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CHARACTER AND THE CAMPAIGN:

What Are The Master Narratives about the Candidates in 2004 and How Is The Public Reacting To Them?

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What Are The Master Narratives about the Candidates in 2004 and How Is The Public Reacting To Them?

If presidential campaigns are about character and control of message, neither candidate has had much success so far, according to a new study of the media coverage of the 2004 campaign.

Heading into the political conventions, the presidential campaign has been largely subsumed inside coverage of other news events—particularly the conflict in Iraq, the Abu Ghraib prison scandal and the September 11th Commission.

One consequence is that President George W. Bush has dominated the coverage, but much of that reportage, at least when linked to character traits, has been critical—by a margin of more than three to one.

This may not have damaged the President markedly yet. People still tend to associate positive character traits with Bush more than negative ones—in particular that he is decisive and won't shrink from a fight.

There is some bad news for Kerry. He has not been much of a presence in the news, and this problem has grown with time. As a result, most people surveyed have difficulty associating any character traits with Kerry as opposed to Bush. The only major theme that even a third of the public links to him is that he flip flops.

This leaves Kerry with much ground to make up as he tries to project himself more clearly to the American public this month with his choice of John Edwards as running mate and his party's convention. It also suggests he remains vulnerable to being defined by the Republicans.

These are some of the findings of a new study of the media coverage, political advertising and public opinion in the 2004 presidential election conducted by the Project for Excellence in Journalism in collaboration with the University of Missouri School of Journalism and twinned with a survey of public attitudes by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press.

The study examined how the major narrative themes about the character of the candidates were portrayed in the news media, advertising and late night comedy programs spanning four months from March to June 2004. In collaboration with the Pew Research Center, the study then surveyed the public about these major campaign themes to see which themes people believed and which ones they did not. It further analyzed their ad and media consumption behavior, controlling for various factors, to isolate which messages and which forms of media might be having an impact on public attitudes.

Among the findings:

- There is evidence that the press is having an impact: the more people pay attention to press coverage, the more likely they are to match the character traits with the candidates the same way the press has.¹

¹ To test what features were associated with people identifying each thread characteristic with the candidate it had been linked with (i.e., Kerry with flip flopping; Bush with refusing to admit he was wrong), we added up for each respondent how many characteristic-candidate links they got correct (which ranged from

- The impact of the press coverage may be greater in battleground states, where the survey data shows people are paying closer attention to candidate news.
- Advertising, on the other hand, has had only a limited impact on the public’s thinking.
- Undecided voters at this point tend to consume news less, see slightly fewer ads and are generally less engaged in the political process. They also have the most indistinct impression of both candidates at this point.
- Journalists were almost as likely as the campaigns to be the source asserting these character traits about the candidates.
- More than four in ten character assertions were made with no evidence cited to back them up.

THE CHARACTER THEMES IN ORDER

The most prevalent message about the character of the candidates in the news media is that President Bush is “stubborn and arrogant.” This is followed closely by the idea that Bush “lacks credibility.”

The third most common message in the press, however, is a positive one about the President, the idea that he is a “strong and decisive leader.”

Put together, all of these messages trump in magnitude those about Democratic challenger Kerry—by more than two to one.

The most common theme about Kerry is that he “flip flops” on issues, followed closely by the idea that he is “very liberal.”

These, in turn, outweigh by two to one the notion that Kerry most wants to project—that he is “a tough guy who won’t back down from a fight.”

As time wore on, all of these messages about the candidates were less common in campaign stories as events, particularly the war in Iraq, began to overwhelm the coverage.

Both the President and Kerry, in other words, have failed to gain control of the campaign dialogue projected in the press.

In their ad campaigns—the medium they can control—these character themes are more prominent.

Meanwhile, in late night comedy, where some voters say they get political information, a different set of messages tended to exist. Kerry barely has registered at all on the comedy circuit, and when he does it is as a flip flopper. The dominant message of the President in comedy, however, is that he lacks the intelligence to do the job. This

Positive and Negative Themes By Candidate	
<i>(Excluding refuting themes)</i>	
Tone of Themes	Percent
Bush Negative	56.3%
Bush Positive	16.0
Kerry Negative	23.3
Kerry Positive	4.4
<i>Total</i>	<i>100%</i>
<i>(Total # of Themes = 955)</i>	

0 to 6). We then used hierarchical linear regression to see first how demographics affected the scores, then how party affiliation affected them, and finally how much Kerry and Bush advertising people had seen and how much attention they reported paying attention to the news.

message was common in the 2000 race², but has largely disappeared in the news now that he is a sitting president.

WHAT THE STUDY EXAMINED

To a large degree, journalists and political scientists have noted that presidential campaigns are dominated by a handful of themes, usually those that revolve around the character of the candidates. These might be called the “master narratives” of the campaign and they can raise or sink a candidacy.

In a way, these master or metanarratives are the modern equivalent of pack journalism. While the reporters are no longer all standing together in a group, literally looking over each others shoulder as they write, they tend to synthesize and react to each other’s coverage to such an extent that it can be difficult for candidates to escape the impression created by these narratives or to project a different one.

In 2000, a study by the Project found that Vice President Gore was dogged by the notion that he was tainted by scandal. Then-Governor Bush was portrayed primarily as a different kind of Republican but he was also tagged with the idea that he was dim.

For this year, we identified seven themes about Bush and Kerry that we expected to be most prevalent. We then verified that these were the most dominant character themes in the press coverage. We also examined advertising to see whether these were the themes the candidates themselves were trying to project—either about themselves or about their rival. The seven most prevalent themes were:

- Bush is a strong and decisive leader
- Bush is arrogant and unwilling to admit mistakes
- Bush lacks credibility and twists the facts
- Kerry is a tough guy who won’t back down from a fight
- Kerry hems and haws and can’t make a decisive statement
- Kerry is very liberal
- Kerry is an elitist, not like you and me

The study examined how common each theme was in the press, the basis for the theme and the source who tended to make it.

The study also examined the degree to which each of the themes was rebutted in each story.

In addition, the study examined the advertising of each campaign to see to what extent it projected these themes and looked at late night comedy shows to see if they were mirroring these themes in their satire.

The results were then twinned with a companion survey of public attitudes about the candidates by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. The two studies together allow us to explore how much these press messages, ad messages and comedy messages are shaping public opinion of the candidates.

The study examined a mixed media universe of six newspapers, twenty TV and radio programs and five Internet sites over a period of four weeks—sampling one week of each month from March through June.³

² Please see the similar study by PEJ conducted during the 2000 presidential campaign: “A Question of Character: How the Media Have Handled the Issue and How the Public Has Reacted,” Project for Excellence in Journalism, July 27, 2000.

Due to the nature of the probe, the content study examined each occurrence of these character themes within stories. A given story might contain more than one theme or assertion about a candidate, or contain assertions about both candidates.

Overall more than 1,500 election stories were examined. In all, 506 of these contained at least one theme for a total of 1,073 themes.⁴

THE MAJOR CHARACTER THEMES

The press coverage, for now, has focused far more on Bush than on Kerry. Seven out of ten (72%) of the character themes identified in the coverage were about the President.

In part, this is a reflection of the fact that Bush dominates the news as the incumbent, whether he is governing the country or campaigning as a candidate. Kerry, as the challenger, can only make news while campaigning. This reinforces the axiom that campaigns involving an incumbent are largely referendums on the sitting President.

Four years ago a similar study by the Project found the coverage to be much more evenly divided between Bush and his rival, the sitting Vice President Gore.

Yet the imbalance of reportage toward Bush also reflects the degree to which the coverage this year has revolved around news events rather than campaign activities.

While this is a potential advantage for an incumbent, this year the bulk of these messages studied were negative. Roughly a third, 32%, made claims of Bush’s arrogance. Another quarter, 24%, asserted his lack of credibility. Just 16% were the positive message his campaign has been trying to assert.

Four years ago, by contrast, the positive image of Bush as a “compassionate conservative” clearly outweighed the negative traits Gore was trying to project about him.

Percent of Themes By Candidate	
<i>(Excluding refuting themes)</i>	
Description of Themes	Percent
Bush is arrogant	32.4%
Bush lacks credibility	23.9
Bush is a strong & decisive leader	16.0
<i>Total Bush Themes</i>	<i>72.3</i>
Kerry hems and haws, can't make a decisive statement	11.7
Kerry is very liberal	10.6
Kerry is a tough guy who won't back down	4.4
Kerry is an elitist, not like you & me	1.0
<i>Total Kerry Themes</i>	<i>27.7</i>
<i>Total</i>	<i>100%</i>

(Total # of Themes = 955)

Kerry’s candidacy, on the other hand, has largely been absent in the news so far, accounting for just 28% of the themes overall.

³ The fourth week, scheduled to be from June 1 – June 7, was cut short due to the death of President Ronald Reagan. Both campaigns suspended all activities for several days following his death on June 5. This final week of coding ended June 5 for a 5-day week.

⁴ Of the 1,073 total assertions, 118 were refutations of the threads and are analyzed separately in this report. Therefore, for most of this analysis, the total n is 955 specific assertions.

When the press did choose to include Kerry in stories that talked about the presidential election, the message was most often negative, just as it was for Bush. Statements about Kerry's tendency to change his mind on issues made up 12% of all themes. Similarly, those presenting him as very liberal made up 11%.

The supportive image of him as a tough guy who won't back down, on the other hand, made up a mere 4% of all messages.

The study also initially looked for the theme that Kerry, a product of prep schools and Yale and married to a multi-millionaire, is an elitist. The Bush campaign said it intended to tar Kerry with this image. In the end, however, this theme did not receive significant play: just 1% of the reportage—10 mentions in all the 1,073 assertions studied.⁵

Another feature of the campaign coverage this year is that rather than producing conventional campaign stories such as stump stories or background pieces about the candidates, news events are dominating the coverage. The campaign sits in the background while the war in Iraq or the 9-11 Commission is the lens through which the race is discussed.

Part of this no doubt has to do with the nature of the news today. Yet that may not be the whole explanation. The focus of a campaign also reflects the nature of the sitting president.

In the wake of the presidency of Bill Clinton, whose charms and failings were more personal than policy oriented, character may have seemed a more important concern in choosing his successor.

President Bush's perceived strengths and weaknesses, in contrast, may have more to do with policy and approach, such as his emphasis on tax cuts, his embrace of unilateralism in foreign affairs and his more squarely conservative approach at home. Thus the coverage has focused more on these issues rather than on their perceived personal characteristics.

WHAT THE PUBLIC THINKS

The second phase of this study was a survey of the public by the Pew Research center for the People and the Press to see if the narrative themes about the candidates in the press were having an impact on public attitudes. While the public perceptions of the candidates character traits do not match precisely what the press has published about them, further analysis of the data by the University of Missouri suggests the coverage is, apparently, having an impact.⁶

Despite the negative coverage, the strongest associations people have with President Bush are positive.

⁵ Incidentally, these master narratives showed up equally as often in newspapers as in television. About 40% of all the assertions studied appeared in newspapers and another 40% in television. Internet blogs accounted for just 20%. The one message that was more likely to appear in print (about twice as likely) was that President Bush lacked credibility. In all, 62% of these assertions were found in newspapers, compared with 29% on TV.

⁶ While seven threads were analyzed in the press coverage, we surveyed only six. The idea of Kerry as an extreme liberal was omitted, as the public would naturally attach that more to Kerry than to Bush because of their Party identifications.

Character Associations with the Candidates						
	John Kerry	George W. Bush	Neither	Both	Don't Know/Refused	Total
Twists the facts	28%	33%	23%	8%	8%	100%
Wealthy Elitist	20	27	24	14	15	100%
Flip-flops	36	22	24	9	9	100%
Strong and Decisive	18	48	21	6	7	100%
Stubborn/Won't Admit Mistakes	13	44	25	7	11	100%
Personally Tough and Doesn't Give Up	15	53	17	8	7	100%

About half of the public (48%) associates the idea of a “strong and decisive leader” with Bush rather than Kerry. And even a slightly higher percentage (53%) say the positive theme Kerry has most tried to project, that of a courageous person who won’t back down from a fight, best describes Bush, (just 15% of the public identified this more with Kerry.)

The character theme that the press has honed in on the most, that Bush is stubborn and arrogant, does seem to have registered. Nearly half of the public (44%) say that trait best describes Bush (just 13% associate it more with Kerry).

The other negative character theme that the press has focused on, that the President lacks credibility, did not register much with the public by mid June. Overall, just 33% of the public associated this more with Bush. As it turns out, nearly as many (28%) feel it describes Kerry best, even though in the press coverage it was clearly tagged to Bush.

What else did the public think of Kerry?

Overall, its impression of him was indistinct. The only theme that more of the public saw as best describing Kerry rather than Bush was that he was a flip flopper. Interestingly, this is the one theme about Kerry that came at the public from all three of the major media categories that we examined—press coverage, advertising and late night comedy. In all, a little more than a third, 36%, attached this theme to Kerry more than Bush.

In most cases, partisanship dominates these specific perceptions of the candidates. For example, 60% of Democrats say the phrase “he twists the facts and misleads people” better describes Bush while a similar number of Republicans (55%) say it better applies to Kerry.

But even many Republicans are willing to acknowledge Bush’s stubbornness. About as many Republicans say that negative trait applies to the president (22%) as say it better describes Kerry (24%). On the other hand, a significant minority of Democrats (21%) say the phrase “strong and decisive” better describes Bush; that is not much fewer than the number of Democrats who say it applies more to Kerry (31%).

The character themes are mostly lost on swing voters—those who are either undecided at this point or say they still may change their vote. Majorities of swing voters said most of the themes did not particularly apply to either candidate. The exceptions are traits—both positive and negative—associated with Bush: 44% say the phrase strong and decisive applies more to Bush; 44% say the phrase “personally tough” better describes

the President; and about the same number of swing voters—43%—believe the phrase “he is stubborn and doesn’t admit mistakes” also better characterizes the President.

Having trouble sticking with a decision is that only character trait that at least 30% of swing voters apply to Kerry. At the same time, however, other negative aspects of Kerry’s personality seen in the coverage have little to no resonance among swing voters. For instance, just 9% of swing voters say the phrase “he is a wealthy elitist” better describes Kerry—more than twice as many (24%) say it applies more to Bush.

The Media’s Influence

Why does the public largely associate positive character traits with Bush if coverage has been so negative?

To assess that, researchers at the University of Missouri took a closer look at the polling data. First they looked at responses to the character themes overall to see if paying more attention to news media was having an effect. Next they looked at each character theme see which ones in particular were impacted by news consumption.

What they found was that, first, news consumption indeed was influencing how people saw the candidates. The more attention they paid to the news, the more they tended view the candidates they way they were portrayed in the press.

What’s more looking at the themes individually, there is statistical evidence the coverage is having a mixed effect theme by theme.⁷

First, the press coverage so far is not having any measurable effect on people’s perception of President Bush.

For Kerry, the coverage tends to persuade people both that Kerry is a tough guy who won’t give up and that he is a rich elitist.

The biggest factor influencing opinions of the candidates, the analysis shows, was naturally people’s political orientation and candidate preferences.

But when these political preferences were controlled for—along with demographic variables like race, gender, education and age—the researchers were able to isolate that people who consume more press coverage about the race are more likely to think Kerry is both tough and an elitist. There is no measurable effect on their perceptions at this point of the President on his major character themes.

The influence of news coverage may be more important in the states that will play the biggest role in the election, the so-called “battleground states,” those where the electorate is fairly evenly divided and thus where the candidates are spending most of their time and money.

The reason is that people in these states are paying more attention to campaign coverage than elsewhere, according to the survey data. And while the candidates are spending more on ads in these places, the ads here are failing to have a measurable impact on voter attitudes about the character themes, with one exception: people who see more Bush ads in battleground states are more likely to agree with the theme that Bush is strong and decisive.

⁷ To test what features were associated with people identifying each narrative theme with the candidate it had been linked to in the press, the following analysis was performed: The six character themes were analyzed individually. After controlling for demographic variables and voter preference, researchers looked at the impact of ad exposure and attention to news for each using a hierarchical multiple regression,

For now, it is less clear what impact the press coverage or even ads are having on undecided voters. They are less engaged, but that will likely change as Election Day draws nearer.

Incidentally, in non-battleground states, the only statistically significant effect of ads is that those who see more Bush ads tend to say Kerry flip flops.

Some critics may leap to the conclusion that these findings confirm their suspicions of a liberal bias in the press.

Others may argue that the coverage of the President has been more negative than positive since March because the news events have turned against him, from Richard Clarke challenging the President's pre-war thinking to the revelations of prisoner abuse and the continuing instability of the situation in Iraq. An incumbent president naturally reflects the news of the day.

Had this study been done during the war itself or in the months leading up to it, these observers might argue, the coverage would have been more positive for Bush.

We cannot answer this debate.

A similar study four years ago, however, found that the coverage was more positive for Bush than for his Democratic rival, Al Gore. That raises several possibilities, including that the tenor of coverage simply follows events. Or maybe there is a tendency for the press to be more skeptical about the devil it knows best than the devil knows least.

THE MESSAGE CHANGES OVER TIME

Since March, the biggest change in the campaign character narratives is that they have been lost in news events. Instead of picking up the emphasis on campaign messages, as the candidates refined their rhetoric and the conventions and elections draw closer, the press has been moving away from it.

And it is not that the seven themes we first examined have been replaced by others, or that negative messages were replaced by positive ones.

Indeed, while the negative messages trailed off as time went on, so did the positive ones.

Instead, news events have overwhelmed everything.

Even with this, there was some ebb and flow of each of the themes.

Bush Lacks Credibility

The question of Bush's leadership qualities arose early on in the coverage and then trailed away. Roughly three-quarters of the assertions about Bush lacking credibility came in March and April, peaking in March, during the testimony of former National Coordinator for Counter Terrorism Richard Clarke and the debate over whether National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice should testify.

The source of this charge was just as often journalists themselves as it was the Kerry campaign.

Sometimes it was simply the message that journalists interpreted out of all the events that seemed to be transpiring, as on April 13, when CBS' John Roberts reported, "At stake tonight, the president's credibility, chipped away at in recent weeks by the twin issues of Iraq and the 9/11 investigation."

Other times, Kerry himself raised this charge directly against Bush, though his speaking style was so tangled, it made it difficult for reporters to get a clean quote.

AP reporter Mike Glover did his best on April 14, when he quoted Kerry as saying, “I think we’ve already made it clear, many of us, that the way the President went about this was more than a mistake, in the sense that when the President broke promises... He promised he would go to war as a last resort. He broke every one of those promises.”

Bush is Arrogant

The same basic arc over time was true of the theme that Bush is arrogant. Fully 79% of the assertions came in March and April.

Here journalists seemed even freer to bring the charge on their own volition, often interpreting events, as did Caryn James in the New York Times analysis of Richard Clarke’s book on May 14, in which she reported that “Mr. Clarke’s forceful narrative and behind the scenes details allow him to make a strong case that the Bush White House dangerously neglected terrorism in favor of going after Iraq.”

Bush is a Strong and Decisive Leader

The notion that the president was strong and decisive most often came from his own surrogates and aides, and usually was proffered not with any concrete evidence but largely as opinion.

A typical example came April 14 on the front page of the Washington Post from political reporter Dan Balz quoting a Republican Senator. “Sen Elizabeth Dole (R-NC) said she thought Bush ‘showed he was a leader in every sense of the word,’ and said he ‘outlined and justified a bold and ambitious plan to combat terror around the world.’”

Sometimes, of course, one person’s vision of stubbornness is another’s sign of decisiveness, as in a front-page story by David Sanger in the New York Times from April 14, assessing a presidential press conference. “With those words,” Sanger analyzed, “Mr. Bush drove home the singlemindedness that has become the hallmark of his presidency, his greatest strength in the eyes of his admirers, and a dangerous never-change-course stubbornness in the eyes of his detractors.”

For Kerry there is a slightly different story, one that suggests that while negative accusations may not be haunting him as much as Bush, he risks failing to create any image of himself whatsoever.

Kerry is a Liberal

In March, the most likely impression one might have found in the press about the expected Democratic nominee was that he was a liberal. Nearly three quarters of the projections of this message in the press came in March.

Many of these assertions were tied directly to the Bush campaign’s advertising released at the time, which talked about the gas tax and where Kerry might take the country. Once those ads had been released, however, that message virtually disappeared.

Usually, the source for this was the Bush campaign. Or it might be journalists characterizing Republican strategy, as occurred May 15 when Paul Farhi in the Washington Post reported that, “Republicans are likely to tie the worldwide publicity over [Massachusetts’s ruling on gay marriage] to Kerry in an effort to paint him as a northeastern liberal who is out of touch with the values of the rest of the country.”

Kerry is a Flip Flopper

The biggest problem Kerry may have is shaking the idea that he epitomizes the stereotype of the equivocating politician.

This was the most consistent character message about Kerry over the four months of press coverage studied. According to polls, it is perhaps the clearest impression the public holds of him at this point. It is also the one notion about the Democratic candidate that seems to have penetrated the public consciousness enough to make it to the late night comedy programs. And it is the negative message hit on most consistently in Bush campaign ads, using Kerry's own words.

Thus, Kerry the flip flopper might have made what could be called the perfect four-corner bank shot of political communication, a negative impression coming at you from all sources—news, ads, fellow citizens and comedians.

Listen to Tim Russert on April 11's Meet the Press. "And the Republicans pounding away on the flip flops of John Kerry, day after day." Sometimes it was reporters citing Kerry's voting record, as on April 14th, when NBC's Carl Quintanilla noted, "For weeks, Kerry's position on the war has been criticized even by Democrats as too vague as he's wrestled with the question on television... Kerry's own voting record on the war is inconsistent."

Kerry is a Tough Guy

The glimmer of good news for Kerry is that, while not large, the one positive message he wants to project—the idea of his personal toughness—remained relatively steady in the press coverage. If Kerry is to find a way to create a more lasting and more upbeat impression with the American people, at the moment, this is the message for which he has laid the most groundwork.

As was true with both of the positive character themes for the candidates, often this one was projected by the campaign itself, as when on May 14 the AP's Mike Glover quoted fellow Democrat Wesley Clark. "'John Kerry has been in the company of heroes his whole life,' Clark said. 'He saw real action; he was in combat virtually every day. When you've done this, you don't have to go around saying you're a leader.'"

The Master Narrative in News versus Commentary

One might have thought that these master narrative themes about candidate character, since they are basically interpretive messages, would be more the province of editorials, talk shows or analysis pieces in the newspaper, rather than in news stories.

Not so.

A breakdown of the types of stories in which these narrative themes appear shows that they were as likely, and in some cases even more likely, to appear in news stories and TV segments than in analytical pieces or editorials and op-eds.

REBUTTAL

Another truism of modern political campaigning is that any charge should not go unanswered lest it be believed.

This has given way to the political black art of quick response: If your opponent says something about you, how effective are you at rebutting it? To some degree, campaigns judge their effectiveness today by the extent to which they never leave a charge unchallenged and always succeed in getting their point of view inside the story about the other guy.

The study measured the responsiveness of the campaigns in the media by examining the degree to which each of these narrative character themes about the candidate were directly rebutted in stories.

The answer is, not that often.

Percent of Themes By Candidate (Excluding refuting themes)			
Theme	Number of Themes	Number of Rebuttals	Percent with Rebuttals
Bush is arrogant	309	25	8%
Bush lacks credibility	228	11	5%
Bush is a strong & decisive leader	153	18	12%
Kerry hems and haws, can't make a decisive statement	112	11	10%
Kerry is very liberal	101	39	39%
Kerry is a tough guy who won't back down	42	7	17%

Overall, while these candidate themes appeared in stories nearly 1,000 times in the period studied, only about 10% were accompanied by some kind of rebuttal.

The charge rebutted most often was that Kerry is liberal. Overall, 39% of the time that charge appeared in a story it was accompanied by some refutation.

Why this is the one charge that was frequently challenged is harder to say. It may be that since it was leveled in the first wave of advertising, the Kerry camp felt it was particularly important to rebut. It may be that both journalists and the Kerry camp felt that the Bush campaign had twisted facts, many of which had to do with the gas tax, in putting the ad together. Or it may be that as a national candidate, Kerry and his team felt this charge was particularly damaging, and they were most eager to deny, above all, the dreaded “L-word.”

Whatever the reason, the frequently rebutted charge of Kerry as a liberal was also the one negative message that seemed to dissipate in the coverage over time. That may suggest that successfully rebutting a charge in stories will make it go away, discouraging reporters from continuing to assert it.

Kerry did not fare so well in rebutting other messages, however. Only 10% of the charges that he hemmed and hawed were challenged and only 12% of the time that Bush was praised for strong leadership did the Kerry camp manage to rebut that.

Bush, on the other hand, did not fare well in rebutting any of the negative messages against him. Only 5% of the time that a story asserted that Bush lacked credibility did the story also contain a rebuttal to that charge. And only 8% of time that the assertion that Bush was arrogant appeared was that rebutted.

There are several possible explanations. One is that since many of the negative messages about Bush came in news stories involving Iraq or the 9-11 Commission, and from journalists rather than the Kerry campaign, it was more difficult for the White House to be primed to rebut them than if they had come from news sources or the Kerry campaign.

Another reason may be that the Bush White House may feel that it doesn't need to rebut every charge.

Whatever the reason, this may prove a disadvantage for President Bush if that trend continues.

SOURCES FOR THE NARRATIVE THEMES

Who was making these assertions about the candidates? Are the journalists offering these messages on their own, or are they coming from the campaigns, neutral experts or others, such as bloggers writing their own personal opinions?

Generally, the campaigns were the most likely sources, either from the candidates or their surrogates, a sign that the master narratives are, in part, the creation in part of the campaigns. In all, 39% of the time we saw these narrative themes, the candidates or their

Source of Themes	Sources for The Themes					
	Bush lacks credibility	Bush is arrogant	Bush is a strong leader	Kerry is very liberal	Kerry hems and haws	Kerry is a tough guy
Journalist analysis/opinion	35%	46%	27%	14%	29%	24%
Campaign related	34	22	48	73	52	55
Expert statement/named	11	11	9	9	9	5
Author's opinion	6	6	5	2	3	7
Others	14	15	11	2	8	10
<i>Total</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>101%</i>	<i>101%</i>

Numbers may not add to one hundred due to rounding.

surrogates were the source of the assertion.

But the campaigns are not alone. The second most likely source of the character themes was journalists themselves. Fully a third, 34%, of the assertions came from the reporters.

Experts were used only minimally to establish the themes—accounting for just 11% of the assertions overall and never exceeding that for any individual theme (excluding Kerry as an elitist).

Other outside sources, such as voters, were an even smaller factor, suggesting that the establishment of these themes so far has been mostly inside baseball—the campaigns themselves or journalists.

When it came to the positive messages, these tended to come more from the campaigns themselves—48% of Bush’s positive message and 55% of Kerry’s.

The sources for the negative messages, however, differed for the two candidates. Journalists played a larger role in putting forth the negative assertions about Bush, especially the notion that Bush is arrogant. Nearly half of those assertions (46%) came from journalists, versus 22% from the Kerry camp.

When it comes to Bush’s credibility, journalists and the Kerry campaign had roughly equal influence—35% from journalists and 34% from the campaign.

The negative images haunting Kerry, on the other hand, were much more driven by the Bush campaign. Fully 73% of the statements asserting Kerry as an extreme liberal

came from the Bush campaign, as did 52% of those suggesting problems sticking with a decision.

Why is this? There are several possible explanations. One is that the Bush camp was more willing and more relentless at going negative at Kerry, both in ads and in their conversations with reporters. Some more ideologically minded critics, in contrast, might see in the data proof that journalists are liberal and thus likely to interpret events to the detriment of the President on their own.

It is also possible that the nature of events, particularly the testimony of Richard Clarke, was so pointedly critical of the President, that reporters felt they could connect the dots analytically without sourcing. The Kerry campaign, in turn, decided it had no need to get involved. When your opponent is on fire, stay out of the way, goes the political adage.

THE EVIDENCE BEHIND THE CHARACTER THEMES

When stories did convey one of the narrative themes about the candidates, what was the evidence cited?

The answer reveals the extent to which political reporting today is a game of interpretation as much as one of verification.

Stories were nearly as likely to offer no evidence for these interpretative themes about the candidates as they were to cite something concrete—be it public record, policy, recent candidate statements or the like.

In all, 44% of the time reporters cited no evidence. In other words, the journalist just took it upon himself or herself to assert this.

When evidence of some kind was cited, most often (42%) it was public record, recent candidate statements, policy positions or the candidate's management style. Another 9% of the time it was merely journalists quoting someone asserting this, either a poll or campaign surrogate or an attack by an opponent. The other five percent of assertions were based either on campaign tactics and fundraising or personal behavior of the candidate.

These breakdowns, however, varied, depending on the theme.

The theme most likely to be put forth with no evidence whatsoever was Bush as a strong and decisive leader. More than half, 57%, of those assertions (again mostly put forth by Bush campaign surrogates) offered no evidence. Just 26% used some hard evidence tied to Bush's record or management style.

The Kerry campaign offered more evidence in pushing the image of Kerry as a tough guy, but that evidence was not necessarily tied to his public record. Instead it was a mix of public record and management style (31% combined), statements by past personal friends (12%) and his ad strategy or other campaign tactics (10%).

The negative messages, in general, were more grounded in hard evidence of public record. Half of all references to Kerry as very liberal linked to his public record (keep in mind, though, that some references to public record, especially in the opponent's ad campaigns can be disputed).

Evidence for the Themes	
Type of Evidence	Percent
None	44%
Public Record/Management	42
Outside Statement	9
Tactics/Personal Behavior	5
<i>Total</i>	<i>100%</i>

That was true of 42% of the assertions about Kerry's problem of changing his decision, 45% of the claims that Bush's credibility is in question and 46% of the claims that Bush is arrogant.

What elements of each candidate's record were used as evidence? The scope was relatively narrow. Terrorism preparedness and war in Iraq (not surprisingly) were the primary focus of Bush's record, together accounting for roughly seven-in-ten references to his public record. And when it came to Kerry, the focus was on past tax votes and his remarks on gas pricing, 41% of all evidences of public record. The others were a mix of Vietnam experience, his vote on the support for the war with Iraq, his defense record and others.

THE ADVERTISING CAMPAIGN

While news coverage of the campaign gradually became so focused on news events that the major narrative themes about the candidates were often missing, that is not the case with the campaign ads.

In their carefully constructed "paid media" messages, the candidates leaned hard on the themes about themselves—and each other—that we were studying. Overall, more than half the ads hit on the major character themes. The rest tended to deal more specifically with policy issues.

We looked at the ads the campaigns ran, according to their own websites, in the period between mid-February and the first week of June. In this period each campaign produced the same number of TV ads, 16.

Five of Bush's ads hammered the idea that Kerry was liberal. Another three suggested Kerry was a flip flopper. Three projected the positive image about the President that he is a strong leader.

Kerry's ads generally tended to be somewhat more positive. Six of them projected the message that Kerry is a tough guy who won't back down from a fight. Another three drove in the negative theme that President Bush lacks credibility.

Issues were often the evidence or material used to press the case, particularly Kerry's Senate voting record and Bush's utterances about the war.

There has been an extraordinary amount of money spent by the two campaigns. The ad wars also began early. The analysis shows the ads are having a statistically significant impact on voter perceptions of the candidates for only two of the major character themes. And they seem to be working to Bush's advantage.

The more Bush ads people have seen, the more likely they are to agree that Kerry flip flops and that Bush is strong and decisive.

In the critical battleground states, only the message that Bush is strong and decisive can be said statistically to be making a difference.

In the non-battleground states, people who see more Bush ads are more likely to agree with theme that Kerry flip flops.

The Bush Campaign

The initial ads the Bush campaign aired built up the President's image as a strong leader. Two of these three ads spoke directly to this image in the context of Bush's response to September 11th.

Eight days later, the ad campaign turned negative. In the next thirteen spots, the number of negative ads Bush produced outnumbered the positive ads 10 to 3.

While Bush started with Kerry is a liberal, the impression that seems to have stuck is that Kerry is a flip flopper.

Notably, the Bush campaign used Kerry's own words against him in a way that journalists analyzing the ads considered particularly effective.

NARRATOR: *Few votes in Congress are as important as funding our troops at war. Though John Kerry voted in October, 2002 for military action in Iraq, he later voted against funding our soldiers.*

SENATE CLERK: *Mr. Kerry:*

ANNOUNCER V/O: *No.*

NARRATOR: *Body armor and higher combat pay for troops?*

SENATE CLERK: *Mr. Kerry:*

ANNOUNCER V/O: *No.*

NARRATOR: *Better health care for reservists?*

SENATE CLERK: *Mr. Kerry:*

ANNOUNCER V/O: *No.*

NARRATOR: *And what does Kerry say now?*

JOHN KERRY: *I actually did vote for the \$87 billion before I voted against it.*

The Kerry Campaign

The Kerry campaign's ad strategy has been the reverse image of the Bush campaign. Kerry began negative. The theme of "Bush lacks credibility" appeared in three of the six ads that were produced from February 14 through April 5.

From there on Kerry's attacks seemed to be more policy specific, and Kerry's own positive biography began to creep more and more into the ads. On May 3, the Kerry campaign released two biographic ads aimed at introducing Kerry to voters, focusing intently on his military service.

Indeed, Kerry's positive message, that he is a "fighter," was the most common character theme in his ads, appearing in 6 out of the 16 we examined.

In the survey data, Kerry's "military service" came up as the number one favorable trait respondents gave about the candidate in open-ended questioning—mentioned 11% of the time. But when voters were asked to affix the phrase "He is personally tough and doesn't give up in the face of adversity" to a candidate, they assigned it to Bush 53% of the time, compared to only 15% for Kerry.

THE LATE NIGHT SHOWS

The place where political messages are reduced to their simplest form, but perhaps also their most enduring, is late-night comedy/talk shows.

Here news events that have entered the American psyche are morphed into accepted attitudes and become punchlines.

Late night comedy is also a place where some Americans, particularly young people, glean information about the election. A Pew Research Center survey earlier this year found one-in-five young people say they regularly get campaign news from late-night comedy shows such as Saturday Night Live and the Daily Show.⁸

Certainly anything that is monologue fodder may be harder for a candidate to shake. Just ask Janet Reno. It's been a while since she has presided over the justice department, but in the programs we examined, she is still sometimes the object of late night humor.

That said, the character themes of campaign 2004—and on the comedy shows, to be sure, we mean the embarrassing negative themes—are present, but they do not dominate. In all, 23 jokes from the 20 nights studied hit on the character themes that permeate the news coverage and political advertising. (Out of 60 possible shows, 33 were studied here; the others were re-runs from outside the time period.)

The theme that appeared most often was that Bush lacks credibility.

But it appeared just 9 times, or about once out of every seven programs.

The second most common theme, a close second, was the notion that Kerry flip flops. It appeared 7 times.

Neither, in other words, may have reached the point of critical mass.

Bush is Dumb

The most common political punchline about the candidates, however, is a holdover from campaign 2000. It's the idea that Bush is dim or somehow not up to being president intellectually. That idea appeared almost as often as all the 2004 story themes combined, 19 times, or virtually every night.

Sometimes these digs were subtle, as on the April 8 Daily Show when host John Stewart aired clips of Condoleezza Rice defending the Bush administration:

RICE: I do not believe there was a lack of high level attention. The President was paying attention. How much more high-level can you get?

STEWART: Well, I suppose it could have went to Cheney.

Sometimes the references were more straight-on as on April 13 when David Letterman discussed the upcoming Bush press conference.

LETTERMAN: It's such a big deal that Fox, the Fox Network, decided it would preempt its American Idol show and just have the George W. Bush press conference instead. And I thought, you know, that makes sense, you don't want too many amateurs on on the same night.

It doesn't appear, however, that this message is digging into voters' opinions of Bush. In the survey data "intelligence" was cited as a negative Bush trait only 4% of the

⁸ "Cable and Internet Loom Large in Fragmented Political News Universe Perceptions of Partisan Bias Seen as Growing, Especially by Democrats," Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, January 11, 2004. Available online at <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=200>

time. It may be that the “Bush is over his head” theme, while it still gets laughs, is largely written off as good-natured ribbing by voters in 2004.

Of the swipes at Bush’s credibility, five of those came in the two nights when Late Show host Letterman showed a tape of a boy yawning while the President was speaking. The joke later became about the White House’s response to the veracity of the tape.

When it came to Kerry as a flip-flopper, both Tonight Show host Jay Leno and Letterman took a few shots.

LENO on March 29: *I like to hear both sides of an issue. That’s why I listen to John Kerry. I know, sooner or later, I’ll get both sides of an issue. In fact, today John Kerry cleared up his military position on Iraq. He voted yes on shock but no on awe.*

On his May 19th show Letterman ran what he said was a commercial from *Shrek 2* that included various positive reviews from Gene Shalit and Roger Ebert, and this review from John Kerry: *“I can’t say at this juncture whether I liked it or didn’t like it. I deem it feasible to withhold judgment until all the facts are out as this issue is far too complex to get into in such a limited forum. But I do feel it pertinent to remind everyone I was a military hero.”*

The Shows Individually

The Tonight Show – The most popular late night show is, perhaps not surprisingly, also the least edgy in its political joke selection. The image of Bush lacking credibility—probably the most contentious, provocative story theme—did not show up in a single gag on the Tonight Show.

And while some jokes in Leno’s monologue were linked to the day’s news events, when they concerned Bush they always spun off into the area of Bush lacking intelligence. Jokes about Bush being over his head or slow appeared 14 times in the days we watched The Tonight Show. Leno’s March 31 monologue was ripe with such jokes.

LENO: *Bush will testify but he says he wants Dick Cheney with him. Why does he have to have Cheney with him? What does he have like a learning permit to be president?*

And then.

LENO: *Cheney is kind of like that pilot who was with the President when he landed on the aircraft carrier. They want someone in the plane who knows what the hell he’s doing.*

The show’s reaching back to a dominant theme from the 2000 campaign is not surprising when one watches Leno. On this show jokes deal with topics that often have more than a few gray hairs on them and sometimes curl all the way to the Clinton Administration and Janet Reno. It’s also interesting to note, however, that the Tonight Show was the only late night program in the period we watched to zing John Kerry on the

charge of elitism. After Kerry had minor shoulder surgery, Leno quipped, “*There was one slightly scary moment during John Kerry’s operation. Apparently the transfusion room ran out of blue blood.*” And after Kerry appeared on MTV for an interview, Leno jabbed him a few more times for his background. “*He said he is fascinated by rap and hip-hop. (pause, laughter) And what Yale-educated, white millionaire from Massachusetts is not fascinated by hip-hop.*”

But Leno’s shots, whomever he hits, are seldom nasty. If predictable, Leno’s political humor on network TV is largely genial.

Late Show – If the Tonight Show sometimes sounds like dinner theater from the Poconos, the political jokes on the Late Show have a more post modern air. Letterman’s on-stage presence is that of a guy who is in on the joke, and sometimes his humor is aimed at much at drawing groans from the crowd as laughs. The monologues are generally less focused on politics, but even when they are the humor often seems to come around to Letterman in some way. A good example is the minor commotion that erupted when Letterman ran video from a Bush speech that showed a boy standing behind the President yawning and checking his watch under the segment “George W. Bush Invigorating America’s Youth.” On March 29 the show ran the video for the original joke, but for days after Letterman ran clips of CNN saying the video was staged expressing outrage with a mock air of seriousness.

LETTERMAN on March 30: *That is an out and out, absolute, 100 % lie. The kid was exactly standing where we said he was. So when you cast your vote in November remember that the White House was trying to make me look like a dope.*

Letterman also dug into Bush several times on the question of the President’s National Guard service, such as April 14 when the host discussed the president’s press conference the previous night. “*He said Iraq is not another Vietnam. Well, of course not. He avoided Vietnam.*”

Interestingly Kerry took fewer hits, only two in the days we studied, but the story theme the Late Show hit was Kerry as a flip-flopper. On March 30, for example Letterman ran what looked like C-SPAN video from a Senate vote and played this voice-over:

ANNOUNCER: *Mr. Kennedy? Mr. Kennedy votes no. Mr. Kerry? Mr. Kerry votes no. Wait, now Mr. Kerry votes yes. Ok, now he says no. Back to yes. Now back to no.*

On the whole the Late Show is probably harder on the president than the Tonight Show. The sheer volume of jokes might be higher with Jay Leno, but Letterman’s barbs are more pointed.

The Daily Show – In a way, comparing John Stewart’s Daily Show to Leno and Letterman is like comparing apples to Asian pears. One is mainstream. The other is a more exotic fruit. To begin with, Stewart’s show has a different approach, that of a mock

newscast that tailors to a niche cable television audience. The news format keeps the program very topical. And the audience, apparently full of more news junkies aware of the subtleties of the day's events than the other shows, means the Daily Show deals less in the broad political messages or even the main protagonists. While Leno and Letterman aim their broadsides at Bush and Kerry, Stewart and his crew will mock cabinet figures and others in the Bush Administration that many network audiences might not be able to identify.

In fact, it had the fewest themes of the three shows by far, only four. It was the least likely to fall back on old jokes and narrative themes—unless they are relevant to the stories at hand. And much of the Daily Show's appeal is not that it simply makes fun of politicians, but of the artifice that surrounds television journalism, the jargon, the sometimes overly earnest tone.

When the Daily Show does stories about Iraq, the jabs it takes are often not aimed at Bush in particular, but on the Administration as a whole or at specific member of the Bush team. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, for example, took some hits when the Abu Ghraib story broke. Vice President Dick Cheney is also a frequent target. This is another advantage the Daily Show has. Jokes about Paul Wolfowitz or Richard Armitage may not be picked up by Leno or Letterman viewers. But Stewart seems to feel his show's format and its audience allow him to play with a broader list of names from the Bush administration.

In taking shots at the President, though, the jokes are sharp. When news broke that long-time U.S. ally Ahmed Chalabi may have been passing U.S. secrets onto the Iranian government Stewart did a long bit on June 2 attacking Bush's credibility cutting back and forth between video from the president and Stewart's comments.

STEWART (in studio): *I'm sure an honorable man like our President will admit he was wrong about Chalabi and will not try to minimize the relationship our country had with him.*

BUSH (on tape): *My meetings with him were brief. I think I met him at the State of the Union and working the rope line. He might have come with a group of leaders.*

STEWART (in studio): *He sat behind your wife. Those seats don't just go to the eighth caller. You knew he was the guy feeding us all the information about Saddam.*

BUSH (on tape): *I don't remember anyone walking into my office and saying Chalabi says this is how it's going to be in Iraq.*

STEWART (in studio): *Really, you don't remember that. Because that's what happened. Didn't you read any of the articles about how the war started? I want to go on vacation again.*

Stewart's digs at Kerry are less frequent. In the time we coded the Daily Show, he never once hit on one of Kerry themes. Stewart's critique of Kerry, instead, is more based along the lines of Kerry is uninspiring or a standard politician. That may not be a new critique of Kerry, but Stewart's elbows are sharp.

STEWART: *Meanwhile as the Chalabi scandal unfolds John Kerry continues to use campaign speeches to swing wildly and hope something catches people's attention.*

KERRY (on tape): *We have to do everything we can to stop a nuclear weapon from ever reaching our shore. But that mission begins far away.*

STEWART (looking away): *Oh, I'm sorry were you saying something?(pause) Yes, yesterday John Kerry pandered to the crowd in South Beach Florida by dressing in local aboriginal garb for a speech highlighted by a bold assertion: Terrorist with nuclear weapons are bad.*

Methodology

Content Analysis

Sample Design

A content analysis of coverage of the 2004 presidential campaign was conducted via 31 media outlets—six newspapers, 20 television and radio programs (19 television and 1 radio), and five Internet sites.

For newspapers, the New York Times and the Washington Post were selected based on their national reputation for political coverage. Four other newspapers were selected from a random sample of large regional newspapers. The sample ensures geographic and ownership diversity. These newspapers are also included in the Project's Annual Report on the State of the News Media. The six papers studied were as follows:

- The Washington Post, the New York Times, the Cleveland Plain Dealer, the Philadelphia Inquirer, the Dallas Morning News, and the Sacramento Bee.

Television and radio programs, selected to provide the widest range of coverage, included the following:

- Eight Evening news programs: ABC World News Tonight, CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, PBS NewsHour, CNBC News with John Siegenthaler, CNN NewsNight with Aaron Brown, Fox News Special Report with Brit Hume, NPR All Things Considered.
- Three Morning Shows: ABC Good Morning America, CBS This Morning, NBC Today Show.
- Five Sunday Shows: ABC This Week, CBS Face the Nation, NBC Meet the Press, CNN Late Edition, Fox New Sunday.
- Four Prime Time Talk Programs: CNN Larry King Live, MSNBC Hardball with Chris Matthews, ABC Nightline, Fox News The O'Reilly Factor.

We also examined five Internet blogs

- ABCnews.com The Note, Andrew Sullivan, Joshua Marshall, Instapundit, Eschaton (Astrios)

The outlets were monitored for four weeks of coverage between March and June 2004. The first period was from March 25 to March 31. The second period was from April 8 to April 14, the third period was from May 13 through May 19. The fourth week was from June 1 to June 5 (June 6th and 7th of this week were omitted because President Reagan's death on the 5th halted campaign activities for several days.).

Inclusion and Screening

Newspaper articles for the selected days were downloaded from Lexis-Nexis using the search terms "Bush or Kerry." These articles were then screened to eliminate stories where these terms were used in a non-relevant context (such as stories about the baseball player Kerry Wood or gardening stories mentioning "bushes"), stories where either President Bush or Senator Kerry are mentioned only in passing (such as a reference to a school that had been visited by President Bush), and stories on Bush administration actions with no analysis or discussion of their political dimensions. This initial screening yielded 1,006 newspaper stories.

Transcripts of television and radio news programs were downloaded from Lexis-Nexis and screened using the same procedure. Programs archived in Lexis story-by-story yielded 565 stories. Lexis archives five of the programs, Nightline, Hardball, Aaron Brown, Larry King and the NewsHour as one program-long story, adding another 80 “stories.”

Daily transcripts for each of the five blogs were captured from the individual websites. Each day that a blog was updated counted as one story, regardless of the number of postings per day. This totaled 113 initial stories.

Next coders read each story individually to search for mentions of the seven themes in our study: Bush lacks credibility, Bush is arrogant, Bush is a strong and decisive leader, Kerry is very liberal, Kerry is an elitist who is not like other people, Kerry hems and haws, and Kerry is a tough guy who won’t back down.

Rather than code the story as a whole, we wanted to examine the treatment of each individual assertion. Therefore, every time a relevant statement emerged, it was highlighted for inclusion. To be included, a statement needed to assert or refute one of the seven character themes. There was a wide range of acceptable language for each theme. For example, the wording of a statement about Bush as arrogant could be that he is flippant, ignores reality, won’t admit mistakes, charges ahead, is impudent, insensitive, uncaring, etc.

Some stories had three or four assertions, while others had just one. Stories with no assertions were discarded. This resulted in a project sample of 506 stories and 1,073 total assertions, 955 affirming and 118 rebuttals. The theme-by-theme breakdown is as follows:

- Bush lacks credibility—228 affirmations, 11 rebuttals
- Bush is arrogant—309 affirmations, 25 rebuttals
- Bush is a strong and decisive leader—153 affirmations, 18 rebuttals
- Kerry is very liberal—101 affirmations, 39 rebuttals
- Kerry hems and haws—112 affirmations, 11 rebuttals
- Kerry is a tough guy—42 affirmations, 7 rebuttals
- Kerry is an elitist—10 affirmations, 7 rebuttals

Occurrences of this last theme, Kerry is an elitist, were too few for individual analysis.

Coding Process

Each of the 1,073 assertions was coded individually by a team of researchers at the Center for Advanced Social Research of the University of Missouri School of Journalism. The project managers were Ken Fleming, director of the Center and Esther Thorson, associate dean of graduate studies and research at the school. A description of the study’s objectives and data processing was provided to orient the five coders and project managers of the content analysis project. The codebook contained a dictionary of coding variables, values, and operational definitions with detailed instructions to the coders. Prior to the actual coding process, extensive training was conducted with the coders. Meetings were held at least once a week between the coders and project managers to discuss problems and issues identified during the coding process. Coding sheets were designed and used throughout the four-week period of time. Reliability check was conducted every week using a random selection of sample stories

for each of the twelve coding variables. The overall intercoder reliability of the content analysis was .851, calculated with Scott's Pi.⁹

Late Night Show Analysis

The opening monologues of the three late-night comedy shows—The Tonight Show, The Late Show, and The Daily Show were studied for the presence of the seven narrative themes. Video tapes of the shows were used for the analysis. Program re-runs aired during the content analysis period were discarded. In all, 33 shows were studied, broken down as follows: The Daily Show—9, Late Night with David Letterman—11, The Tonight Show with Jay Leno—13.

Ad Campaign Analysis

Bush and Kerry campaign ads were also analyzed for references to the seven character themes. All campaign ads were captured via the candidates' own websites. All ads listed as airing from February 14 through June 5th were studied.

Public Opinion Survey

The public opinion component of this report was conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press as a part of the June 2004 Voter Attitudes Survey. The survey was conducted from June 3-13, 2004. The total for questions about the six themes was 1330. Esther Thorson of Missouri performed further statistical analysis of the survey data. She looked at how demographics, party affiliation, political ad exposure (Kerry and Bush ads), and attention to news were related to both individual responses to each narrative theme (for example, when you hear a candidate flip flops, would you say that was Kerry or Bush or neither or both?), and how they were related to the total number of narrative themes that each person “correctly” connected the candidates. Two different types of regression were performed:

Overall Analysis

To test what features were associated with people identifying each theme characteristic with the candidate it had been linked with (i.e., Kerry with flip flopping; Bush with refusing to admit he was wrong), we added up for each respondent how many characteristic-candidate links they got correct (which ranged from 0 to 6). We then used hierarchical linear regression to see first how demographics affected the scores, then how party affiliation affected them, and finally how much Kerry and Bush advertising people had seen and how much attention they reported paying attention to the news.

In the regression, the dependent variable, the number of themes each individual linked with the candidate defined in the theme, ranged from 0 to 6.

In a hierarchical multiple regression, the first block of variables entered included age, gender, (defined as 1 = male; 0 = female), education (1 = Below high school; 2 = High school graduate, 3 = Some college, 4 = College degree, and 5 = Post college), and race (1 = white; 0 = non-white).

In the second block of variables, we entered which candidate the respondent said they planned to vote for (Bush = 1; undecided = 0; and Kerry = -1).

In the third block we entered how many Kerry ads they had seen (3 = A lot, 2 = Some, and 1 Only once or twice), how many Bush ads they had seen (3 = A lot, 2 = Some, 1 = Only once or twice), and how much attention they had paid to four news areas:

⁹ For more information, see Riffe, D; Lacy, S; & Fico, F, “Analyzing Media Messages: Using Quantitative Content Analysis in Research,” Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998.

News about Presidential candidates; News about Iraq; News about the high price of gasoline; and News about the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by U.S. soldiers in Iraq. The scale for each news area was 3 = Follow the news story very closely, 2 = Follow fairly closely, 1 = Follow not too closely, and 0 = Not at all closely. Thus the scale values varied from 0 to 12.

Theme by Theme Analysis

To test what features were associated with people identifying each theme as characterizing Bush or Kerry or neither or both, the following analysis was undertaken. First, we eliminated all respondents who answered neither or both because for them, there really was no “narrative theme” about either of the candidates.

Next we coded the dependent variable for each theme as choosing Kerry = 1, and choosing Bush = 0. Then we applied the same hierarchical multiple regression model used in the “corrects” analysis. That is,

The first block of variables entered included age, gender, (defined as 1 = male; 0 = female), education (1 = Below high school; 2 = High school graduate, 3 = Some college, 4 = College degree, and 5 = Post college), and race (1 = white; 0 = non-white).

In the second block of variables, we entered which candidate the respondent said they planned to vote for (Bush = 1; undecided = 0; and Kerry = -1).

In the third block we entered how many Kerry ads they had seen (3 = A lot, 2 = Some, and 1 Only once or twice), how many Bush ads they had seen (3 = A lot, 2 = Some, 1 = Only once or twice), and how much attention they had paid to four news areas: News about Presidential candidates; News about Iraq; News about the high price of gasoline; and News about the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by U.S. soldiers in Iraq. The scale for each news area was 3 = Follow the news story very closely, 2 = Follow fairly closely, 1 = Follow not too closely, and 0 = Not at all closely. Thus the scale values varied from 0 to 12.

For the Pew Survey, battleground states included the following: AZ, AR, FL, IA, LA, ME, MI, MN, MO, NV, NM, NH, OH, OR, PA, TN, WA, WV, WI

The full survey and methodology can be found at www.people-press.org.

CHARACTER AND THE CAMPAIGN: TOPLINE TABLES

TABLE 1: Numbers of stories & theme

Description	Frequency
Number of stories	506
Number of themes	1,073

**TABLE 2: Coverage by Themes / Statements
(Excluding refuting themes)**

Description of Themes	Percent (%)
Bush is arrogant	32.4
Bush lacks credibility	23.9
Bush is a strong & decisive leader	16.0
Kerry hems and haws, can't make a decisive statement	11.7
Kerry is very liberal	10.6
Kerry is a tough guy who won't back down	4.4
Kerry is an elitist, not like you & me	1.0

(Total # of Themes = 955)

**TABLE 3: Coverage by Different Media
(Excluding refuting themes)**

Description of Media	Percent (%)
Newspapers	48.6
Broadcast Evening News	23.5
Internet	12.7
Television Morning Shows	7.4
Primetime TV Talk Shows	5.7
Sunday Shows	2.2

(Total # of Themes = 955)

**TABLE 4: Cross Tabulation Result -- Themes vs. different media
(Excluding refuting themes)**

Description of themes	Newspaper Coverage	Internet Coverage	Television Coverage	Row total
Bush lacks credibility	62%	9%	29%	228
	30%	17%	18%	
Bush is arrogant	45%	11%	44%	309
	30%	28%	36%	
Bush is a strong leader	39%	18%	42%	153
	13%	22%	11%	
Kerry is very liberal	46%	13%	42%	101
	10%	11%	11%	
Kerry is an elitist	60%	30%	10%	10
	1%	3%	0	
Kerry hems and haws	42%	15%	43%	112
	10%	14%	13%	
Kerry is a tough guy	60%	17%	24%	42
	5%	6%	3%	

Column total	464	121	370	955
Significance	Significant at			<i>P</i> < .000

Notes:

1. The first value in each cell is the row percentage, & the second column percentage.
2. For the purpose of statistical analysis, "television coverage" combines the categories of "television morning shows," "Sunday shows," and "primetime television talk shows."

**TABLE 5: Cross Tabulation Result - Themes vs. time of coverage
(Excluding refuting themes)**

Description of themes	March	April	May	June	Row total
Bush lacks credibility	41% 25%	33% 23%	11% 19%	14% 29%	228
Bush is arrogant	32% 27%	47% 43%	13% 28%	8% 23%	309
Bush is a strong leader	35% 15%	44% 20%	15% 17%	5% 7%	153
Kerry is very liberal	72% 20%	10% 3%	9% 6%	9% 8%	101
Kerry is an elitist	30% 1%	20% 1%	40% 3%	10% 1%	10
Kerry hems and haws	31% 9%	18% 6%	28% 22%	23% 23%	112
Kerry is a tough guy	29% 3%	31% 4%	17% 5%	24% 9%	42
Column total	370	333	139	113	955
Significance	Significant at			<i>P</i> < .000	

Notes:

1. The first value in each cell is the row percentage, & the second column percentage.
2. For the purpose of statistical analysis, "television coverage" combines the categories of "television morning shows," "Sunday shows," and "primetime television talk shows."

**TABLE 6: Story Type
(Excluding refuting themes)**

Description of story type	Percent (%)
News story	47.4
Op-Ed	16.4
Editorial	3.4
Analysis	27.2
Others	5.5

(Total # of Themes = 955)

**TABLE 7: Cross Tabulation Result - Themes vs. story type
(Excluding refuting themes)**

Description of themes	News story	Op-Ed	Editorial	Analysis	Others	Row total
Bush lacks credibility	51% 26%	18% 26%	4% 28%	24% 21%	4% 17%	228
Bush is arrogant	37% 25%	21% 42%	6% 56%	33% 39%	4% 21%	309
Bush is a strong leader	42% 14%	17% 17%	2% 9%	32% 19%	6% 19%	153

Kerry is very liberal	63%	5%	0	23%	9%	101
	14%	3%	0	9%	17%	
Kerry is an elitist	50%	20%	0	10%	20%	10
	1%	1%	0	0	4%	
Kerry hems and haws	59%	9%	1%	24%	7%	112
	15%	6%	3%	10%	15%	
Kerry is a tough guy	57%	19%	2%	12%	10%	42
	5%	5%	3%	2%	7%	
Column total	453	157	32	260	53	955
Significance	<i>Significant at</i>					<i>P < .000</i>

Notes:

1. The first value in each cell is the row percentage, & the second column percentage.

**TABLE 8: Sources of statement / theme
(Excluding refuting themes)**

Description of sources	Percent (%)
Journalist analysis	23.8
Campaign surrogate-named	17.9
Candidate statement	11.9
Expert statement-named	10.2
Journalist opinion	10.2
Campaign surrogate-unnamed	9.4
Author's opinion	4.9
Other media	1.5
Voter statement-named	1.4
Poll-named	1.3
Voter statement-unnamed	0.9
Expert statement-unnamed	0.5
Celebrities	0.4
Poll-unnamed	0.1
Others	5.3

(Total # of Themes = 955)

**TABLE 9: Cross Tabulation Result - Themes vs. (Regrouped) Sources
(Excluding refuting themes)**

Description of themes	Journalist analysis/opinion	Campaign related	Expert statement/named	Author's opinion	Others	Row total
Bush lacks credibility	35%	34%	11%	6%	14%	228
	24%	20%	26%	30%	30%	
Bush is arrogant	46%	22%	11%	5%	15%	309
	44%	18%	36%	36%	42%	
Bush is a strong leader	27%	48%	9%	5%	11%	153
	13%	20%	14%	17%	14%	
Kerry is very liberal	14%	73%	9%	2%	2%	101
	4%	20%	9%	4%	2%	
Kerry is an elitist	50%	20%	20%	0	10%	10
	2%	1%	2%	0	1%	
Kerry hems and haws	29%	52%	9%	3%	8%	112
	10%	16%	10%	6%	8%	
Kerry is a tough guy	24%	55%	5%	7%	10%	42
	3%	6%	2%	6%	4%	

Column total	324	375	97	47	112	955
Significance	<i>Significant at</i>					<i>P < .000</i>

Notes:

1. The first value in each cell is the row percentage, & the second column percentage.

**TABLE 10: Source's evidence or basis for statement / theme - A
(Excluding refuting themes)**

Description of sources' evidence	Percent (%)
No evidence	43.7
Public record	29.3
Very recent public statements	6.8
Candidate's current policy	2.6
Others	3.9
Management style	2.9
Named poll	2.4
Ad strategy & content	1.6
Candidate's campaign tactics	1.4
Opponent's attacks	1.0
Past personal behavior	0.9
Candidate's interactions with voters	1.2
Other media analysis	0.9
Unnamed poll	0.5
Friends' of candidate statement	0.4
Campaign fundraising	0.2
Candidate's personal finances	0.1
Present personal behavior	0.1

(Total # of Themes = 955)

**TABLE 11: Cross Tabulation Result - Themes vs. (Regrouped) Sources' Evidence
(Excluding refuting themes)**

Descripti on of themes	No evide nce	Public record	Very recent public stateme nt	Candidate' s current policy, managem ent style	Others /Opponen t's attacks	Ad strategy / candidat e campaign tactics, interacti on with voters	Past personal, friend's statemen ts, candidat e's personal finances	Named & unnam ed polls, other media analysi s	Row total
Bush lacks credibility	40% 22%	38% 31%	4% 15%	3% 13%	8% 38%	2% 12%	0 0	4% 27%	228
Bush is arrogant	41% 31%	26% 29%	12% 57%	8% 49%	6% 36%	3% 22%	1% 20%	2% 19%	309
Bush is a strong leader	57% 21%	14% 8%	6% 14%	6% 17%	3% 9%	6% 22%	1% 13%	8% 32%	153

Kerry is very liberal	41% 10%	47% 17%	0 0	3% 6%	2% 4%	5% 12%	1% 7%	2% 5%	101
Kerry is an elitist	40% 1%	10% 0	0 0	0 0	10% 2%	10% 2%	30% 20%	0 0	10
Kerry hems and haws	41% 11%	31% 12%	6% 11%	5% 9%	4% 8%	7% 20%	1% 7%	5% 16%	112
Kerry is a tough guy	45% 5%	19% 3%	5% 3%	7% 6%	2% 2%	10% 10%	12% 33%	0 0	42
Column total	417	280	65	53	47	41	15	37	955
Significance	<i>Significant At</i>								$P < .000$

Notes:

1. The first value in each cell is the row percentage, & the second column percentage.

TABLE 12: Cross Tabulation Result - (Regrouped) Sources' Evidence vs. (Regrouped) Media Outlets (Excluding refuting themes)

Description of media outlets	No evidence	Public record	Very recent public statement	Candidate's current policy, management style	Others /Opponent's attacks	Ad strategy / candidate campaign tactics, interaction with voters	Past personal, friend's statements, candidate's personal finances	Name & unannounced polls, other media analysis	Row total
Newspapers	44% 49%	28% 47%	5% 32%	6% 55%	5% 51%	5% 56%	2% 53%	5% 62%	464
Internet	65% 19%	20% 9%	2% 3%	4% 9%	2% 6%	3% 10%	2% 13%	2% 8%	121
Television/Broadcast	36% 32%	34% 45%	11% 65%	5% 36%	5% 43%	4% 34%	1% 33%	3% 30%	370
Column total	417	280	65	53	47	41	15	37	1073
Significance	<i>Significant At</i>								$P < .000$

Notes:

1. The first value in each cell is the row percentage, & the second column percentage.

TABLE 13: Underlying basis of statement / theme - A (Excluding refuting themes)

Description of bases	Percent (%)
1. Weapons of mass destruction	2.0
2. Medicare proposals	0.6
3. The deficit	n.a.
4. The war with Iraq	12.1
5. Gay marriage	0.1

7. No child left behind (education)	0.1
8. Tax cuts	0.6
10. Environment/Science	1.2
11. 9-11 commission	0.1
13. Terrorism preparedness	13.8
14. Gas availability / price	1.7
40. Other Bush	5.0
51. Vietnam war experience	1.0
52. Vietnam war protest	0.2
53. Defense record	0.7
54. Tax votes	3.7
55. Support of Iraq War	0.9
56. Gay marriage	0.2
58. Overseas jobs	0.1
62. Social Security	0.3
63. Terrorism preparedness	0.2
64. Gas availability / price	2.2
80. Other Kerry	4.8
99. N/A Not recorded-based	48.2

TABLE 14: Cross Tabulation Result - Regrouped Underlying Basis vs. (Bush's) Themes (Excluding refuting themes)

Description of themes	Terrorism preparedness	War with Iraq	Others	Row total
Bush lacks credibility	20%	26%	53%	131
	20%	30%	64%	
Bush is arrogant	42%	38%	21%	165
	52%	55%	31%	
Bush is a strong & decisive leader	63%	28%	9%	57
	27%	14%	5%	
Column total	132	112	109	353
Significance	<i>Significant at</i>			<i>P < .000</i>

Notes:

1. The first value in each cell is the row percentage, & the second column percentage.

TABLE 15: Cross Tabulation Result - (Regrouped) Underlying Basis vs. (Kerry's) Themes (Excluding refuting themes)

Description of themes	Tax Votes Gas Availability	Others	Row total	
Kerry is very liberal	75%	25%	59	
	79%	19%		
Kerry is an elitist	0	100%	3	
	0	4%		
Kerry hems & haws	20%	80%	54	
	20%	53%		
Kerry is a tough guy	5%	95%	21	
	2%	25%		
Column total	56	81	137	
Significance	<i>Significant at</i>			<i>P < .000</i>

Notes:

1. The first value in each cell is the row percentage, & the second column percentage

TABLE 16: Breakdown of affirming/refuting narratives by themes

Description of themes	Affirming n = 955	Rebuttal n = 118
Bush lacks credibility	23.9%	9.3%
Bush is arrogant	32.4%	21.2%
Bush is a strong leader	16.0%	15.3%
Kerry is very liberal	10.6%	33.1%
Kerry is an elitist	1.0%	1.0%
Kerry hems and haws	11.7%	9.3%
Kerry is a tough guy	4.4%	5.9%
