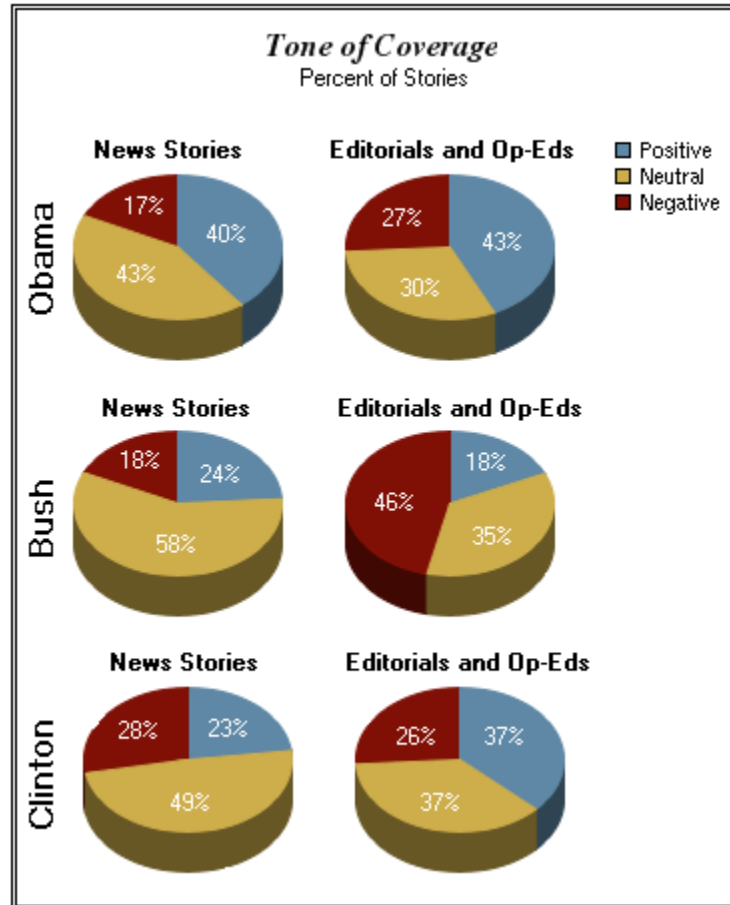
NEWS VS. OPINION

One other difference is that Obama has won the narrative in both the news accounts in print and TV and in the opinion pages. That was not the case for Clinton and Bush.

Looking at only news accounts, (removing newspaper op eds and editorials as well as Newsweek magazine) Bush’s coverage in 2001 was actually more positive (24%) than negative (18%) during his first two months. On the other hand, the op ed and editorial pages tended to offer harsh assessments of Bush (18% positive and 46% negative.)

Clinton’s news coverage, by contrast, was more negative (28%) than positive (23%), while op ed and editorial writers tended to favor him in those early days (37% positive and 26% negative).

Newsweek was much more skeptical of Clinton (22% positive and 39% negative) while mixed about Bush (30% positive and 35% negative).



Obama prevailed in all of these venues. Fully 40% of news stories were positive while just 17% were negative. In op eds and editorials, the numbers have been fairly similar (43% positive vs. 27% negative). Newsweek stood out even more. More than half of its stories have carried a clearly positive tone for the President, 53% vs. 23% negative.

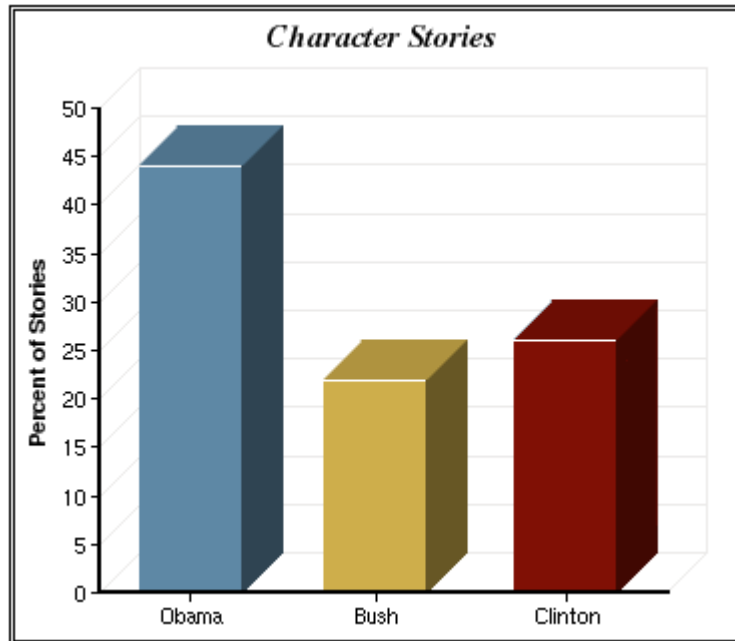
FOCUS OF COVERAGE

If the tone of coverage of Obama’s first days in office differed significantly from that of Bill Clinton and George Bush, so too did the focus of stories about the new President. Compared with his predecessors, the press narrative about Obama featured considerably less attention to policy and ideology and substantially more to such matters as Obama’s leadership ability, management style and political skills—coverage often cast in a highly tactical and strategic context.

To some extent at least, those differences reflect the unique circumstances under which Obama took office. Faced with an historic financial crisis, he reacted with a sequence of major initiatives that seemed to orient coverage more toward assessments of whether Obama was succeeding than the philosophy and details of what he was proposing.

This focus on character and leadership is evident first in the topics of the Obama coverage—the basic subject of each story or segment.

Fully 44% of all stories studied dealt with Obama himself, or his key appointments, as opposed to policy issues.



That is double the percentage of stories that were focused on these personal aspects of Bush’s early presidency (22%) and substantially more than that of Clinton in 1993 (26%).

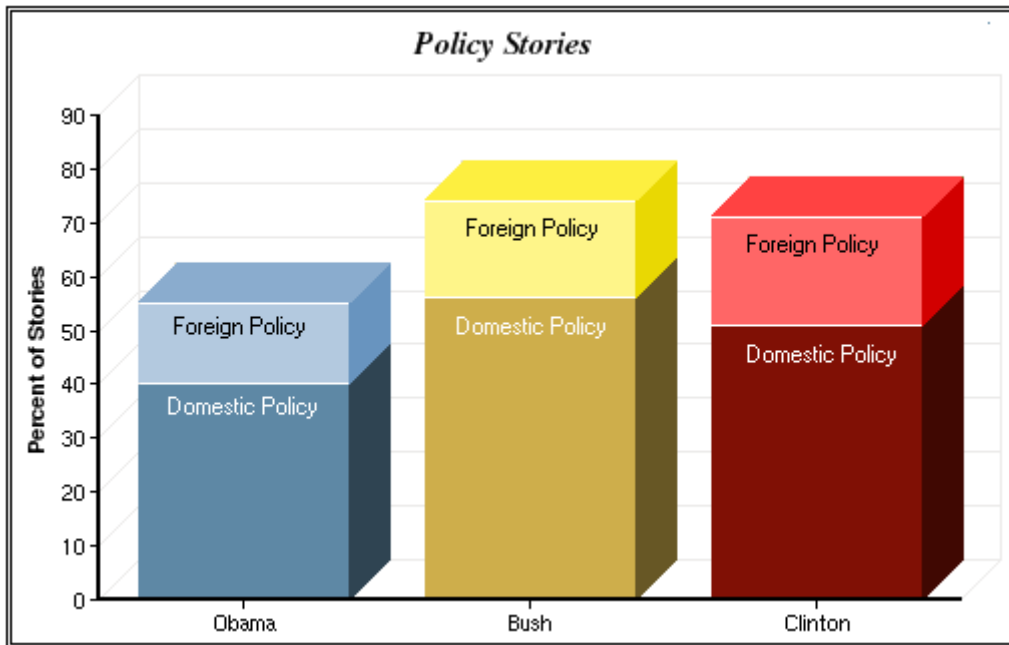
Obama Character Stories	
Percent of Stories	
Political Skills/Management	26%
Political Philosophy/Ideology	6
Pres. Appts./ Nom. Officials	6
Obama’s Race/Historical President	4
Personal Profile/Character	3

Most of this coverage, fully 26% of all stories studied, specifically concerned Obama’s management style and political skills (compared with 11% for both Bush

and Clinton in the first 60 days of their tenures.)

Meanwhile, a notably smaller percentage of Obama’s coverage than his predecessors’ focused on policy, or where he wanted to take the country. Stories at least nominally about policy made up 55% of all the Obama coverage studied, compared with 71% for Clinton and 74% for Bush.

When policy was the subject, which of Obama’s initiatives got the attention? Fully three quarters of his domestic policy stories involved either his budget or the economic crisis. That intense focus on one overarching financial theme also stands in contrast to his two predecessors, who generated substantial attention for a wider variety of domestic initiatives.



In his first months in office, for example, Clinton generated considerable attention to his approach to gays in the military (7%) and health care and issues affecting seniors (5%). A substantial portion of Bush’s policy-oriented coverage was focused on education (6%), religion (6%), and the environment (5%). In contrast, Obama received little coverage of any domestic issue not directly related to the economic crisis or budget matters.

And despite the series of daunting foreign policy challenges facing Obama—from Iran’s nuclear ambitions to the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan—there was also less coverage of foreign policy and defense issues for the new President (16%) than for either Clinton (20%) or Bush (18%).

One reason for the greater focus on character and leadership seemed to be that in trying to take stock of everything that was happening in the Obama administration the media focused on the president’s temperament and management style as the unifying theme.

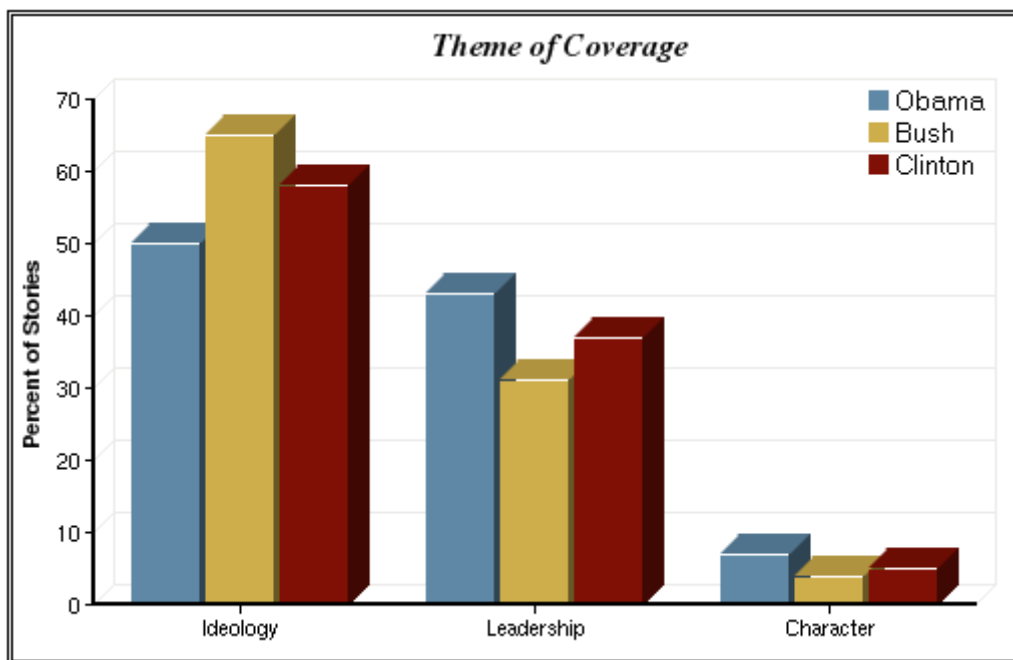
On February 15, for instance, three weeks after Obama’s inauguration, the Washington Post editorialized about a presidency that had already been “through a whirlwind,” and lauded Obama for a style perhaps well-suited to navigating such a grave economic downturn. “The sober approach Mr. Obama has taken since his election, underscoring the severity of the situation and taking pains to avoid over-promising results, may help keep the patient calm in the months that it will take to gauge the medication’s effectiveness,” the Post declared.

This personal focus of the media coverage is even more striking when one drills down deeper into how stories—especially news accounts—were put together or framed.

Only a quarter of all the Obama stories studied (26%) were framed around explaining the implications of his policies—about half the percentage of Bush 48% and far less than Clinton 35%.

Far more (39%) were constructed around the strategy and tactics of the Obama presidency. That is nearly double the percentage for Clinton (22%) and triple of that for Bush (14%).

Finally, the more personal nature of the coverage is reinforced by still another measure that the study examined, the underlying theme of the stories—or the basis upon which the presidents were being evaluated. Where the bulk of stories evaluated both Bush and Clinton based on his policy agenda (65% for Bush and 58% for Clinton), a noticeably smaller number did so far Obama (50%). In contrast, a higher percentage of stories were assessing Obama based on his leadership ability (43%), high than either Bush (31%) or Clinton (37%).



Whether the evaluations were positive, negative or mixed, Obama’s leadership ability and strategic skills—rather than the merits of specific proposals—were often the focus of media coverage in the first months of his presidency

On February 13, less than a month after Obama took office, those qualities were evaluated on PBS’s NewsHour, when senior correspondent Judy Woodruff asked commentator David Brooks what he was “seeing” with the new President.

“I mean, he’s passed this major piece of legislation, he’s passed SCHIP. From his perspective, he’s doing fine,” said Brooks. “Where he’s failing is that he set such remarkably high standards for himself: no lobbyists, change politics, bipartisan.... So far,

you have to give him a B, not up to the standards he set, but—but successful by his own right.”

A less flattering assessment came when former George Bush press secretary Ari Fleischer, in an interview on MSNBC, criticized the new administration for targeting conservative radio talk host Rush Limbaugh.

“The issue is the behavior of the president of the United States and his staff. Which Barack Obama is it? Is it the post-partisan Obama or the Barack Obama who sends his staff out to act childish?” Fleischer asked, adding that Obama “is acting more as a petty partisan instead of as the president.”

Why the different Obama focus?

The different focus for Obama coverage may well reflect the reality that his first days in office have been very different from his predecessors. In response to the fears of a widespread economic meltdown—perhaps the greatest financial crisis since the Great Depression—he has moved aggressively and quickly with a series of major and sometimes transformative economic initiatives.

On February 10, his Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner unveiled the financial sector bailout package known as TARP II. Three days later, Congress passed the White House-supported \$787 billion stimulus package. On February 18, Obama went to Phoenix and announced a housing market plan estimated to ultimately cost up to \$275 billion. On February 24, Obama delivered a major prime-time speech to Congress on the economy that was largely designed for consumption in America’s living rooms. Two days later, he unveiled a \$3.6 billion budget that dramatically re-ordered the nation’s domestic priorities. Then in late March, Geithner came forward with a detailed plan to deal with “toxic assets” in the banking sector.

It seems likely that the strategic nature of Obama’s coverage, and the focus on his leadership, is inextricably linked to the breakneck pace of his initiatives—some of which required Congressional approval and some of which did not. Given the sheer volume of news generated by the President, much of the media’s focus—rather than detailing the ideological or philosophical underpinnings of Obama’s decisions—has been devoted to assessing how well he is doing. Put simply: Is he winning or losing?

In early 2009, the press seemingly tried to answer that question hour-by-hour and day-by-day. One way of evaluating that was to examine the President’s track record with Congress. That was certainly the case with the hotly debated stimulus package that ultimately passed with minimal Republican support. But another method for tallying up Obama’s scorecard was to gauge the impact of his actions on the economy—by looking at everything from unemployment figures to housing foreclosures; from bank earnings statements to the Dow Jones Industrial Average.

One other element that may have affected his coverage is the trend of the news industry—exemplified on the cable news talk shows—toward an ever more immediate horse race-oriented evaluation of the news. The question “how did the President do last week?” on the weekend network panel shows has now morphed into “how did the President do last hour?” on the nightly cable programs.

The growing power of this “[snap judgment](#)” culture in the media—often mixed in with ideological commentary—may also have contributed to the greater strategic focus on Obama.

On the February 13 NewsHour, Judy Woodruff prefaced the Obama report card segment by noting that the new president has been in office for three-and-a-half weeks.

“It’s not too soon to ask” how he’s doing, she ventured.

In the current media environment, it’s not considered to soon to ask after three-and-a-half minutes.

Differences in Obama Coverage among Media Sectors and Outlets

In directly comparing Obama’s coverage to his two predecessors’, PEJ used the same sample—Newsweek, The New York Times, The Washington Post and the CBS, NBC, ABC and PBS nightly newscasts—for all three presidents. But to get a fuller sense of how the new administration was covered and reflect the more diverse media landscape today, we also broadened Obama’s news universe to include 49 media outlets in five sectors—online, newspaper, radio, broadcast news and cable news.

What is noteworthy in the expanded media universe are some significant differences in how various sectors and outlets covered the early months of the Obama tenure.

One broad trend finds that the tone of Obama’s coverage was more favorable in two traditional “old media” sectors—newspapers and network news—than in two newer platforms, cable news and online.

	<u>Media Overall</u>	<u>Newspaper</u>	<u>Online</u>	<u>Network w/o PBS</u>	<u>Cable</u>
Positive	37	41	30	40	32
Negative	23	22	23	19	30
Neutral	40	37	48	41	38

Indeed, striking similarities emerge between newspapers and the three commercial broadcast networks. In both cases, Obama’s positive stories outnumbered the negative ones by about a two-to-one margin (41% to 22% in newspapers and 40% to 19% in network). The neutral coverage in both sectors was also pretty much in sync—37% in newspapers and 41% on network.

The daily papers' overall positive tone for Obama was evident in the both the news reports in the expanded newspaper sample (39% positive versus 18% negative) and in the op eds and editorials studied in the Washington Post and New York Times (43% positive and 27% negative).

Online, the verdict was considerably more mixed. There, the largest percentage of Obama's coverage was neutral (48%) and the positive coverage (30%) outweighed the negative (23%) by a relatively modest amount.

On cable news, the tone was equally divided. Fully 38% of the President's stories were considered neutral compared with 32% positive and 30% negative. But looking at cable in aggregate is somewhat deceptive. For the balance came less in the coverage across the cable channels than in the average of what were three distinctly different portrayals of the president depending on which channel you watched.

While the sample sizes are too small to break out specific numbers by channel, the differences are clear enough to characterize. On Fox, the majority of Obama stories were clearly negative in tone, the only outlet studied where that was the case. On MSNBC, the majority of stories were clearly positive in tone, the only outlet studied other than Newsweek where that was the case. Indeed, in that respect, the two channels offered divergent images of Obama.

CNN, meanwhile, looked a great deal more like the rest of the media.

While the sample is small, it is not the first time the pattern has showed up. Indeed, the findings mirror the same ideological chasm that PEJ documented in the final months of the presidential campaign in a study entitled "The Color of News" ([link](#))—in which Fox and MSNBC saw the campaign strikingly differently from each other and from the rest of the media, with numbers that are quite similar.

In the first 100 days there are many examples of the dueling views of Obama's early tenure driven by ideological prime time hosts on MSNBC and Fox.

On his February 16 show, for instance, Fox News host Sean Hannity blasted the president for the just-passed stimulus bill. "I think this bill shows a very radical socialist agenda...and there's a certain level of dishonesty that I see," Hannity declared during a discussion with former George Bush advisor Karl Rove, adding that "If you're right, I'm right, and there's a dishonesty factor, what does that mean for the future leadership of Barack Obama?"

On his February 10 program, MSNBC host Keith Olbermann applauded Obama for trying to sell his stimulus package in not-so-friendly public venues. "A curious juxtaposition of presidents," Olbermann asserted. "The last one, if he was trying to sell us war, speaks in front of a hand-picked crowd of military families or conservative veterans.

This one, if he's trying to sell us economic stimulus, instead speaks in front of unscreened audiences in two cities that voted for his opponent..."

It should be noted the pattern is less pronounced in daytime, when cable tends to be newsier and often focuses on breaking events. There, the three cable channels generated about twice as much positive as negative coverage about Obama with half the stories falling into the neutral category, not too different from the media overall.

Another finding from "The Color of News" study was reinforced in the first months of the Obama administration. Corporate siblings NBC and MSNBC are very different entities editorially. While MSNBC provided the most favorable coverage of the new president on cable by a wide margin, NBC's coverage stood out in the broadcast universe for being considerably less positive and more negative about Obama than either CBS or ABC.

Notably, two public media outlets had the highest percentage of neutral coverage of the Obama presidency. On PBS' NewsHour and National Public Radio's Morning Edition, about half of the coverage was neutral compared to 40% in the media overall. One significant difference, however, was that the NewsHour's Obama stories were almost four times more positive than negative while on Morning Edition, his coverage was only moderately more positive than negative.

Both PBS and NPR also distinguished themselves from the rest of the media when it came to the topics constituting Obama's coverage. The NewsHour and Morning Edition devoted the highest percentage of stories to foreign affairs—22% and 17% respectively, compared with 12% for the press in general.

Methodology

"Obama's First 100 Days" is based on the aggregated data and coding from January 21 through March 21, 2009. This timeframe begins the day following the inauguration of President Obama and runs through his 60th day in office.

This study was conducted in two parts. The first was a replicate study, using the same methodology and sample as in PEJ's 2001 study "[The First 100 Days: How Bush Versus Clinton Fared in the Press.](#)" This was done to allow us to make accurate comparisons between the coverage of Obama's first days in office and the same time periods for the preceding two presidents.

The second part of the study added additional news reports beyond those included in the 2001 study. For the expanded universe we utilized data collected as part of PEJ's News Coverage Index during the same 60 day time period in order to examine additional media outlets.

As a result, this study includes two samples. The first sample, referred to here as the comparison sample, is modeled after the previous 2001 study. The second sample, referred to as the broader sample, includes all the stories that were in the comparison sample plus additional media outlets and sectors.

All the data about the coverage of President Clinton and President Bush come from the 2001 study. The methodology for that study can be found [here](#).

Sample Design

Comparison Sample

The comparison sample was duplicated for 2009 the sample used in PEJ's 2001 study. This sample consisted of seven media outlets—2 newspaper, 1 news magazine and 4 broadcasts. The time period was January 21 to March 21, 2009.

The specific outlets, selected to develop a sample of coverage provided by the national press, are as follows:

Newspapers

The New York Times
The Washington Post

Weekly Magazine

Newsweek

Evening Network TV

ABC World News Tonight
CBS Evening News
NBC Nightly News
PBS Newshour

Newspaper stories were drawn from section front pages (i.e. national news, style, business, metro, Sunday review), editorials and op-ed pieces. Complete newscasts and complete issues of Newsweek were the basis for the sample of television and magazine stories. It should be noted that the PBS Newshour only airs from Monday through Friday, while the three broadcast networks air newscasts every day of the week. Also, there were a number of weekend network broadcasts that were pre-empted for other programming. CBS Evening News did not air on February 1, February 8, February 15, February 22, March 15, and March 21. NBC Nightly News did not air on February 1, February 8, and March 15.

Story Inclusion

For the newspaper and television outlets, this sample included stories published or broadcast every 2nd day and all stories published or broadcast on Sundays. All Newsweek

issues published during the period were used in the study except for the Commemorative Inaugural Edition which differed in style from the typical Newsweek edition.

Stories were only included in this study if 50% of the time or space was devoted to Barack Obama or his administration. Print stories less than 100 words long, broadcast stories 30 seconds or less, 1-on-1 interviews with Obama, or the purest form of straight news were excluded.

The resulting comparison sample consisted of 362 stories.

Broader Sample

The broader sample included all the outlets included in the comparison sample along with many of the additional outlets that are coded as part of PEJ's regular News Coverage Index.

The complete methodology of the PEJ's News Coverage Index is available [here](#).

The outlets that were part of the broader sample (in addition to the comparison sample listed above) are listed below. And here, there is an embedded system of rotation, as indicated.

Newspapers (Sun-Fri)

Coded every second day

USA Today

Los Angeles Times

Wall Street Journal

Coded two out of these four every day

Kansas City Star

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

San Antonio Express-News

San Jose Mercury News

Coded 2 out of these 4 every day

Herald News (MA)

Anniston Star (AL)

Spokesman-Review (WA)

Meadville Tribune (PA)

Web sites (Coded 6 of 12 each day, Mon-Fri)

CNN.com

Yahoo News

MSNBC.com

Google News

AOL News

Foxnews.com
USAToday.com
Washingtonpost.com
ABCNews.com
BBC News (international version)
Reuters.com
NYTimes.com

Morning Network TV (Mon-Fri)

ABC – Good Morning America
CBS – Early Show
NBC – Today

Cable TV (Fifteen in all, Mon-Fri)

Daytime (2:00 to 2:30 pm) coded 2 out of 3 every day

CNN
Fox News
MSNBC

Nighttime CNN – coded 2 out of the 4 every day

Situation Room (6 pm)
Lou Dobbs Tonight
Campbell Brown: No Bias, No Bull
Anderson Cooper 360

Nighttime Fox News – coded 2 out of the 4 every day

Special Report w/ Bret Baier
Fox Report w/ Shepard Smith
O'Reilly Factor
Hannity

Nighttime MSNBC – coded 2 out of the 4 every day

1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Hardball (7 pm)
Countdown w/ Keith Olbermann
Rachel Maddow

Radio (Mon-Fri)

NPR Morning Edition every day (Rotated daily between the first 30 minutes of the first hour and first 30 minutes of the second hour)

Story Inclusion

The portion of the news product studied different slightly from the comparison sample. For the broader sample content, PEJ analyzed all stories with a national or international focus that appear as follows:

- On the front page of newspapers
- During the first 30 minutes of network morning news and cable programs
- During a thirty minute segment of NPR's Morning Edition
- As one of the top 5 stories on each Web site at the time of capture

Then, as in the comparative sample, stories were included in this study if 50% of the time or space in the story was devoted to Barack Obama or his administration. Print stories less than 100 words long, broadcast stories 30 seconds or less, 1-on-1 interviews with Obama, or the purest form of straight news such as were excluded.

Finally, from the qualifying stories, every second story appearing in newspapers, network TV, online, or radio, every 2nd story was randomly selected for inclusion. Since there were a high number of stories on cable devoted to politics, every 3rd story was randomly selected to be part of this study.

The resulting broader sample consisted of 757 stories (including the 362 stories also in the comparison sample).

Capture and Retrieval

All outlets are captured and included in PEJ's media archive.

For Newsweek magazine and newspapers that are available in print in the Washington, D.C. area, hard copies are used. For newspapers that are not available for delivery, digital editions of the paper are retrieved either through the newspaper's own Web site, or through the use of digital delivery services such as pressdisplay.com and newsstand.com. When necessary, the text of articles are supplemented by the archives available in the LexisNexis computer database.

Radio programs are captured through online streams of the shows. Using automated software, we record several local affiliates that air the program in various markets throughout the country. The purpose of this method is to ensure that we have a version of the program in case one of the streams is unavailable on a particular day, and so that we record the show in a manner that represents the way a typical listener would hear the program with commercials and newsbreaks.

Online websites are captured manually by a member of PEJ's staff. The capture time is rotated daily between 9 am ET and 4 pm ET. The home pages and pages with the top articles for all five sites are saved so that when we reference the material, the format is the same as it appeared online at the time of capture.

Finally, all television shows are recorded digitally and archived for coding purposes. PEJ is a subscriber to DirectTV satellite service and all programs are recorded onto multiple TiVo recording units before being burned onto DVDs for archival purposes. Several of the weekend newscasts used in this study did not air in the Washington, D.C. area at the normal time. In those instances, either copies of those stories were borrowed from the

Vanderbilt Television News Archive, or transcripts were accumulated from LexisNexis or Highbeam Research.

All television and radio programs are then coded by a member of PEJ's staff who watches or listens to the archived version of the program.

Coding Team & Process for Weekly Index Coding

Much of the data in this study was derived from PEJ's regular Index coding and was conducted by PEJ's team of 14 trained coders. We have tested all of the variables contained in the regular weekly Index coding and all the variables reached a level of agreement of 80% or higher. For specific information about those tests, see the [methodology section for the NCI](#).

Additional Coding

For all the stories included in this study, additional coding was conducted using the same codes used in the 2001 study of Presidential media coverage.

Stories were coded for topic, frame, and arena. For these three variables, the *simple plurality rule* was used: researchers coded each paragraph individually, variable by variable, and the code that appeared most often was used to classify the story. Where two codes appeared with equal frequency, the code that occurs earliest in the story was used.

- **Topic** refers to the general subject matter of the story: for example, crime, the environment, or the nomination process.
- **Frame** describes the narrative technique used by the journalist (whether consciously or not) to inform readers or listeners about the subject at hand.
- **Arena** describes to whom the story related the president. For example, a story about the president's budget (topic) might be written in a way that relates him to Congress (e.g., describing White House staff meeting with Senators) or to interest groups (e.g., reporting on the efforts of lobbyists who support or oppose the plan) or to his cabinet (e.g. how closely did Bush work with his cabinet on final figures compared to other president's). Another possible relationship is that of the office of the president. These are stories that focus internally and look at the President in his new role.

Finally, stories were coded for **Theme** and for **Tone**. Theme refers to what journalists were assessing about the president. Three possible themes of presidential evaluation were developed: leadership, an assessment of the president's political skills or decision-making ability; ideology, an assessment of the president's agenda; and character, an assessment of the president's personal mores and system of values. Researchers coded comments from sources (including the president himself) and journalists' innuendoes to determine which theme a story belonged to.

Next, researchers coded each comment and innuendoes pertaining to the President for tone: positive, negative or neutral. Extra weight was given to text in the headline or lead paragraph of a story. When the ratio of positive to negative comments, or negative to positive comments, equaled or exceeded 2:1 a story was coded as a positive or negative assessment of the president. All other stories were classified as neutral.

Coding Team & Process for the Additional Coding

A team of five of PEJ's experienced coders worked with a coding administrator in order to complete the additional coding for this particular study. Of the five coders, all but one had previously coded for tone in a previous PEJ campaign study.

Intercoder testing of the specific additional codes used in this study was conducted using 43 randomly selected stories. Of those, 29 of the stories were coded by all participants while 14 of the stories were coded by two participants.

The percent agreement for each variable was as follows:

Topic: 84%

Frame: 81%

Political arena: 82%

Theme: 80%

Tone: 83%