



# But her emails! How journalistic preferences shaped election coverage in 2016

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## Abstract

While existing work explains how journalists use news values to select some stories over others, we know little about how stories that meet newsworthiness criteria are prioritized. Once stories are deemed newsworthy, how do journalists calculate their relative utility? Such an ordering of preferences is important as higher ranked stories receive more media attention. To better understand how stories are ordered once they are selected, we propose a model for *rational journalistic preferences* which describes how journalists rank stories by making cost-benefit analyses. When faced with competing newsworthy stories, such as in an election context, the model can generate expectations regarding news coverage patterns. To illustrate model utility, we draw on a unique case – the US 2016 presidential election – to explain how reporters order newsworthy stories (e.g. scandal and the horse race) by observing changes in the volume. Our content data captures coverage featuring Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump on major broadcast and cable networks over 31 weeks. We find that the *rational journalistic preference model* explains the imbalance of scandal coverage between the two candidates and the dominance of horse race coverage. In 2016, such preferences may have inadvertently contributed to a balance of news stories that favored Trump.

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Work on gatekeeping describes a process by which reporters and editors make decisions regarding a range of possible stories based on characteristics such as newsworthiness and expense. This selection process is shaped by news routines, economic incentives, and professional practices. When journalists are situated in the competitive contexts in which they operate, we can examine how institutional constraints explain trends in news coverage. For example, journalists' preference for negative news stories can be explained by both audience demand and professionalization practices which emphasize news values in story selection.

These same institutional forces are evident in feeding frenzies, or news media's tendency to cover the same story. This occurs because journalists use news values to guide coverage choices and the cost of breaking a story is subsidized by a few outlets. As a result, research in this area explains aggregate news coverage as the product of journalists making news decisions constrained by newsroom norms and incentivized by market and professional considerations. These models conceptualize news coverage as a series of binary choice, to cover stories or not. Such an approach allows us to understand why some stories get covered over others. But what happens once a story is selected? Some stories inevitably receive more media attention than others, and calculations of costs and benefits shape journalists' preferences. However, we know little about how stories that are deemed newsworthy are prioritized in coverage. This gap is consequential as, once selected, journalists accord differential rates of attention to stories. We ask, *how do journalists order newsworthy stories?* We argue that *coverage priorities* influence the public's shared agenda and, unlike previous work which tells us why stories make it to the news agenda, this study contributes to our understanding of how patterns of aggregate news coverage reflect journalists' priorities.

To better understand how the news is shaped by ranking, we first review work on news values and media institutions. The literature motivates a model of *rational journalistic preferences* that depicts journalists as assigning preference to a set of potential stories based on their relative utility, prioritizing those that maximize newsworthiness criterion given limited resources. The result is a perspective of the gatekeeping process that moves beyond a distribution function to the ways information *preferences* manifest in news coverage.

We test this model using the 2016 presidential election, in which we explain how reporters order newsworthy stories by observing levels of coverage devoted to types of stories. Our data are weekly coverage measures featuring Clinton or Trump on Fox News, NBC, CBS, CNN, and ABC collected across 31 weeks during the 2016 presidential election. We find that the *rational journalistic preferences model* explains the imbalance of scandal coverage between the two candidates. Moreover, the model sheds light on the ways horse race coverage, because of its lower cost, dominates coverage regardless of the potential professional benefits to scandal coverage.

## **Institutional origins of news values**

Public perceptions of news are disconnected from scholars' characterization of news-making. Conventional wisdom places individual reporter biases at the forefront. For example, Silver (2017) alleged groupthink caused reporters to miss the potential for a Trump presidential victory, citing data (Willnat and Weaver, 2014) that shows 7 percent of journalists identify as Republicans. The implication of such accounts is that journalists' preferences drive news selection processes. In contrast, research on news selection, called gatekeeping (Stacks and Salwen, 2014), characterizes the process as a series of decisions in which various considerations (Lewin, 1947) guide evaluation of a story and the decision to publish or not (White, 1950). These considerations include institutional constraints (Boydston, 2013) and reflect the work of news routines (Tuchman, 1972), economic incentives (Hamilton, 2004), and professional practices (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). In this way, we can think of the news as evidence of broad trends in selection, rather than the culmination of individual preferences (Soroka, 2012).

Supply-side considerations such as news values are key (Gans, 1979). Reporters rely on news values – or newsworthiness criteria – to help them sort through an infinite supply of stories and make coverage decisions (Bridges and Bridges, 1997). Galtung and Ruge (1965) set forth a typology of news values, including timeliness and unexpectedness. Recently, scholars have added additional values such as scandal (MacShane, 1979) and bad news (Harcup and O'Neill, 2001) to the list of news values. This preference for negative news may be related to the surveillance function of news in which people pay attention to unusual elements in their environment to detect potential threats (Lasswell, 1966). Thus, deviant events are more newsworthy (Shoemaker, 1996).

News values are learned in journalism schools, where such norms assist aspiring reporters in suppressing their own biases (Schudson, 1978). This process continues through newsroom socialization (Willig, 2013), as students often work on campus newspapers or in internships where they internalize professional norms (Singer, 2004). The socialization continues when reporters join the industry and observe senior journalists' selections (Gravengaard and Rimestad, 2012). The process of recruitment, retention, and promotions for journalists who adhere to standard newsroom practices further incentivizes reporters to use standard news values. For rank-and-file journalists, it is these professional, rather than personal, values that guide their decision-making (Shoemaker and Vos, 1996). We observe differences between elite rhetoric and news coverage because journalists are guided by news values more than sources (Groeling and Baum, 2009). At every stage, journalists are socialized to elevate news values over their own preferences and these beliefs become a routinized part of newsmaking (Tuchman, 1972).

Imbued in news values are professional, personal, and economic considerations that shape news-generating processes (Boydston, 2013). Scholars as early as Lippmann (1922) cautioned against focusing on individual news judgments, urging observers to focus on routines. Indeed, an early critique of White's (1950) urged researchers to consider the broader context in which news is processed (Gieber, 1964). With a renewed interest in institutions, media scholars elevated the role of routine forces, like news gathering and editing, over individuals (Zelizer, 1993). For example, the process of revision is seen both as quality control and safeguard against the influence of personal biases.

Similarly, the selection of sources is largely shaped by deadlines and accessibility (Powers and Fico, 1994). Shoemaker and colleagues (2001) found that newsroom routines for judging newsworthiness explain the disproportionate coverage of Congressional bills more than the characteristics of journalists. And the tendency for journalists to cover deviant events is institutionalized in newsmaking as the audience, hard-wired to pay attention to unusual events, incentivize such coverage (Lamberson and Soroka, 2018; Shoemaker, 1996).

While there are professional reasons to suppress biases, there are also economic incentives. Reporters seek to capture the largest possible market share, resulting in coverage that reflects their audience's preferences more than their own (Mullainathan and Shleifer, 2005). For example, partisan news outlets are more likely to cover polls that show their preferred candidate in the lead (Searles et al., 2016). In this way, the news values that shape journalistic decision-making reflect professional, personal, and economic incentives.

## Journalistic decision-making

The goals of news organizations are diminishing the biases of journalists and increasing their market shares. In this way, media outlets institutionalize routines that incent professional and market considerations in efforts to compete for audience attention (Sparrow, 1999). As the marketplace is increasingly crowded by entertainment options (Prior, 2007), vulnerable outlets are more responsive to market pressures (Hamilton, 2004). One of the ways this manifest is with negative news (Smith and Searles, 2014). Both news values, which privilege negativity and conflict (Patterson, 1994), and audience demand (Trussler and Soroka, 2014) incent negative stories. Negative stories satisfy institutional market goals *and* professional norms.

The same news values that warrant coverage of negative stories also incentivize a topical focus on scandals, motivated by the promise of reputational benefits and audience interest. Scandal coverage is perhaps even more promising than negative coverage *because* media play a key role in coproduction of the transgression, which requires coverage to rise to the level of public awareness to be accorded the 'scandal' descriptor (Waisbord, 2004). Scandal coverage is more likely when an indiscretion is politicized as the ensuing back-and-forth between party elites affords reporters the requisite content to report on the event while maintaining objectivity (Tuchman, 1972). This is particularly true when the opposition party is vociferous (Nyhan, 2017).

Generally, campaign coverage is also dominated by the horse race (Farnsworth and Lichter, 2005), which for the purposes of this article we define as the discussion of campaign strategies, polls, public opinion, personality traits, and candidate style (Graber, 2002). This type of coverage is advantageous to journalists as it is of interest to consumers (Iyengar et al., 2004) while also meeting professional norms of objectivity and timeliness (Crespi, 1980). Characteristics of this coverage, such as use of the language of war and sport, constancy, and the limited resources required to produce it (Singer, 2004), make it appealing.

Greater emphasis of horse race coverage leads to less issue coverage, or news that focuses on public affairs. This is driven in part by greater competition, which has

harmful legacy news outlets while elevating the influence of commercial logic on journalistic decision-making (Hamilton, 2004). Issue coverage is thus increasingly crowded out in favor of topics more likely to interest audiences (Patterson, 1994). Indeed, Farnsworth and Lichter (2005) found that coverage in the wake of the 2000 election was more likely to be issue-focused only because there was no longer a horse race to report. Issues typically lack the novelty and timeliness of the horse race. As a result, when given the option of commercially appealing news, journalists are unlikely to cover public affairs (Zaller, 1999).

This view elevates the role of institutions in newswork by drawing on neo-institutionalist theories in political communication to shed light on media gatekeeping (Sparrow, 1999). After situating journalists in such competitive contexts, economic and newsroom incentives explain journalist's selections and ultimately, the news (Semetko, 1991). However, such perspectives focus on binary decisions to cover a story or not, neglecting the role of preference in ordering story alternatives. We address this gap with the *rational journalistic preferences model*.

## The rational journalistic preferences model

Our goal is to pose a model that formalizes the effects of strategic journalists' preferences on news coverage. We rely on rational choice theory, a descriptive paradigm for decision-making under uncertainty characterized by the calibration and ranking of a set of choices in order of their highest expected utility (Riker, 1995). Rational choice theory allows us to specify a set of assumptions regarding journalistic decision-making and then generate expectations for news coverage in a context characterized by competitive news values, such as an election. Seeing journalists this way – as goal-oriented – permits us to evaluate the news as the product of many strategic journalistic decisions (Zaller, 1999). Rational choice theory can provide the link between individual journalist's decisions and institutions (Fengler and Ruß-Mohl, 2008).

Rational choice theory also tells us that, given a set of newsworthy stories, journalists' goals for coverage reflect preferences that are both complete and transitive. Here, goals are motivated by costs (time, resources, effort) and benefits (professional, economic). This is not to say that journalists are completely rational actors (Patterson and Donsbach, 1996), just that a rational choice framework can explain the effects of journalists' decisions in the aggregate. Journalists are motivated to maximize professional and economic benefits like attention for their work and minimize the associated costs like time. Even though journalists may be influenced by nonmaterial benefits, like influencing public discourse, their decision-making is still self-interested (Zaller, 1999). We assume that this ordering of preferences affects the rational journalists' actions (Riker and Ordeshook, 1968), which allows us to explain aggregate patterns of news coverage as the product of journalists making strategic decisions, motivated by costs and benefits, regarding their story preferences. In sum, we can depict journalists as assigning relative utility to a set of possible stories, using these expected utility calculations to order those stories, and then attending to each story in accordance with their ranking.

To illustrate these assumptions, we posit that, given story choice set  $S(x, y, z)$ , in which  $S$  contains a range of story types known to the journalist, that for each pair of choices  $(xy)$

$xz$   $yz$ ) the journalist has a preference or is indifferent. This represents *completeness*. If the journalist prefers  $x$  to  $y$  and  $y$  to  $z$ , then she prefers  $x$  to  $z$ . This is *transitivity*. Given preference as a measure of utility, we can posit that the journalist will use these expected utilities  $U$  to rank each story and prioritize resources accordingly.<sup>1</sup> As a consequence, we can look to story rankings to predict news coverage in competitive news contexts.

We can further illustrate this model by setting forth a formula for a journalist's expected relative utility for a story  $U$ , including the benefit she receives for doing a story  $B$ , and  $C$  is the costs associated with doing the story. Given  $x$

$$U_x = B - C$$

We can likewise generate  $U$  for  $y$  and  $z$ , and given our assumptions we know that if  $U$  for story  $x$  is larger than  $U$  for story  $y$  which is larger than  $U$  for story  $z$ , then we can expect  $x$  to be ordered ahead of  $y$ , both of which are ranked ahead of  $z$ . Accordingly, after generating  $U_x$ ,  $U_y$ , and  $U_z$  we can order stories using relative journalistic preferences and generate predictions regarding news coverage.

Given some guidance from the literature on the various considerations that shape horse race, scandal, and issue coverage, we can generate a hypothetical  $B$  and  $C$  for  $S$  where  $x$  is horse race,  $y$  is scandal, and  $z$  is issue, to calculate  $U$ . Recall that we define benefits as including professional and economic rewards, and costs as including time, effort, and resources. For example, we can postulate that the relative benefit of a horse race story is more than the benefit of a scandal story given that audience interest increases the potential for both economic and professional rewards. We further expect that the benefit generated by scandal stories is greater than the benefit produced by issue stories because people are more likely to engage with matters that are controversial (Entman, 2012), increasing the relative potential for economic and professional rewards. Issue coverage, on the other hand, is the least preferred story in a competitive context in which the audience demonstrates little demand (McManus, 1994). Thus, we can reasonably assert that

$$B_x > B_y > B_z$$

Concordantly, based on what we know of newsroom norms and constraints, we can postulate that a scandal story is costlier, given the investigative resources and time required to pursue the story, than an issue story. In fact, the costs of covering scandals is often blamed for the underproduction of such stories despite their potential value (Hamilton, 2004). Moreover, both story types are costlier than a horse race story, which is heavily subsidized by outlet investment in polling and the oversupply of campaign content. Thus

$$C_y > C_z > C_x$$

For the sake of illustration, we can assign a score of 3, 2, and 1 to  $B$  and  $C$  for  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $z$  based on their order in the sequence. Then we can write:  $B_x = 3$ ,  $B_y = 2$ ,  $B_z = 1$  and  $C_y = 3$ ,  $C_z = 2$ ,  $C_x = 1$ . If we then use our formula for a story's expected utility,  $U$ , we get

$$U_x = 2$$

$$U_y = -1$$

$$U_z = -1$$

If preferences are complete and transitive ( $U_x > U_y$ ,  $U_y \sim U_z$ ,  $U_x > U_z$ ) we can use  $U$  to rank  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $z$  such that

$$x > y \sim z$$

In other words, given calculations of relative expected utility, a rational journalist will rank a horse race story first and has weak preferences between scandal and issue stories. The implication of this abstraction is that journalists faced with a set of newsworthy stories will prioritize the horse race and display indifference between scandal and issue stories.

The weak preference exhibited between scandal and issue stories is in part a product of the relatively low cost of covering the horse race. While optimal for journalists, the relative expected utility for this set of stories may not benefit audiences. For most elections, the value of media attention to a horse race story is attenuated over-time as voters make up their minds about candidates (Cushion and Thomas, 2018). On the other hand, a scandal story, given the stakes, is more likely to affect voters. This was likely true in 2016 when the horse race was capturing more noise than signal due to overreliance on forecasting models (Westwood et al., 2018). The result may be a mismatch between a rational journalist's priorities and the stories important to the public. Indeed, the only way to decrease the ranking of horse race stories given model specifications is to increase the benefit of an issue story relative to a horse race story, an unlikely scenario. Here, the distance between rational journalistic preferences and optimal coverage for the public is the market, not journalist's biases. Thus, adherence to journalistic doxa may be described as a tradeoff between depressing individual biases while elevating market biases.

The weak preference between scandal and issue stories means that the agency of individual journalists is important. Much of journalists' agency in the market for information is their ability to withhold information – by choosing not to cover a story – an iterative tendency that has a cumulative effect. If, during a given election, a rational journalist, having weak preferences between a scandal and issue story, chooses not to cover scandal more than issues over and over again, we can expect those choices to be consequential over time. This preference ordering also suggests that a coordinated opposition (Nyhan, 2017) may be able to successfully motivate a journalist not to cover the in-party scandal.

But this context dependence also means that the relative expected utility of each story is likely sensitive to features of the reporting environment, such as an election with a strong front-runner. Specifically, given the media's preference for covering front-runners, we might expect the costs for stories of the leading candidate to change over time

as some of that cost is defrayed by previous coverage of the front-runner (Zaller, 1999). Hamilton (2004) notes that the costs of learning about emerging scandals tips expected utility toward continuous coverage of well-known scandals, as was likely the case with ‘email-gate’ in 2016. In this way, a front-runner who has held a consistent lead effectively permits news outlets to subsidize future scandal coverage with previous investigative costs. Other institutional accounts of media attention suggest a similar focus on the front-runner (Boydston, 2013), particularly for scandal coverage, the dynamics of which are replicative rather than reflective (Entman, 2012). Because calculations are candidate-specific, this shift in relative costs applies only to coverage of the front-runner, not the trailing candidate. Given a strong front-runner, we would expect

$$C_z > C_y > C_x$$

If we assign scores based on these relative costs but where the relative benefits remain the same, then we can write:  $B_x = 3$ ,  $B_y = 2$ ,  $B_z = 1$  and  $C_z = 3$ ,  $C_y = 2$ ,  $C_x = 1$ . We can then again use the formula to derive  $U$

$$U_x = 2$$

$$U_y = 0$$

$$U_z = -2$$

Which we can then lend an order to using  $U$  for stories of the front-runner, such that

$$x > y > z$$

Given the known story set  $S$  and media environment are context-dependent, this abstraction represents a generalization that can be revised given varying circumstances. The salient feature of the reporting environment varied is presence of a strong electoral front-runner. In these conditions, using these simple calculations of utility, we expect rational journalists to rank a horse race story first, scandal second, and issue stories third. The implication is that rational journalists should prioritize the horse race when covering a front-runner. Even if the journalistic benefit of a scandal story is also increased relative to horse race and issue coverage, the low cost of the horse race means that it remains a priority in the ordering of stories. In fact, the only way to change this calculus is to *also* increase the value of issue coverage relative to the horse race, again a situation unlikely in the real world.

Rather than seeing the journalist as engaging in iterative decision-making to cover a story or not, this model characterizes journalists as having multiple goals ordered relatively. Aside from illustrating how journalistic preferences might manifest in news coverage, this model also captures the sort of decision-making journalists engage in during an election when many stories are newsworthy. Given the assumption that the order of story goals reflects journalist’s calculations of relative expected utility, we can conclude



that the preferences of a rational journalist are exhibited by the relative volume of newsworthy stories. We can look to the distribution of stories produced during campaigns to see whether these *rational journalistic preferences* manifest.

## Empirical test of the rational journalistic preferences model

The model articulated above formalizes our argument that differences in the relative volume of newsworthy stories can be attributed to journalistic preferences, which are ultimately derived from cost-benefit analyses. A focus on the role journalists play in this framework recognizes their increasing agency in agenda-setting (Cushion, 2015). Using the 2016 presidential general election as a case in which Clinton was a strong front-runner and Trump was consistently trailing, and given a story choice set that includes horse race, scandal, and issue stories, we can generate three hypotheses:<sup>2</sup>

*H1.* Journalists will devote more coverage of the trailing candidate to stories about the horse race than to stories about scandals or issues.

*H2.* Journalists will devote more coverage of the front-runner to stories about the horse race than to stories about scandal.

*H3.* Journalists will devote more coverage of the front-runner to stories about scandal than to stories about issues.

## Data and methods

We test this model using weekly television news content from ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, and Fox News, collected by Media Tenor, a firm that specializes in coding news content, during the 2016 presidential election. The content is discussion of the two major party presidential candidates: Democrat Clinton and Republican Trump, coded separately. Media Tenor collected CBS, NBC, and Fox News broadcasts from 4 April 2016 to 6 November 2016. Data from ABC and CNN were collected from 18 July 2016 to 6 November 2016. These data cover the entirety of broadcast candidate stories aired during the general election and part of the primary election phase of the campaign for a total of 31 weeks. A story meets the standards for inclusion if more than five seconds of coverage discusses a candidate. We focus on television news as it was the dominant source for information during the 2016 election (Gottfried, 2016) and is noted for its agenda-setting function when it comes to scandal coverage (Entman, 2012).

Full-time employees trained by Media Tenor visually evaluated content, coding candidate stories every 15 seconds by outlet, candidate, and dominant topic. Topics are assigned using an internal set of codes indicating the focus of discussion such as, 'public opinion'. Each of these units of observation are then collapsed within outlet by week and given a proportion score indicating, for example, how much Clinton coverage on ABC was dominated by 'public opinion' that week. The unit of analysis is the proportion of topic coverage by candidate-week ( $N = 1280$ ).

Often studies using Media Tenor data stop at this stage and analyze the content of those topics that dominated coverage (e.g. 0.5% of coverage, Patterson, 2016). However, as we are interested in the volume of coverage by story type, we examine the range of topics for inclusion in the three broad story categories of interest: scandal, horse race, and issue coverage. In consultation with Media Tenor, we developed a codebook which operationalized each of the three categories of news coverage.<sup>3</sup> Content is defined as focusing on scandal if it includes a discussion of some kind of ethical transgression that violates ethical norms or an attempt to cover up such behavior, for example, discussion of the Clinton email server. Horse race coverage draws on the typology of game and strategy frame coverage developed by Aarlbeg and colleagues (2012), including discussion of candidate standings, campaign style and operations, personality traits, strategies, and tactics. Content about the candidates that did not fall under either of these topics was coded as an issue. An alternative labeling of this category might be ‘other’ as it includes all topic codes not subsumed by scandal or horse race coverage. However, the topic codes included in this category often refer explicitly to policy and are better characterized as issues, for example, domestic policy.

Next, two coders were trained using this codebook to categorize a sample of proportions over the course of several meetings. Each coder then independently categorized the universe of proportions, producing substantial agreement.<sup>4</sup> For each observation producing disagreement, one of the authors adjudicated between the two coders using additional information search. Of these observations, 290 were categorized as issue, 739 were categorized as horse race, and 251 were categorized as scandal coverage.

After each proportion is assigned a story type category, we are left with a sample of candidate-outlet proportions of scandal, horse race, or issue coverage by week. We collapse these data across media outlets such that we have weekly measures of the overall proportion of coverage devoted to scandals, the horse race, and issues ( $N = 31$ ).

## Results

Recall our model suggests journalistic preference manifests in coverage via a focus on the trailing candidate’s horse race, with a weak preference for scandal or issue stories. Using the 2016 election as a case in which Trump was the trailing candidate, our first hypothesis formalizes this set of preferences, such that we expect journalists will devote more coverage to Trump’s horse race over scandal or issues (H1). Similarly, our model suggests that the front-runner – Clinton – should receive more horse race coverage than scandal coverage (H2), and more scandal coverage than issue coverage (H3).

We plot these data over time in Figure 1, which suggests that coverage of both candidates tends to focus on the horse race to a much greater extent than scandal or issues, offering initial support for H1 and H2. But whether scandal coverage is prioritized over issue coverage based on front-runner status, as suggested by H3, is difficult to discern from the plot. This pattern is made clearer when we calculate and plot the weekly mean proportion of coverage by topic and candidate in Figure 2. The average weekly proportion of coverage devoted to scandals is about 0.08 higher for Clinton than it is for Trump ( $t = 2.14$ ,  $p \leq 0.05$ ). Overall, news organizations devoted significantly more attention to scandals week-to-week than to issues for Clinton and the reverse for Trump, lending support to H3.

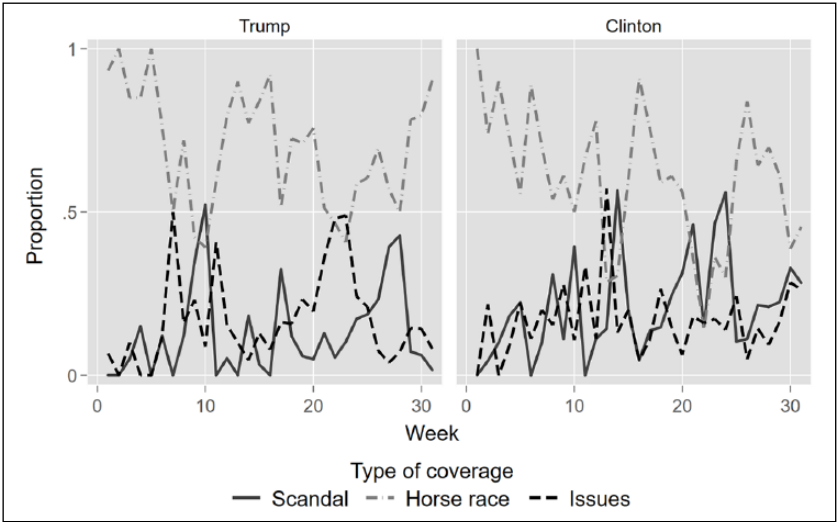


Figure 1. Type of coverage across all media outlets by candidate.

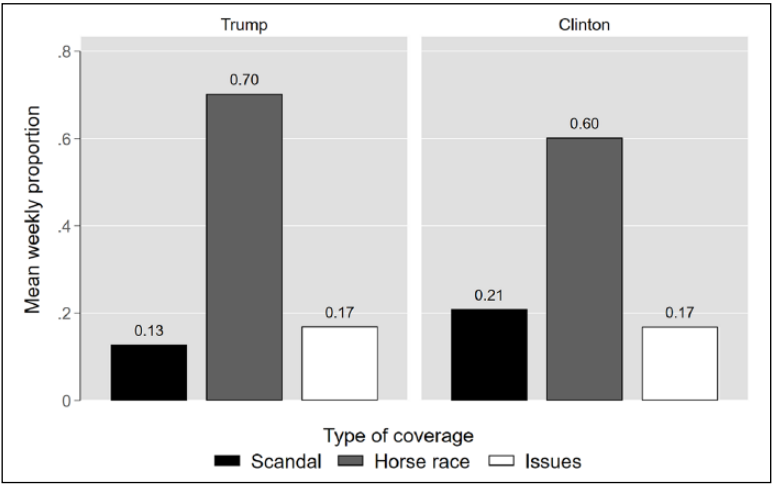
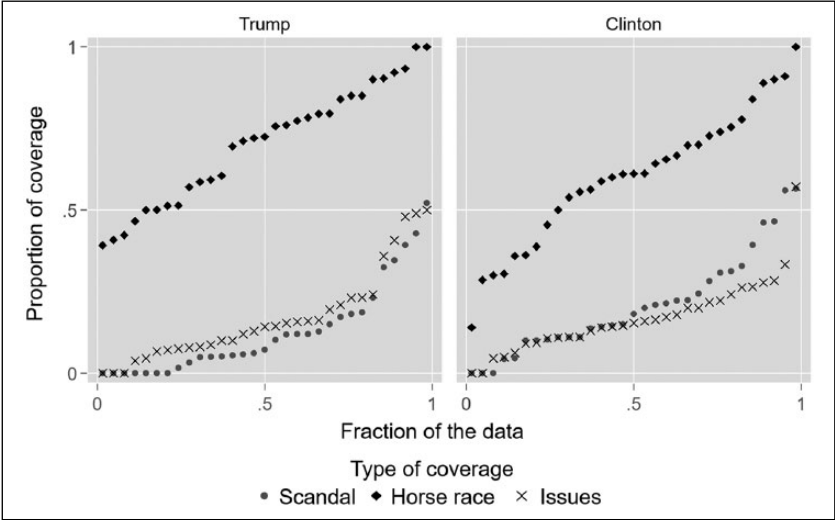


Figure 2. Mean levels of weekly coverage type by candidate.

Next, we test the degree to which the media focus on these three topics when discussing each candidate. As H1 suggests, the average weekly proportion of Trump coverage focusing on the horse race is 0.57 ( $t = 10.98, p \leq 0.05$ ) units higher than coverage of scandals and 0.53 ( $t = 10.14, p \leq 0.05$ ) units higher relative to coverage of issues. These differences are large and substantively meaningful; as the model predicts, journalists' preferences appear to manifest in coverage that prioritizes the horse race over scandal or issue stories for trailing candidates. In line with H2, we also observe that the



**Figure 3.** Quantile plot of weekly coverage for Trump and Clinton.

average weekly proportion of Clinton coverage focusing on the horse race is 0.39 ( $t = 6.52, p \leq 0.05$ ) units higher than average weekly coverage of scandals. As a result, we see that news media devoted significantly more Clinton coverage to the horse race than to her scandals. Given journalists’ priorities, we also expect Clinton’s weekly coverage to focus more on scandal than issues on average, which it does by 0.04 units, though this difference is statistically insignificant ( $t = 1.14, p = 0.13$ ).

To gain more clarity, we compare the distribution of story types. To do this, we use a quantile plot, a superior approach to comparing distributions as it does not require the arbitrary assignment of bins and is more detailed than comparing means. Figure 3 plots the quantiles for each set of story types by candidate. As this provides an estimate of the proportion of data less than or equal to a given value (Cox, 2005), both the y-axis position and slope of each series tell us something about journalistic preferences. First, we see that horse race coverage receives more attention from journalists for both candidates, as H1 and H2 predict. Second, the slope and y-axis position of scandal and issue coverage also tells us something about journalistic preferences by front-runner status, as scandal coverage is steeper and generally positioned higher than issue coverage for Clinton, while the same is not true for Trump. This echoes H3, which posits that scandal coverage of the front-runner receives more media attention relative to issue coverage. However, there is also some overlap of the quantile plot for Clinton between the scandal and issue series, which suggests that reporters may have given issues similar to levels of attention as scandals, but issues were never given more attention than scandals. The distributions make clear that there are differences in how reporters prioritize stories for the front-runner and trailing candidate, with a definitive preference for the horse race regardless of candidate status and a stronger preference for scandal over issue stories when the candidate is a front-runner.

## Discussion

The data suggest that – as predicted by H1 and H2 – journalists will cover a trailing candidate like Trump's horse race more than issues and scandals and will cover a front-runner like Clinton's horse race more than scandals. Looking at the data over time as well as the average weekly proportion of coverage, we find this to be the case with reporters covering the horse race significantly more than issues or scandals for both candidates. These findings are congruent with our model of *rational journalistic preferences*, which argues that journalists order their preference for the horse race over other stories like scandal and issues, regardless of a candidate's status, as part of their utility calculations.

While the evidence is more mixed on H3, overall we find that news organizations covered Clinton's scandals more than Trump's. We find that coverage of Clinton's scandals is significantly higher than coverage of Trump's scandals. While we observe the expected pattern in levels of scandal and issue coverage of Clinton, this difference fails to achieve traditional levels of statistical significance. When we look at the distribution of story type by candidate, we see a stronger preference for Clinton scandal coverage relative to issue coverage. What is clear from these results is that reporters covered Trump and Clinton differently and as a result, more attention was accorded to Clinton's scandals. This result is in line with our model's predictions, which posit that a front-runner like Clinton facilitates differential cost-benefit analyses for investing in scandal coverage.

While some have blamed media tendency toward false equivalency for 2016 scandal coverage, this proclivity does not explain why Clinton received significantly more scandal coverage than Trump. Our model offers an explanation: preferential ordering for a subset of stories based on journalists' cost-benefit analyses. Regardless, these results suggest that the balance of scandal coverage may have benefited Trump by emphasizing Clinton's transgressions.

## Conclusion

A rich literature on gatekeeping has focused on selection choices, affording a better understanding of what stories make the news and what stories do not. However, news-making is more than a series of binary choices. Indeed, we argue that a complete understanding of journalistic decision-making includes the ordering of preferences, in which journalists calculate the relative utility of a subset of newsworthy stories. By assigning relative utility to stories, journalists make strategic decisions about coverage. As a result, we can draw on our understanding of the institutions that shape news routines to uncover the ways journalistic priorities manifest in aggregate patterns of news coverage.

We formalize this argument in a model of *rational journalistic preferences* and generate expectations to examine coverage of the 2016 US presidential election. This model affords us the opportunity to understand why some stories receive more airtime relative to other newsworthy stories. Previous work cannot tell us how stories are ordered once they meet newsworthiness criterion. This represents our primary contribution as it permits us to better understand how journalistic preferences manifest in differences between coverage volume for a set of newsworthy stories.

We leverage rational choice theory to better understand the strategic behaviors of journalists. To this end, we find evidence that both major party candidates received more horse race coverage than coverage of either scandals or issues. We also find that coverage of the front-runner, Clinton, focused more on scandals than on issues, resulting in significantly more scandal coverage for Clinton than Trump. Our model explains this difference in relative proportional coverage: we argue that this pattern of news coverage reflects a second-order preference for covering front-runner's scandals, given the investigative costs associated with learning about emerging scandals of the trailing candidate. These results may surprise critics who suggest that the liberal inclinations of American journalists result in electoral coverage that benefits Democrats. However, this differential preference for scandal coverage based on candidate standing supports work, which finds that the media have a difficult time calibrating their attention to the gravity of ethical transgressions (Entman, 2012).

Overall, our results support the idea that journalistic decision-making is rational *and* exhibits preferences. Altogether, this understanding of journalistic decision-making moves beyond explaining the issues that make the agenda, to describing how the amount of coverage for valuable stories falls into consistent patterns with relevance for our politics. This not only helps us to better explain differences in media attention to types of stories but, as we show in this paper, there can be high-stakes consequences to ordering one type of story over another. Ultimately, incorporating journalistic preference into our portrayals of news coverage lends one additional way to observe who gets what, when, and how (Lasswell, 1966).

However, if we agree that the news media should help the public hold politicians accountable and that the public requires scandal coverage of both the front-runner and trailing candidate to make informed choices (Entman, 2012), it seems that journalistic preferences in 2016 – however rational – reflect a professional failure to deliver relevant information. While balancing professional miscarriages against commercial logic is unrealistic (McManus, 1994), at the very least our results suggest further scrutiny of the esoteric nature of journalistic routines is needed (Carlson, 2017).

While our focus on the US case is a limitation, our model of *rational journalistic preference* can be applied to other contexts. For example, future research might examine journalistic behavior in the coverage of other elections, at different levels, and in other countries. Indeed, to better understand whether the mixed evidence on journalistic preferences for scandal over issues for front-runners is related to estimate precision or a true null relationship, additional case studies are needed to test this model. Expanding the number of cases that our theory is tested on is also important due to the atypical nature of Trump as a presidential candidate. Doubts regarding his viability likely reinforced journalists' weak preferences for Trump scandal and issue coverage. A more serious candidate may have been accorded more investigative resources, resulting in a smaller gap in the relative volume of front-runner and trailing candidate scandal coverage. However, presumably a more typical candidate would have fewer scandals to cover. Indeed, few candidates have afforded the media as many opportunities to cover scandals.

Our results also have implications beyond the study of media. Questions of journalistic bias are driven by an interest, more broadly, in the way institutions establish processes and norms to improve information flows (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). This interest is in

part driven by the importance that these institutions appear neutral for the functioning of democracy. Through journalism school training and newsroom routines, media creates the conditions for optimal news output; but as our results suggest, even journalistic decisions reflecting rational preferences may lead to biased outcomes.

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**Notes**

1. We do not assume that these are all the newsworthy stories, merely that these are known choices that can be ordered. Nor do we assume that the journalist knows how to achieve her goals (e.g. instrumental accuracy), but that she believes she knows how to do so.
2. According to RealClear Politics polling aggregates, Trump led Clinton in popular support on five days over the general election cycle.
3. Procedures: Assign a category code to the ‘Topic’ in each of the rows in the spreadsheet. Mark each row 0 if the item in topic can be classified as issue, 1 if horse race, and 2 if scandal. Use notes below. The row provided below provides an example:
  - Issue (0) = Coverage of issues includes any topic that is not scandal OR horse race. For example, Media Tenor code: economic policy.
  - Horse Race (1) = Coverage of the horse race encapsulates what is also referred to as game and strategy frame. Use the following definitions from Aalberg et al. (2012), ‘This type of news coverage has a strong focus on winners and losers and is typically related to opinion polls and election outcomes. Quite often these news stories also involve a language of war or games to describe the campaign ... it offers a more indirect form of strategic information (p. 167)’ and ‘... the journalistic focus on a candidate or a party’s motives for taking a particular policy stand. Stories containing this element directly imply that political actors are primarily interested in garnering votes ... including personality and style, motives and instrumental actions ... also stress that internal or external conflicts and relations are important ... also reflective coverage of the media (metacoverage)’ (p. 168). For example, Media Tenor code: electoral campaign.
  - Scandal (2) = Coverage of scandal can be defined as discussion of an ethical transgression which has been constructed as violating ethnical norms. Often involves an accusation of wrong-doing, whether illegal or immoral. For example, Media Tenor code: scandals.

Date	Candidate (0 = Trump, 1 = Clinton)	Outlet (0 = CBS, 1 = NBC, 2 = Fox, 3 = ABC, 4 = CNN)	Media Tenor Code	Category
31 July 2016	1	2	Scandal	2

4. A priori we set a threshold of .7 for interrater agreement per best practices (Lombard et al., 2004). We achieved 97 percent agreement and  $\alpha = 0.761$ .

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