Research Article

Consumer Demand for Cynical and Negative News Frames

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Abstract

Commentators regularly lament the proliferation of both negative and/or strategic ("horse race") coverage in political news content. The most frequent account for this trend focuses on news norms and/or the priorities of news journalists. Here, we build on recent work arguing for the importance of demand-side, rather than supply-side, explanations of news content. In short, news may be negative and/or strategy-focused because that is the kind of news that people are interested in. We use a lab study to capture participants' news-selection biases, alongside a survey capturing their stated news preferences. Politically interested participants are more likely to select negative stories. Interest is associated with a greater preference for strategic frames as well. And results suggest that behavioral results do not conform to attitudinal ones. That is, regardless of what participants say, they exhibit a preference for negative news content.

Keywords

negative news, strategy news, negativity bias, horse race, consumer demand, experimental design, gatekeeping

Literature in political communication often finds itself concerned with two related themes in media content: (1) negative news frames that generally cast politicians and politics in an unfavorable light and (2) cynical "strategy" coverage that focuses on the "horse race" and conflictual aspects of politics. The two themes may be related, insofar as strategic coverage implies that politicians are motivated only by power, not the common good (e.g., Capella and Jamieson 1997). Regardless of their relation,

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however, work on these frames typically makes two assumptions: First, they are bad for society; and second, their root cause lies in the actions of journalists.

We seek here to question the second assumption through a simple supposition: That the content of any given media environment is determined by some interplay between what media sources supply and what consumers demand.[1] Put simply, we argue that the proliferation of negative and/or strategic content is at least in part a function of individuals' (quite possibly subconscious) preferences.

Below, we present results from a lab study that explores this possibility. Our work is in part an extension of existing work focused on consumer interest in horse-race stories (e.g., Iyengar et al. 2004), or in negative content (e.g., Meffert et al. 2006), although it is among the first to simultaneously consider both. It is also to our knowledge the first exploration of news-selection biases outside the U.S. context, and/or outside the context of an election campaign.[2] Most importantly, however, our work relies on a new laboratory-study approach that has some advantages where both internal and external validity are concerned and that provides a rare opportunity to compare actual news-selection behavior with answers to survey questions about participants' preferences in media content.

The Cynical Media and Their Audience

That the media are negative and cynical about politics and politicians is widely agreed upon in the literature. Some scholars see this trend as a mutation from the media as a watchdog "Fourth Estate," into a hyper-critical "feeding frenzy" (Patterson 1994; Sabato 1991: 2). This view of a negative-centric press is echoed in numerous other U.S. studies (e.g., Blumer and Gurevitch 1995; Capella and Jamieson 1997; Edelman 1987; Farnsworth and Lichter 2007; Lang and Lang 1966, 1968; Lichter and Noyes 1995; Newton 2006; M. J. Robinson and Sheehan 1983; West 2001); it is also evident in Canada (e.g., Andrew et al. 2006) and in other countries around the world (Stromback and Kaid 2008).

There is a related and overlapping area of research focusing on "strategy" coverage. We rely here on Capella and Jamieson's (1997) definition of "strategy" coverage, which is said to include

> (1) winning and losing as the central concern; (2) the language of wars, games, and competition; (3) a story with performers, critics and audience (voters); (4) centrality of performance, style, and perception of the candidate; (5) heavy weighting of polls and the candidates. (Capella and Jamieson 1997: 33)[3]

This particular conceptualization of strategy coverage is related to negativity insofar as it calls into question the motivation of politicians and has been linked to increased cynicism in viewers (de Vreese 2004; Rhee 1997; Valentino et al. 2001a, 2001b). Jamieson and Capella argue that when the actions of those in politics are painted in a strategic light, viewers ascribe a motivation of power, rather than a concern for the common good, to those involved (also see Jones 2004; Patterson 1994). This type of

strategy coverage is also seen to be dramatically on the rise—again, in the United States (e.g., Capella and Jamieson 1997; Jones 2004; Patterson 1994; M. Robinson 1976), in Canada (Mendelsohn 1993; Pickup et al. 2010), and around the world (Stromback and Kaid 2008).

Why?—Supply-Side Explanations

Much existing work places the blame for strategic and negative political coverage on journalistic norms of cynicism toward public officials, stemming from a general decline of trust toward public figures in the United States from the 1970s onward (e.g., Capella and Jamieson 1997; Farnsworth and Lichter 2007; Lichter and Noyes 1995; Patterson 1994; Sabato 1991; West 2001). The argument is, in short, that the twin scandals of Vietnam and Watergate—as well as a desire to emulate investigate reporters like Woodward and Bernstein—moved journalists from "silent sceptics" to "vocal cynics" (Patterson 1994: 73–74).

It seems very likely that particular historical events, and the resulting journalistic norms, contribute to the production of both negative and strategic news frames. That said, the historical account does little to explain why negative and strategic coverage are pervasive outside the United States. Journalists in other countries may have had similar defining moments, perhaps; and notions of how to conduct journalism may well have seeped from the United States into other countries. But the apparent pervasiveness of negative and strategic coverage outside the United States does seem to beg for an argument not rooted just in American political history.

One such argument is that negative and strategic frames are the result of a news-making process that prioritizes new and exciting information. Political news focused on the "horse race," conflict between politicians, or a series of errors made by individuals in the system, will provide fresh content much faster than political news that focuses on policy (Farnsworth and Lichter 2007; Patterson 1994). This explanation is likely more generalizable (i.e., more easily applicable outside the United States) than the historic/norms account. We suspect that neither explanation can fully account for the pervasiveness of negative and cynical news frames, however. Indeed, as we have argued above, while some weight should be given to how the practices of journalists on the supply side determine the content of media, we must also consider the demand side, that is, audience preferences.

Why?—Demand-Side Explanations

The existing literature is unclear about how media consumers feel about negative and/or strategic coverage, in part because many of the major works on the condition of political reporting in the United States focus on the process of producing news much more than on the ways in which we consume it. When the literature does address consumer demand, it most often focuses on the low and/or declining scores the public gives to media in surveys, as evidence of a distaste for the increasing prominence of negative and strategic frames.

There is indeed survey evidence suggesting that the public does not enjoy negative news frames (see, for example, Lichter and Noyes 1995; West 2001), but our own inclination is to be wary of survey questions on this issue. Attitudes on news coverage are likely influenced by the current tone of politics and the media. The particularly vitriolic political climate surrounding the first Clinton presidency may be what drove a downward shift in responses observed by both West, and Lichter and Noyes when writing in the 1990s, for instance. More importantly, it may be that respondents' stated preferences for news content do not reflect their actual news choices. That is, people may say they want one kind of news, even as they systematically select another.

There are certainly reasons to believe that this is true. There is after all a growing body of work describing a "negativity bias" in human behavior. In short, individuals may have a propensity to weight negative information more heavily than positive information. This seems relatively clear in work in psychology on impression formation (e.g., van der Pligt and Eiser 1980; Vonk 1996); it is reflected in work on loss aversion in economics (Kahneman and Tversky 1979); and it is evidenced in work on political behavior and communications as well (e.g., Altheide 1997; Diagnault et al. 2012; Harrington 1989; Patterson 1994; Shoemaker et al. 1987; Soroka 2012, 2014). Some work links the negativity bias to evolutionary processes (e.g., Shoemaker 1996; Soroka 2014; S. Soroka and McAdams 2014). Work also focuses on the importance of a reference point to the negativity bias: Humans tend to be mildly optimistic; negative information is thus further away from our expectations than is positive information; and we thus view negative information as more deviant and potentially more useful as well (e.g., Fiske 1980; Skowronski and Carlston 1989).

The notion that it is the potential usefulness of deviant/negative information that makes it particularly attention-grabbing is echoed in work on why news consumers have a rational incentive to focus on negative and/or strategic news frames. It has long been hypothesized that individuals seek "shortcuts" in their information gathering—shortcuts that can systematically bias their media content environments. This argument is rooted in both (1) Downs's (1957) argument that individuals have little incentive to become informed about or participate in politics, as the impact of their voting decisions on election outcomes is miniscule and (2) Fiske's (1991) notion of individuals as "cognitive misers." In both cases, citizens have limited incentives to pay close attention to most political information. For Fiske & Taylor (1991: 13), this means they will seek "rapid adequate solutions, rather than slow articulate solutions."

What is the nature of these rapid solutions? A focus on negativity, and/or strategy, and/or political conflict is a possibility. When politicians form a consensus around a policy, that policy is likely to be implemented whoever wins an election or political fight. However, where there is controversy or two opposing viewpoints, political support for one side may determine what is implemented, thus giving the individual an incentive to pay attention. In short, "The rational voter is engaged by political conflict and bored by political consensus" (Zaller 1999: 16). When media reduce complex political issues to strategy coverage that highlights disagreement, citizens reward them with increased viewership.

Theories focused on an evolution-inspired negativity bias, or on rational decision making to improve the cost–benefit ratio where political learning is concerned, are quite clearly related: Both suggest that the selection of negative and/or strategic information is for strategic (rather than just entertainment) reasons. The end result may be a preference for information that is negative, and/or strategic, and a body of media content that is produced to match that preference.

Note that this preference for negative and/or strategic information may be subconscious. That is, we may find ourselves selecting negative and/or strategic stories even as we state that we would like other types of information. The presence of survey responses that suggest some wariness about negative and strategic frames in media, even as media consumption seems to point toward a preference for those types of information, may reflect this fact. This would be in line with findings that individuals "frequently grumbled about oversimplified treatment of all news," while being unwilling in their actual habits to view more complex coverage (Graber 1984: 105); or that those who call for public-affairs programming tend to not watch it when it is actually made available (Neuman 1991). In short, previous research already lends support to the notion that individuals' conscious signaling of what news ought to be does not necessarily match their actual patterns of news consumption.

Previous research thus suggests three hypotheses. First, participants will be more likely to read news stories that are negative and/or strategy-focused. Second, those with a greater interest in politics will show a greater tendency toward negative and strategic stories. Third, story selection will be weakly correlated—or even entirely uncorrelated—with attitudes about negativity and strategy frames.

From Attitudinal to Behavioral Analyses

What we require is a way to examine news choices directly, that is, focusing on behavioral (actual news selection) rather than attitudinal (survey question-based) data. There are several valuable examples of this approach. Meffert et al. (2006) look at demand for negative information in an electoral campaign setting, in an experimental lab, using the "dynamic information-board" method pioneered by Lau and Redlawsk (2006). Iyengar et al. (2004) take a different approach: They send out to test subjects a CD with articles on the then-ongoing 2000 U.S. presidential election, and software that tracks participants' news selection. Tewksbury's (2005, 2006) approach is similar: He uses Nielsen Company data capturing the Web history of participants who sign into tracking software whenever they browse the Internet.

There are advantages and disadvantages to each approach. Iyengar et al. (2004) and Tewksbury (2005, 2006) allow respondents to participate at home, in a more natural environment than the experimental lab setting used by Meffert et al. (2006). The resulting external validity comes at a cost, however—They cannot fully control the experimental treatment, as participants may by viewing un-tracked news (not on the CD, or without signing in to tracking software), and people other than the participant may also be using the CD/software. Meffert et al., in contrast, have complete control over the information environment, but there are increased concerns about external

validity; and the experiment is quite clearly focused on a "motivated" campaign environment and may or may not apply to day-to-day passive news readership. In each of these cases, individuals are also acutely aware that their selections are being studied.

The Study

Our study is somewhat different from past work. In short, we rely on a method that attempts to maximize the benefits of the two approaches described above, while minimizing the negatives. The study is designed with four objectives:

1. Maximize the external validity of the study by creating as "natural" a news-reading environment as possible.
2. Minimize the effects of social desirability on news selection by making respondents believe that their news selections are not the object of study.
3. Use a laboratory setting that allows for a high degree of control over the material that is presented to individuals so that they have to make choices between alternatives.
4. Match news-selection decisions (behavioral data) with survey questions on participants stated preferences on news content (attitudinal data), so that implicit preferences for media content can be directly compared with explicitly-stated preferences.

The study that we designed to meet these goals proceeds as follows. First, groups of up to six participants enter a room, sit down at a computer, and are told that the purpose of the study is to track their eye movements as they watch a number of television news stories. Subjects are given a brief explanation of how the eye-tracking software operates. They are told that to obtain a baseline measurement on their eye movements, we will have them browse a Web page of recent news articles for between three and nine minutes. It is important that they read during that time (to calibrate the eye-tracking software properly), but they can choose whatever they like and proceed at their own pace. After they read articles, they will watch two television news stories. Finally, they will respond to a brief survey.

The critical part of this study is that there is in fact no eye-tracking software, and no video is recorded (though the Webcam light on the experimental computers was turned on make the eye-tracking story seem more credible)—What we are really interested in are the stories participants select from the news Web page.[4] The idea of the eye-tracking story, then, is to encourage participants to read in a normal manner, as though their responses are not the object of study. They understand that they must read; but they can read whatever they like, and there is no sign that what they read is being monitored. The two videos are then included in the study only so that respondents believe that those are the objects of study, because we want to get responses to survey questions before the final debriefing.

The main component of this study, the artificial news Web page, is coded in html and run in the MediaLab software program. The database includes fifty articles in

total. All articles were selected by the coauthors from the two weeks directly preceding the study; all were about Canadian politics and written in English. All articles were also coded by a team of three expert coders for tone (positive/negative/neutral)[5] as well as topic (policy/strategy/neither).[6] Where topic is concerned, the coders were unanimous on topic for the vast majority (forty-three/fifty) of cases. This was true for both the article as a whole and for the headline alone—As we are interested here in the initial selection of stories, based on headlines, it is the topic of the headline that matters most. For tone, we do not expect complete intercoder reliability but rather treat intercoder differences as a sign of ambiguity. In short, if two coders see a headline as negative and a third coder sees it as neutral, then we see that article as less clearly negative than if all three coders agreed (as in, for example, Young and Soroka 2012).[7] So our measure of tone is based on an average of the three codes, where −1 is very negative and +1 is very positive.

The sample of fifty articles was carefully selected to provide articles distributed across the range of tone of topic, as well as across a broad swath of national (domestic) political topics. Particular care was given to ensuring that no one political party was over- or underrepresented, and that particular current events did not dominate the article selection. In other words, as much care as possible was taken to ensure that there were not systematic biases in the content of any of the categories. In addition, each respondent was presented with a Web page of thirty articles, randomly drawn from the fifty-article sample, and presented in a random order.[8]

The study has (at least) two limitations. First, test subjects included one hundred undergraduate students at McGill University.[9] This is a good number of participants, but there are of course limits to using undergraduate subjects. Note, however, that we are not attempting to make a population estimate but rather trying to uncover a cognitive process. As such, the fact that our sample is not representative with respect to education, age, and income should be a relatively minor problem (see, for example, Morton and Williams 2008).[10] Second, like almost any lab study, there is the possibility of confounding effects—The main concern is that implicit cues can be given regarding what sort of behavior the study is looking to find by simple acts such as reading the briefing in a certain manner (McDermott 2002). This concern was minimized in this case by sticking carefully to the text written for briefings, a text that emphasized the eye-tracking portion of the study, while presenting the news-selection "baseline measurement" as almost an afterthought.[11]

Properly implemented, our design made it very likely that subjects would focus on their actions in the fictional video study, while acting in a more natural manner in the news-selection section of the study. The deception thus accomplished objectives 1 and 2 above. Of course, we can never fully remove the artificiality of the lab environment, or for that matter, match the "natural" environment of at-home studies (Iyengar et al. 2004; Tewksbury 2006). We nevertheless believe that our approach balances the concerns of external and internal validity in a way that improves upon those studies.[12]

A survey was administered after the fictional eye-tracking study, including a battery of questions on news content, as well as a series of basic demographic and partisanship variables. We cannot avoid the possibility that survey responses are affected by the

Table 1. Aggregate Story Selection.

	Unclear	Policy	Strategy	Total
Negative	—	P:598	P:885	P:1483
		S:63	S:78	S:141
		10.5%	8.8%	10.5%
Neutral	P:73	P:444	P:84	P:601
	S:16	S:44	S:6	S:66
	22%	9.9%	7.3%	9.1%
Positive	P:59	P:540	P:677	P:1275
	S:9	S:59	S:40	S:108
	15.2%	10.9%	6.0%	8.5%
Total	P:132	P:1582	P:1646	—
	S:25	S:166	S:124	
	18.9%	10.5%	7.6%	

Note. P is the number of stories presented to all respondents, and S is the number of stories selected by respondents.

stories respondents read in the news-selection section of the study. As news selection should be conditioned by underlying preferences in news, however, we believe that contamination of survey responses by Web news is in this case relatively unlikely. And to minimize the effects of video news on survey responses, each participant is shown two videos chosen at random from a pool of five. These five videos are drawn from a previous study (Soroka and McAdams 2014), where the aim in this case was to select videos that were relatively mundane—They vary in tone from mildly negative to mildly positive. Information on the videos used is included in the online appendix.

Results

The Impact of Topic and Tone

Table 1 shows some basic diagnostic data for the study. Reported for each cell is the number of stories in that category presented to all respondents over the course of the study (P); the number of stories in that category selected to be read by respondents (S); and finally the percentage of stories read out of those presented. The table thus offers a broad picture of participants' tendencies to select some types of stories over others.

Looking across the "total" rows and columns allows us to compare the relative performance of articles on tone and topic. Note first that the differences in the percentage read between categories seem relatively small—The range is from 6.0 (for positive, strategic stories) to 22.0 percent (for unclear, neutral stories). These are not inconsequential differences, however. Each respondent was presented with 30 stories, of which individuals read approximately three stories on average (min = 1, max = 10). In total, 315 out of the 3,360 stories presented to all respondents combined were actually read. If tone and topic have no effect on the respondents, then we should expect

the frequency of each cell to be 9.6 percent. It is deviations from this value, 9.6 percent, that suggest impacts of topic and/or tone.

With that in mind, note that results for tone are in the expected direction. Negative stories were chosen 10.5 percent of the time, compared with 9.1 percent of the time for neutral stories and 8.5 percent for positive stories. Results for topic appear to run contrary to expectations. Strategy stories were selected 7.6 percent of the time, while policy stories were selected 10.5 percent of the time.

The basic descriptive data in Table 1 likely lack a few important control variables and thus understates the influence of both topic and tone on news selection. A set of more complete logit analyses are presented in Table 2. All models use each person–story combination as a case and predict whether a particular story, for a particular individual was selected (1) or not selected (0).

While our main interest is in how the tone and topic of a particular story affect its selection, we first include several important control variables in each model. The placement of stories on the Web page likely matters to story selection, so we capture placement in two ways: Column is coded as 1 for the left column and 2 for the right column, and row is coded from 1 to 15 based on the row in which a story appeared.[13] (Recall that stories are randomly ordered for each participant.) Because the amount of time varied across participants, we also include time, coded as 5, 7, or 9 for the number of minutes a participant had to read the stories.[14]

All models are estimated using a simple random-effects logit estimation (to account for the fact that cases are not independent, as there are thirty cases per respondent).[15] Table 2 shows the resulting odds ratios, capturing the probability of a story being read. For the sake of comparison, the table includes models used in subsequent sections as well; for the time being, we focus just on models 1 and 2. The first few rows allow us to look at some basic diagnostics of how individuals read news stories on the page. The column in which a story appears, left or right, does not seem to matter to the likelihood that it is selected by respondents. The row in which a story appears does matter—moving down one row decreases the likelihood of selection by roughly 3 percent. The time respondents had to read the news page also matters, of course—Each additional minute leads to increased probability of a story being read of about 11 percent.

Our main interest in model 1 is the effect of the topic and tone of articles. The former is captured with a binary variable, equal to 1 for stories with headlines that are strategy (rather than policy) oriented; and recall that tone is an interval-level measure ranging from −1 (negative) to +1 (positive). Results for topic and tone largely confirm what we have seen in Table 1. A one-unit shift upward in tone makes a story roughly 13 percent less likely to be selected. Positive stories are thus 26 percent less likely to be selected than are negative stories. That said, the effect of tone is significant only at $p < .10$. The impact of topic is more robust: Strategic stories are 33 percent less likely to be selected than are policy stories.

Model 2 tests the possibility that topic and tone interact. Results suggest that they do: In this interacted model, there is no discernible direct effect of tone, but the direct impact of topic strengthens somewhat and is augmented by tone. In short, strategic stories are particularly unpopular when they are positive. But the combined effects of

Table 2. Modeling Story Selection.

	Model							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Column	0.873 (0.105)	0.874 (0.105)	0.869 (0.105)	0.866 (0.105)	0.864 (0.104)	0.861 (0.104)	0.868 (0.104)	0.873 (0.106)
Row	0.970 (0.013)	0.969** (0.013)	0.971** (0.013)	0.971** (0.014)	0.970** (0.014)	0.970** (0.013)	0.970** (0.013)	0.971** (0.013)
Time	1.116** (0.050)	1.116** (0.050)	1.127** (0.051)	1.128** (0.052)	1.125** (0.051)	1.127** (0.051)	1.126** (0.051)	1.126** (0.051)
Topic (Strat = 1)	0.626*** (0.078)	0.596*** (0.077)	0.619*** (0.077)	0.260*** (0.098)	0.620*** (0.077)	0.443*** (0.090)	0.619*** (0.077)	0.569*** (0.092)
Tone (−1/+1)	0.871* (0.070)	1.007 (0.109)	0.934 (0.213)	0.864* (0.069)	1.027 (0.129)	0.861* (0.069)	0.847 (0.139)	0.864* (0.069)
Topic × Tone		0.727** (0.118)						
Interest			1.151 (0.349)	0.723 (0.256)				
Interest × Tone			0.889 (0.283)					
Interest × Topic				3.587** (1.859)				
Country (CAN = 1)					0.916 (0.141)	0.762 (0.139)		
Country × Tone					0.750* (0.122)			
Country × Topic						1.724** (0.441)		
Prefs:Neg							0.929 (0.293)	
Prefs:Neg × Tone							1.050 (0.354)	
Prefs:Strategy								0.832 (0.244)
Prefs:Strat × Topic								1.386 (0.552)
Constant	0.077*** (0.025)	0.077*** (0.026)	0.066*** (0.026)	0.089*** (0.037)	0.078*** (0.027)	0.086*** (0.030)	0.076*** (0.027)	0.077*** (0.026)
n (cases)	3,360	3,360	3,330	3,330	3,330	3,330	3,330	3,330
n (individuals)	111	111	111	111	111	111	111	111

Note. Cells contain odds ratios from random-effects logistic regression with standard errors in parentheses.
*$p < .10$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .01$.

Table 3. The Estimated Impact of Topic and Tone.

	Policy	Strategy
Negative	.103 (.013)	.086 (.011)
Neutral	.104 (.008)	.064 (.007)
Positive	.104 (.013)	.048 (.009)

Note. Cells contain the estimated probability of story selection (with standard errors in parentheses) based on results for model 2 in Table 2.

topic and tone are difficult to discern from the coefficients in Table 2 alone. Table 3 thus shows the estimated probability of story selection (holding other variables at their current values) by both topic and tone.[16] Note that changing the tone makes no difference to the likelihood of selection for policy-oriented stories; but it clearly matters to the likelihood of story selection for strategic stories (cutting the likelihood of selection nearly in half). Put differently, strategic stories are only interesting when they are negative. That said, these estimates also make clear the fact that strategic stories are in this case systematically less popular than policy stories.

The Moderating Effects of Political Interest

Recall that we also want to know how interest in politics affects the basic relationship, with the hypothesis that politically interested individuals are more able to use strategic and/or negative news. We capture political interest by relying on the following question, included in the post-survey:

- *Political Interest*: How interested in politics are you generally, on a scale where 0 means *no interest at all*, and 10 means *a great deal of interest*?

We are interested here not in the direct effect of political interest (in fact, we do not expect any direct effect) but rather in the moderating effect that interest may have on either or both of tone and topic. Models 3 and 4 in Table 2 thus show results allowing both tone and topic to interact with our measure of political interest.

To avoid problems with collinearity, interactions with tone and topic are included in separate models. Model 3 shows results in which interest interacts with tone. The interaction is negative, pointing toward the possibility that those with high levels of interest may be less likely to select positive stories. The coefficient is insignificant, however. Model 4 shows results in which interest interacts with topic—Here, the interaction clearly matters. Those with low interest in politics are highly unlikely to select strategic stories (as evidenced by the now-very negative coefficient for topic); those with very high interest are, in contrast, very likely to select strategic stories. The results for model 4 are laid out in more detail in Table 4.

Table 4 repeats what we have already seen in Table 3, though here we show results for low-interest (interest = 0.33, the 10th percentile) and high-interest (interest = 1, the

Table 4. The Estimated Impact of Topic and Tone, by Interest.

	Low Interest		High Interest	
	Policy	Strategy	Policy	Strategy
Negative	.131 (.018)	.057 (.011)	.108 (.017)	.101 (.017)
Neutral	.115 (.008)	.049 (.009)	.095 (.013)	.089 (.014)
Positive	.101 (.015)	.042 (.009)	.083 (.013)	.078 (.014)

Note. Cells contain the estimated probability of story selection (with standard errors in parentheses) based on results for model 4 in Table 2.

90th percentile) participants. Including the effect of political interest serves to strengthen results for tone. This is apparent in the coefficient for tone in Table 2, and it is also clear in these predicted values: the likelihood of story selection decreases as tone increases across all four columns (albeit marginally in some). But the critical result in this table is the gap between policy and strategy stories for low-interest participants, which is very high, and the same gap for high-interest participants, which is very low (indeed, insignificant). Results suggest, then, that is high-interest, not low-interest, participants who are drawn to strategic stories. This finding supports the notion that interest in strategic stories is driven by a rational desire to acquire information.

Our data offer one additional means of exploring what leads participants to select negative and/or horse-race stories. The McGill University campus has a good number of international students, and our study accordingly includes a significant subsample that is not Canadian.[17] Nationality can, in some sense, act as a less nuanced but higher valence measure of political interest. We might well expect non-Canadians to approach our Canadian political news stories differently; put more precisely, we might expect that Canadians see a greater utility in negative and strategy news then do individuals from other countries. As such, we would expect that these categories are viewed relatively more frequently by Canadians.

Models 5 and 6 in Table 2 thus show results from models in which nationality (Canadian = 1) is interacted with both tone and topic. We see from model 5 that the odds ratio for tone—here the result for non-Canadians—approaches one and is not statistically significant, meaning these individuals selected positive and negative news in equal proportions. The result for the interaction—which represents the coefficient for Canadians—reveals that Canadians are increasingly likely to read news articles as they become more negative, with negative articles being 50 percent more likely to be selected than positive articles. Model 6 interacts nationality and topic. The coefficient for topic suggests that non-Canadians are nearly 66 percent more likely to read policy stories over strategy stories. Canadians, on the contrary, are significantly more likely to read strategy stories.

These results for nationality are clearer in Table 5, which shows predicted likelihood of story selection by topic and tone interacted with the nationality of participants. The top panel of Table 5 shows results from the model in which nationality and tone are interacted (model 5). Here, we see the much steeper impact of tone for native

Table 5. The Estimated Impact of Topic and Tone, by Nationality.

	Foreign Participants		Native Participants	
	Policy	Strategy	Policy	Strategy
Nationality × Tone				
Negative	.107 (.017)	.069 (.012)	.128 (.016)	.083 (.011)
Neutral	.110 (.012)	.071 (.009)	.101 (.010)	.065 (.008)
Positive	.112 (.018)	.072 (.013)	.080 (.012)	.051 (.009)
Nationality × Topic				
Negative	.138 (.019)	.066 (.012)	.109 (.014)	.085 (.011)
Neutral	.121 (.015)	.058 (.010)	.095 (.010)	.074 (.009)
Positive	.106 (.015)	.050 (.010)	.083 (.011)	.064 (.010)

Note. Cells contain the estimated probability of story selection (with standard errors in parentheses) based on results for models 5 and 6 in Table 2.

participants. Indeed, tone does not appear to matter at all for foreign participants at all. For native participants, negative stories are selected roughly 50 percent more than positive ones. The bottom panel of Table 5 shows results from the model in which nationality and topic are interacted (model 6). Here, we see the greater likelihood of native participants selecting strategy stories. It is still the case that policy stories are selected more; but the gap between the two narrows considerably—particularly compared with the foreign participants, who select policy stories two to three times more often than strategy ones.

These differences between native and foreign audiences may, again, shed light on what motivates the selection of negative and/or strategic stories. If selection is driven solely by entertainment value, strategic and negative stories should be appealing to people no matter their background. This is not the case: Those with a more direct stake in Canadian politics are drawn to what may be seen as more informative stories.

There are admittedly alternative explanations for the findings in Table 5. Canadians, having had a great deal of exposure to these types of news frames, may be more accustomed to them, and thus demand them. If this is true, however, we might also expect to see significant differences within the Canadian sample for people who consume more or less media. In other words, if attraction to negative and horse-race news is a function of familiarity/exposure, media consumption should affect news selection. Interacting a variable for overall media consumption with both tone and topic of article headlines produces no significant results, however.

Does Behavior Match Preferences?

Recall that previous work finds a disjuncture between what people say they want from media content and what they seem to consume (e.g., Graber 1984; Neuman 1991). Previous work has not been able to compare directly the preferences and behaviors of media consumers, however. This is one advantage of the study conducted here.

We are able to examine the relationship between behavior and preferences using the following questions:

- *Prefs:Neg*—Is the media too negative and cynical about politicians and politics? [strongly agree (0), agree (1), disagree (2), strongly disagree (3)]
- *Prefs:Strategy*—Would you like to see more or less horse-race coverage, that is, coverage focused on polls and political competition? [more coverage (0), the same amount of coverage (1), or less coverage (2)]

The measures are intended to capture stated preferences about both negativity and strategic coverage, respectively. Model 7 in Table 2 includes the direct effect of Prefs:Neg, interacted with tone; the model thus tests for the possibility that those with preferences for more (less) negativity are more (less) prone to selection negative stories. Model 8 in Table 3 includes the direct effect of Prefs:Strategy, interacted with topic; the model thus tests for the possibility that those with preferences for more (less) strategic coverage are more (less) prone to select strategic stories. Neither interaction is statistical significant.[18] Results thus suggest that story selection does not vary with stated preferences: Those who eschew negative stories in survey questions do not avoid them when reading the news, and those who are concerned about too much strategic coverage are no more likely to read policy stories. These findings help make sense of the disjuncture between attitudes and behavior noted in previous work; or, at least, these findings make clear that the disjuncture is not an error—It appears to be an accurate reflection of a gap between preferences and behavior.

Discussion and Conclusion

Why are negative and strategic news frames repeatedly presented in audience-seeking media, given that they do not appear to match the public's stated preferences for news? It has not been the purpose of this article to discount the supply-side explanations prominent in the literature—Journalistic norms and news values almost certainly contribute to the negative nature of news. But our results suggest that consumer demand matters as well.

Understanding the nature of consumer demand is central to understanding the nature of media content; and the fact that surveys find that media consumers want less negative, less strategic stories does not necessarily mean that they actually do. What we need, and what we have tried to extract in the study outlined above, is a measure of actual news selection. Our results suggest that, regardless of their preferences as stated in a survey, participants are more likely to select negative content. The bias toward negative content is greater for politically interested respondents, and politically interested participants are drawn to strategic frames as well.[19]

There are three important caveats. First, we cannot really discount the possibility that highly interested individuals just find negative/strategy frames entertaining, rather than strategically useful.[20] Second, we are looking at a nonelection context, and although we see advantages to exploring news consumption in this more "normal"

environment, doing so may affect levels of interest in strategic versus policy frames. Indeed, the difference between the results of this study and those of Iyengar et al.—implemented during the 2000 U.S. presidential election—may be a function of this shift in context. Third, research has been inconsistent in definitions of horse-race, strategy, and game-schema news frames (see de Vreese 2004), and our (relatively broad) definition of strategic news cannot easily be compared with work using different definitions. Of course, each of these limitations can be addressed with further study.

Note that we do not intend for these results to suggest that it is good that media content is overwhelmingly negative, or strategic, or both. We are agnostic on that issue, although we certainly do not want to use consumer interest as an excuse for the nature of media content. The relationship between demand and supply is almost certainly reciprocal. Media supply what consumers demand, but they likely help shape demand as well. Efforts on the part of journalists to produce more positive, substantive news content may well lead to a shift in consumer behavior. (That seems more likely over the long than the short term, however.)

Perhaps the important distinction is not between positive and negative news, but between news that is negative, and news that is cynical. A media that monitors the error of politicians is a central component of representative democracy. When political communication scholars write about the unhealthy impact of a negative press, then, they are likely not speaking of this error-monitoring role but rather content that unfairly paints politicians as untrustworthy, bad people. Perhaps what is needed is a move toward negative, yet *constructive*, political news. Efforts on the part of journalists to produce a brand of journalism that is line with their role as watchdogs might allow them to hold the attention of citizens, while also avoiding the corrosive effects of political cynicism (see, for example, Mann and Ornstein 1994; Moy and Pfau 2000).

For the time being, we take our findings as evidence of the importance of demand-based accounts of media content. This focus on demand is particularly salient given increasingly competitive media environments, which put pressure on news sources to prioritize stories that increase economic viability, rather than stories chosen for reasons of journalistic integrity (Bennett 2004; Fallows 1996; West 2001; Zaller 1999). The Internet makes the situation even more acute, because it allows for a much greater degree of consumer choice.[21] Online competition for readers may lead to particularly negative and strategic coverage; and readers' own biases in news consumption may lead them to a selection of news that is particularly negative and strategic as well. Again, whether this is a bad thing is another matter—It may be that selecting negative and/or strategic coverage is an efficient way of learning about the state of politics. This is only speculation at this stage, however. What is clear above is that biases in news consumption likely play an important role in the degree to which news content is both negative and strategic.

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Notes

1. For a useful distinction of demand- versus supply-side accounts of media content, see Andrew (2007).
2. The importance of looking outside the United States is made clear in a section "Why?—Supply-Side Explanations."
3. Note that more recent work has critiqued the literature for muddying the definition of strategic coverage: Aalberg et al. (2012) distinguish between the game frame and the strategy frame, for instance. For our purposes, the general definition will suffice, incorporating a combination of Aalberg et al.'s two categories.
4. Eye-tracking need not be a ruse, of course—There is a growing body of work in political communication that relies on eye-tracking. See Bucher and Schumacher (2006).
5. The tone of stories was, for coding, defined very broadly: Negative stories were defined as those in which, overall, the tone is negative; positive stories were defined as those in which, overall, the tone was positive. Stories which coders decided fit in neither of those categories were coded neutral. The three coders' results were highly correlated, with an alpha of .81.
6. Policy stories are those that discuss the policies and policy proposals of government or opposition members in an in-depth way. They do not focus on competition but rather on the substance of policies. Strategy stories, in contrast, discuss politics and policies as a "game" with winners and losers, or emphasize the political conflict element in a given situation. They often include current poll numbers, or discuss how politics and policies affect future poll numbers. Policy-strategy codes from the three coders were highly correlated with an alpha score of .86.
7. There are no instances here in which codes range from negative to positive, just negative/neutral and positive/neutral.
8. For a list of article headlines and corresponding codes, see the online appendix.
9. Students were recruited using posters around campus; the resulting sample included students from most Faculties, that is, not just in arts or political science. The entire study was conducted in English, with Anglophone students.
10. Also see Note 20.
11. The full text of the briefing is including in the online appendix.
12. Put another way, the objective here should not be viewed as achieving "mundane realism" but "experimental realism." See McDermott (2002).
13. Preliminary models included an interaction between column and row to test for the possibility that the two had an interactive rather than just an additive effect. The interaction was not statistically significant, and so it is not included here.
14. The varied reading time for participants was included as one possible test of the possibility that the selection of negative or strategic content is rooted not just in the "entertainment value" of these stories but in a (likely subconscious) belief that these stories are of greater value where becoming informed about politics is concerned. Our expectation was that when respondents knew how much time they had to read, they might choose stories more strategically. This was not the case, however—There is no interaction between time and a tendency to select either negative or strategy-oriented headlines.

15. Note that a more stringent approach is to use a cross-nested hierarchical model, allowing for heteroskedasticity both within respondents and within stories. Results do not change dramatically when we shift to that more complex estimation, though the statistical significance of story-level factors is of course reduced when we estimate 111 (respondents) times 30 (stories) random effects. We accordingly rely on the simpler model here; but all results are available upon request.
16. Note that Tables 3 through 5 show estimated probabilities of story selection rather than marginal effects coefficients, which illustrate the effect variables more directly. Estimated probabilities take into account both the direct and interactive effects of variables, exactly as an analysis of marginal effects coefficients would, of course—See Brambor et al. (2006) for a particularly valuable discussion of the interpretation of interaction models. We focus here on the estimated probability of story selection because we view it as a more substantively interesting quantity in this particular case; and the statistical significance of the interactions is captured in Table 3.
17. The other countries represented are as follows (*n* in brackets): Albania (1), Bangladesh (1), China (2), France (10), India (1), Pakistan (1), Sri Lanka (1), Trinidad and Tobago (1), the United States (18), and the United Kingdom (1).
18. Results do not change when the two interactions are included simultaneously.
19. Considering that low-interest individuals are those who self-select out of "hard" news anyways (see, for example, Prior 2007), the selections (i.e., demand) of higher interest individuals are therefore far more important in determining the makeup of news content.
20. Note also that to the extent that our student sample is more interested in politics than the average news consumer, our results may over-state the negativity bias—That is, completely disinterested news consumers may not exhibit the negativity bias found here. That said, news consumers are by definition at least party interested. And given that our student sample was drawn from outside political science, we have no reason to believe that our sample was unusually interested in politics.
21. There is of course a growing body of work on how increasing choice in media affects what people learn about politics. See, for example, Mutz and Martin (2001), Negroponte (1995), Prior (2005, 2007), and Sunstein (2007).

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