NETWORK TV NEWS' AFFECTIVE FRAMING OF THE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES: EVIDENCE FOR A SECOND-LEVEL AGENDA-SETTING EFFECT THROUGH VISUAL FRAMING

By Renita Coleman and Stephen Banning

This study expands the theory of second-level agenda setting to include affective framing of candidates conveyed through visual information during the 2000 presidential campaign. Network TV news coverage included nonverbal behavior for Al Gore that was more positive than George Bush's, and those who watched more were significantly more likely to hold attitudes that mirrored the media portrayals.

In the era of television politics, there is a growing trend of style over substance, personality over issues, and emotion over information. Images candidates project and how news media portray them receive attention for the effect they may have. Second-level agenda-setting theory recognizes the importance of affective perceptions, emphasizing these attributes and their tone as being just as important as cognitive-level issue salience. Whereas first-level agenda setting suggests a role for media in deciding *what* issues the public is aware of, with researchers focusing on *amount* of coverage, second-level agenda setting suggests the media also frame *attributes* of these issues, thus affecting *how* the issue is defined.[1]

A growing body of research has shown that the affective attributes reported in the media about newsmakers such as political candidates influence the attributes the public associates with those newsmakers.[2] In these second-level studies, affective attributes of candidates have been examined in terms of one mode of communication—words. Even when the primarily visual medium of television is studied, affective attributes of candidates are examined in the verbal content only. This is a notable gap, given that nonverbal communication is especially adept at communicating affective information.[3]

This study, then, proposes an expansion of second-level agenda-setting theory by examining affective framing of candidates through visual rather than verbal information.[4] It pairs content analysis of the

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2000 presidential candidates' nonverbal behavior with survey data from the National Election Studies, correlating the media affective agenda communicated through visuals with audience affective impressions of candidates. The research expands the study of agenda setting's affective dimension to a method of communication shown to clearly and convincingly convey affect—the visual mode.[5] As Baran and Davis wrote, "Stories are often complex combinations of visual and verbal content—all too often the visual information is so powerful that it overwhelms the verbal."[6]

We test two ideas—first, that television news images of candidates exhibiting positive or negative behaviors such as gestures and facial expressions convey impressions that might be flattering or unflattering.[7] Second, we test whether the second-level agenda conveyed visually corresponds with the public's affective impressions of the candidates. We do not propose that the visual is more important than the verbal, but that visual information can serve as additional, important information that will be considered as audiences evaluate messages. We propose that *both* channels of communication work together to contribute to agenda-setting effects, and that understanding of the process is possible only by studying both modes of communication.

This study has a practical implication because late-deciders may be more influenced by visual displays.[8] Visual presentations may have played an unusually important role in a race too close to call for most of the campaign, and may help us better understand future political races where no clear frontrunner is evident.

Literature Review

Theory. For more than thirty years, scholars have studied agenda-setting effects of news on public opinion. Agenda-setting research examines how the media set the agenda of public opinion, a process McCombs and Shaw[9] called the transfer of issue salience. Since then, hundreds of studies have explored this link. At first only public issues were studied; more recently the focus of agenda-setting studies has been "objects," a rubric encompassing other subjects.[10] Further, media portrayals use a limited number of attributes and an object or issue takes on a different cast depending on what attributes are used to frame it,[11] a condition prevalent in political campaigns.[12]

Research on the "second level" examines the influence of "attribute" salience, or the properties, qualities, and characteristics that describe objects or people in the news[13] and the tone of those attributes.[14] The focus at this level is not on *what* media emphasize, but on *how* they describe it. Second-level research has found that attributes of candidates and issues emphasized in news coverage become the attributes emphasized by voters.

One of the main dimensions of the second-level process is affect.[15] The concept of affective framing addresses affect, or emotional tone. Similarly, the second-level agenda-setting effect involves the impact of various attributes that accompany campaign agendas, such as candidate appearance and personal style.[16] This affective framing of candidates in the media influences the public's perceptions in ways that are not only

cognitive. Agenda setting at the second level places special emphasis on candidate image, and agenda setting in the affective dimension occurs when candidate attributes are described in positive, negative, or neutral terms.[17] Previous research suggests that some of the most prominent attributes emphasized by the media and voters are the candidates' personality traits.[18]

There is much theoretical and empirical support for the processing implicit in second-level agenda setting within the dual-route cognitive processing theories such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model, which explains and predicts a person's attitude toward people, objects, and issues.[19] The ELM says that attitude formation depends upon the likelihood that an issue will be elaborated upon, or thought about, and posits that people process messages in one of two ways.[20] The "central route" requires effort and thinking before an attitude is formed, whereas the "peripheral route" is characterized by limited cognitive scrutiny of the message. Critical to this model is the idea that any type of variable may be processed centrally or peripherally, depending on the person's ability or motivation to make the cognitive effort.[21]

Visual images can be processed by either route. If an image attracts viewer attention and holds it, encouraging the viewer to think about what it contains, it will be processed centrally, with careful, rational thought.[22] Visual images that are not elaborated on are processed as peripheral cues, which have their greatest influence when a person is not very involved in an issue.[23] Therefore, images may still have an effect, for example, on undecided voters or those with less interest in politics. In peripheral processing, the effect should be smaller than for information processed centrally. ELM studies have used pictures and video and found that peripheral cues have a greater impact when the message was presented on videotape rather than in writing.[24] Petty and Wegener wrote: "Many visual aspects of the person . . . could enhance perceptions . . . and these features . . . can only truly affect message recipients when the person (is) clearly pictured."[25] They also note that the modality of the message could serve as a cue; given the "seeing is believing" tendency, it would seem logical that pictures might be believed and therefore, influential.

Literature on affect, defined as emotion or feeling, shows that it impacts information processing through mood.[26] Affect may be largely involuntary and automatic as it is primarily processed peripherally.[27] When a person is not motivated to scrutinize a visual image, the processing is also done by the peripheral route, the same route used to process affect.[28] Thus it is likely that affective framing occurs through the visual mode of communication.

Empirical Evidence. One study that looked at visuals in agenda-setting effects was a first-level rather than a second-level analysis. Photograph size influenced reader perceptions of importance.[29] A more recent experiment manipulated the valence of visual framing and found that negative photographs of social protests created more negative affect in viewers. That study concluded that visuals *alone* can impact how people process news content and their perception of issues.[30]

While no studies have looked at the agenda of attributes communicated in visuals, studies of the *verbal* transmission of affect support prediction of such an effect. Studies of economic issues[31] and the environment[32] hinted at second-level agenda setting early on. McCombs and colleagues[33] found a second-level agenda-setting effect on qualities of candidates and positive, negative, or neutral comments about candidates, such as whether they were good leaders. John McCain was covered more positively than George W. Bush,[34] and perceptions of candidates' personalities and qualifications mirrored media portrayals.[35]

Other studies have also linked media salience of attributes and public perceptions of affect:[36] e.g., community consensus about issues and politicians' attributes;[37] issues espoused by the Christian Coalition newspaper correlated with reporting in major U.S. newspapers;[38] and second-level agenda setting between media content and polls on the economy.[39] Because media audiences process visual and verbal information simultaneously, none of these studies can say definitively that agenda-setting effects were due solely to verbal information. It is possible that visual and verbal information worked in tandem, given the evidence of visual images' effects on other dependent variables.

For example, emotional expressions by political leaders had a direct emotional effect on television viewers.[40] Even a single photograph conveyed a distinct image of a candidate's competence, integrity, and fitness for office, and altering that image produced significant differences in assessments of the candidate, even when political party and issue position were unchanged.[41] Other studies found the same link between candidates' appearance and voters' perceptions.[42]

Further, manipulations in various photo characteristics, including facial expression, can produce changes in evaluations of candidates.[43] Of all the nonverbal cues, facial expressions carry the most information[44] and are most effective at conveying nonverbal messages.[45] Meyrowitz said that visually oriented media such as TV have encouraged audiences to rely on nonverbal or facial expressions to make judgments about issues.[46] Emotional responses contribute to judgments of a candidate above and beyond party identification, and to assessments of the candidate's character and issue position.[47] Englis noted that comprehensive models of voting behavior should place importance on the effects of a candidate's appearance.[48]

Early on, Graber concluded that visual images in TV news were more memorable than verbal elements.[49] Broadcast visuals can enhance the acquisition of verbal information,[50] and viewers use visual information to interpret ambiguous verbal passages.[51] Other researchers note that perception of public opinion about issues can be influenced by visuals in news stories.[52]

The theoretical explanation for these findings is that images are more readily encoded and more persistently available in memory than verbal or textual information.[53] Brosius theorized that emotional visuals stimulate attention to the visuals themselves as opposed to the verbal information and that viewers infer details from memory of the visuals.[54]

Many studies of the visual representations of candidates are of print media.[55] It is especially important to study television visuals. First, moving pictures produce stronger affective responses than still pictures,[56] and affective opinions are critical to actual voting, which is often contingent on how positively or negatively people evaluate a candidate.[57] Second, in network television, the primary source of campaign information for most voters,[58] visuals predominate. In the words of Walter Cronkite, "If we can illustrate all stories, there is no further need of a news broadcaster to read half the items to the public."[59]

In summary, researchers have shown that television imagery can affect public opinion and voting intention.[60] Affective information is communicated through visuals,[61] and, in mass communication, affect is critical in persuasion.[62] Movement, which occurs in most television images, affects cognitive processing and viewer response by capturing and sustaining attention,[63] improving memory,[64] and increasing arousal.[65]

This study explores whether visual information in the media can convey an affective attribute agenda and if that agenda could have effects on audiences. Therefore, we ask the following research questions:

RQ1: Was there a significant difference in the valence of the nonverbal behavior of presidential candidates George W. Bush and Al Gore as portrayed in TV news during the 2000 election?

RQ2: Was there a significant difference between Bush and Gore in the public's opinion of the candidates' positive and negative affective attributes?

RQ3: Was there a significant correlation between the public's opinion of the candidates' positive and negative affective attributes and the public's exposure to media portrayals of their nonverbal behavior, indicating an agenda-setting effect?

Method

The first part of this study uses a quantitative content analysis. Tapes were made from 5 September (Labor Day) to election day, 7 November 2000, of the evening news for the three major networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC). CNN was not included because it did not run campaign coverage during its evening news show; comparison of its hour-long coverage to the networks coverage, in different time slots, would not be appropriate. A random sample of 23 days of newscasts was generated, producing 67 shows that included coverage of the presidential campaigns, and 1,315 shots with visuals of the candidates. Because this was a probability sample, results can be generalized to coverage of the entire Labor Day-to-election day period on the three networks.

The unit of analysis was the shot, the most basic unit of audiovisual message construction, defined as a fragment of visual material that has no break in continuity of action, that is, video that does not contain editing cuts.[66] In a shot, the camera movement is unedited; if the camera's position changes it may be due to zooms or pans, but not cuts.[67] We coded only shots that lasted at least 4 seconds to increase coder accuracy. Typically, nonverbal behavior measures that use segments of 2 seconds have about 84% accuracy; scenes of 5 seconds have a nearly perfect accuracy rate.[68]

Nonverbal behaviors were defined as facial expressions, posture, and gestures,[69] and we measured five nonverbal dimensions tested in previous studies—activity, posture, arms, hands, and eyes.[70] Coders distinguished between particular movements, for example, whether the candidate was looking directly into the camera or at someone, or was looking up, down, or indirectly.[71] The movements were later rated as positive, negative, or neutral, based on the decision rules below. These procedures have been shown to increase validity and reliability. Coding candidate attributes' valence captures one dimension of image agenda setting.[72]

Activity was coded as dynamic, and was later rated positive, if the candidate was speaking, shaking hands, kissing babies, or exhibiting similar highly active behavior; it was coded as not dynamic, and thus negative, if the candidate was shown passively listening, reading, dozing, or engaged in other non-active behavior. *Posture* was coded either as standing tall and upright (positive), or as bowed, slumped, or leaning on something (negative). *Arms* were coded as either held at shoulder height or higher (positive), or held at rest, at the side, or folded (negative). *Hands* were coded as gesturing or doing something (positive), or being at rest (negative). *Eyes* were coded as looking directly at the camera or someone (positive), or as looking indirectly, up, or down, or being closed (negative). The five nonverbal measures were indexed by summing all the positive nonverbal behaviors into one index, and all the negative nonverbal behaviors into another.

Two trained coders independently coded 10% of the shots. Reliabilities using Scott's *pi* were quite high, as expected from other studies: 1.0 for story topic (Bush or Gore), network, and candidate visual (Bush or Gore). Other variable reliabilities were activity, .94; posture, .95; arms, .96; hands, .96; eyes, .96.

The study also involved secondary analysis of a national, random-sample survey of 1,807 respondents collected for the National Election Studies during the 2000 campaign. A set of four questions for each candidate was labeled "*Affect*" and included: "Has (candidate), because of the kind of person he is, or because of something he has done, ever made you feel": "angry," "hopeful," "afraid," and "proud." Dichotomous responses (1=yes and 0=no) for "angry" and "afraid" were summed to form the negative affect index (0 to 2 range) for each candidate; similar responses to "hopeful" and "proud" form the positive affect index.

"*Candidate traits*" was operationalized with another set of six questions: "I am going to read a list of words and phrases people may use to describe political figures. For each, please tell me whether the word or

phrase describes the candidate I name." Two words or phrases referred to negative character traits ("dishonest" and "out of touch with ordinary people"), and five referred to positive character traits ("moral," "really cares about people like you," "knowledgeable," "provides strong leadership," and "intelligent."). The scale was coded so 1 = not well at all, 2 = not too well, 3 = quite well, and 4 = extremely well.

Scores on the positive affect and positive traits questions were summed to form one positive affective attributes index for each candidate; the same was done for the negative affect and negative traits questions to form one negative affective attributes index for each candidate. The final index divided the raw index scores by the number of questions in each.

The decision to approach attribute "valence" this way was guided by our study's goals and design. That is, verbal content analyses in second-level agenda-setting studies frequently identify specific aspects of affective framing such as intellectual ability, moral quality, or leadership, and count the number of keyword synonyms and antonyms in stories. It is more difficult to differentiate between such specific characteristics in pictures or video. For example, what does a "moral" or "intelligent" gesture look like? Observers can accurately identify behavioral expressions of specific emotions such as anger and fear, but specific personality traits such as intelligence and honesty have not been reliably linked to objective operational definitions of nonverbal behaviors such as waving hands or furrowed brows.

However, research has shown that *valence* is an essential, defining feature of affect,[73] and a person who exhibits positive nonverbal behavior leads perceivers to infer positive personality traits about that person. Thus, we collapsed the affect and trait variables from the public opinion survey into categories representing valence, with "angry," "afraid," "dishonest," and "out of touch" forming the negative affective attribute index for each candidate; the same was done for the positive affective attributes index. This gave us a more direct comparison with our content analysis categories of nonverbal behavior, and is congruent with bivariate models of positive and negative affect as separate but interacting systems.[74] Moreover, theories of affect accord valence a central role and show that it accounts for twice as much variance as any specific emotion.[75]

News use was measured with a 7-point interval question that asked how many days a week respondents watched national TV news. More than half (53%) watched national TV news three or more days per week. Finally, respondents to the NES survey were fairly attentive to national news; 45% said they paid a "great deal" to "quite a lot" of attention, 39% paid "some" attention; only 16% paid "very little" to "none."

Results

RQ1 asked if there was a significant difference in the valence of the nonverbal behavior of Bush and Gore. Table 1 shows that significantly more shots showed positive nonverbal behavior by Gore than Bush (F = 19.26, df = 1, 968, $p < .001$), and significantly more shots

showed negative nonverbal behavior by Bush than Gore (F = 18.28, df = 1, 968, $p < .001$).

RQ2 asked if there were a significant difference between Bush and Gore in the public's opinion of the candidates' positive and negative affective attributes. Based on the NES data, Gore was rated significantly higher on the positive affective attributes index than was Bush (t = -13.84, df = 1,806, $p < .001$). Gore's mean positive affective attribute index score was 3.5 (sd = 1.45), and Bush's was 2.93 (sd = 1.06). Bush was rated significantly higher on the negative affective attribute index than was Gore (t = 19.39, df = 1,806, $p < .001$). Bush's mean negative affective attribute index score was 3.1 (sd = 1.1), and Gore's was 2.4 (sd = 1.3).

RQ3 asked if there were significant correlations between the public's opinion of the candidates' positive and negative affective attributes, and exposure to media portrayals of their nonverbal behavior. This question sought to determine if an agenda-setting effect could have occurred, by correlating the valence of public opinion with a variable we created that weighted the valence of media portrayals by survey respondents' level of news use and potential exposure. This variable multiplied each respondent's amount of news use (0 to 7 days) by the average score of each candidate's positive and negative nonverbal expressions from the content data; this yielded scores for each respondent's exposure to positive Bush content, negative Bush content, positive Gore content, and negative Gore content. We correlated exposure of each candidate's negative nonverbal behaviors (the content data) with the public's attitudes (survey data) toward their negative affective attributes.

As Table 1 shows, we found significant direct correlations between exposure to Bush's negative nonverbal behavior and negative public opinion on the affective attribute index using Pearson's r (r = .131, $p < .001$), exposure to Bush's positive nonverbal behavior and public opinion on the positive affective attribute index (r = .129, $p < .001$), and between exposure to Gore's positive nonverbal behavior and public opinion on the positive affective attribute index (r = .202, $p < .001$). No significant correlation was found between exposure to Gore's negative nonverbal behavior and public opinion on the negative affective attribute index (r = .032, p = .17).

Discussion and Conclusion

There is evidence of differential effects on public opinion of the affective framing of the nonverbal communication by the candidates. Gore exhibited more positive nonverbal expressions; Bush expressed more negative nonverbal behavior. Survey respondents felt significantly more positive about Gore than about Bush. Gore made them feel more hopeful and proud, and was more moral, knowledgeable, intelligent, and caring, and was a stronger leader; Bush made them feel more angry and afraid, and was significantly more dishonest and out of touch with ordinary people. Not only did significant differences exist, but those differences in public opinion were significantly correlated with exposure to the candidates' different nonverbal expressions. Public perception of the candidates' characters traits and personalities was correlated with exposure

TABLE 1

Comparison of Media and Public Attributes of Bush and Gore

	Positive Media Portrayals *M* (sd)	Negative Media Portrayals *M* (sd)	Positive Public Attitudes *M* (sd)	Negative Public Attitudes *M* (sd)
Bush	3.61 (.75)[a]	1.38 (.75)[b]	2.93 (1.06)[a]	3.10 (1.1)[b]
Gore	3.84 (.81)[c]	1.16 (.81)	3.50 (1.45)[c]	2.40 (1.3)

N = 1,807

a – Pearson's correlation = .129, $p < .001$
b – Pearson's correlation = .131, $p < .001$
c – Pearson's correlation = .202, $p < .001$

to the media portrayals of their nonverbal communication on three of the four analyses, indicating how a second-level agenda-setting effect may have occurred through visual information.

Obviously, in this correlational study, we cannot determine the definitive cause of the public's affective attitudes. However, studies of agenda setting show an effect on the second level through verbal information. It does not seem inappropriate to suggest that visual information may have a second-level agenda-setting effect. Especially when it comes to TV news, visuals predominate; if a second-level effect can be posited to have occurred via words, then surely pictures may also have some effect.

While the effect of nonverbal cues may be less than the effects reported for some verbal cues, the effect is nevertheless significant. Eagly and Chaiken note, "Effects that account for relatively small proportions of variance can still be consequential, and often are regarded as extremely important in applied areas."[76] Visuals do function as an important information source from which voters gather affective impressions of candidates. Visual images of the candidates' nonverbal expressions in the media have a small but significant effect on the public's feelings toward the candidates and their character traits. Visuals can play an important albeit modest role in facilitating impression formation in the political process.

Because this is the first study of second-level agenda-setting effects conveyed by visual information, there were questions a single study could not answer. One issue in the development of the concept of visual framing in agenda-setting theory is how to best operationalize the measures of visual affective elements. In this study, we used existing techniques for measuring nonverbal communication. This has the benefit of validity and reliability, but the correspondence between the two has not been tested until now. Future studies should test new measures.

It is important to discover the source of affective attributes about the candidates that are conveyed to the public.[77] Clearly, there is more to the affective framing of candidates than the elements examined in studies to date, most of which look at only the verbal component of news coverage. As this study shows, there is merit in pursuing explanations for affective framing in the visual aspects of news coverage as well.

This study suggests another channel of communication should be incorporated into second-level agenda setting—visual framing. In their book outlining second-level agenda setting, McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver note that when the news media report on candidates or any other object, "they describe that object. In these descriptions some attributes are very prominent and frequently mentioned."[78] To that definition, we would add that broadcast news reports also *display* attributes, prominently and frequently, that also help define an agenda of attributes. This study has shown that such visual displays do occur, that some attributes are displayed more frequently and prominently than others, and that the prominently displayed attributes are significantly correlated with affective opinions of audiences.

Research should not view one channel of communication in isolation; verbal and visual messages and their processing occur simultaneously. Studies that assess emotion in addition to cognition consistently show the predictive ability of emotions above and beyond cognitions.[79] An incomplete understanding of the second level of agenda setting results from studying the affective messages in one and not the other. This study has shown that there is much in a newscast's visual information that can shape the interpretation of that information. Relying solely on one channel will not allow a complete explanation of voters' perceptions of candidates' images. Characterizing voters' opinions of candidates' attributes as arising only from verbal information and not visual information overlooks a great deal of complexity and subtlety about the way humans process information.

NOTES

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