Comparing the Substantive Nature of Media Coverage of Elections

in the United States and United Kingdom

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GOVT-480-001H

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University Honors in Political Science

Spring 2012

Abstract

The way that campaigns and the media interact and communicate information is crucial to the public's decision about whom to vote for on Election Day. As a consequence, the media bears responsibility to communicate substantive information to help voters make informed decisions. Historically, the UK media has tended to provide the public with a higher lens of substantive coverage, but this gap has narrowed recently. The US media has continued to provide less substantive coverage, while UK media has become increasingly Americanized in its approach. Using a sample of 960 newspaper articles on national elections in *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* from 1948-2010, this research evaluates the media's coverage of general elections in the United States and the United Kingdom over time. This project not only assesses the extent of recent changes in the nature and style of reporting and communicating about elections in the US and UK, but finds that the types of stories covered have transformed over time. Although US media continues to focus on the horse race aspects of elections at a high rate, UK coverage in recent elections focuses less on issues and more on the conduct of the campaign.

Introduction

During national elections, citizens make decisions about candidates by assessing the information provided by campaigns and the media. Political campaigns and the media play crucial roles when it comes to communicating this important information to those citizens who will ultimately elect office-holders (Freedman et al. 2004, 723). The goal of a political campaign is to communicate a platform to voters while the media serves as the most important conduit of this information. Thus, one of the most important roles of the media is to communicate effective, substantive information to the public prior to elections (Hayes 2010, 597).

Two countries where the media has this key responsibility are the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK). The UK and US have similar media models that look to communicate information to voters. Yet, the US has a tradition of less substantive election coverage and disproportional focus on the game or strategy of the candidates during elections. The UK, on the other hand, has shown a commitment to coverage showcasing more policy-oriented stories and has effectively communicated party positions. Yet, the information gap in election coverage between these two countries has decreased in recent years, as the UK media experiences an Americanization of the news, prompting a need to reassess the substantive nature of coverage from each country's media. Previous studies of media coverage of elections have also focused on one or several election years. These cross sectional studies lack the longer narrative that might be gained from analyzing election coverage over a long period a time. This study looks to fill this gap in the research and offer a longitudinal look at media coverage of elections while providing a broad narrative of how it has developed over time. This study finds that less articles on economic issues and increasing focus on campaign strategy and candidates has characterized a UK media that become increasing more Americanized in its media coverage of elections.

Literature Review

US Politics and Media Systems

The structure of a country's political system is one of the most influential aspects of the way the media portrays campaign information to the public. The US political system is based on elections of candidates, or representatives, to political office. Although the US has a two party system where candidates can run under one party or another, citizens elect their candidates individually come election time. The separation of powers between the Presidency and Congress, as well as the McGovern – Fraser reforms, were important pieces in establishing the US electoral

system as an institution focused on candidates rather than parties with primary voting proceeding in a state by state manor (Patterson 1993, 51). These reforms were key factors in also institutionalizing the media as a medium through which candidates inform the public about their policies and positions while also ensuring elections for national office were focused on individuals, not the parties they represent (Patterson 1993, 51). Although candidates see the media as the best avenue through which to inform the public, this candidate-focused election system provides a unique type of media news coverage of campaigns that focuses more on the horse race aspect of elections, or a game approach, than the policies each candidate supports. Instead, little time is devoted to the issues, candidates are given little opportunity to talk or discuss substantive policy issues (Farnsworth et al 2011, 167).

The system of political communication in the media tends to focus on the competitiveness of each race rather than the substantive policy issues that candidates would pursue once in office (Hayes 2010, 597). The US media boasts a free-market liberal model with little to no government regulation. Thus, the way it reports on elections is a type of balancing act between communicating the issues, and communicating what is exciting and interesting in order to sell. During the primary season, unique to US elections, candidates fight for their party's nomination. The media, during this intense race between sometimes 10 or more candidates, tends to focus on who is winning and losing rather than where the candidates differ on policy. The media focuses on this because stories about the game aspect are exciting and engaging. Reporters will focus on what is compelling and different, which most times will not be policy positions, but instead will be the ways in which candidates are trying shake up the race (Patterson 1993, 61). Patterson cites the "plot-like nature of the game" of each election as reason enough for newspapers and television to focus less substance and more on the horse race. After the spirit of

this primary season is over, the media continues this game type coverage as each party's nominee fights for potential votes. The coverage continues to focus on campaign and candidate controversies rather than policy disagreements due to the attractiveness of the horse race to reporters, news organizations, and viewers alike (Patterson 1993, 73).

This type of coverage is detrimental to the way in which campaigns and the media interact with voters and the US democratic system. It is crucial that candidates and campaigns use the media as a voice to deliver their message and stances on policy issues to the voters and the public. The way our democracy works was originally intended is so that voters go to the polls to vote for the best candidate for that office. Campaigns work tirelessly in order to educate voters on the issues their candidate supports and his or her policy stances. Campaigns communicate issues to the public because that is what people should be voting for or against on Election Day. In a media system that instead stresses the horse race aspect of politics rather than policy, the system may fail to elect the best candidate into office. When people are instead exposed to more "game" aspects of politics, their views of the issues are instead skewed by candidate personalities and the conduct of each campaign season. It is important that voters go to the polls to vote on policy rather than personality in order to maintain a healthy democratic system and elect competent legislators into office.

UK Politics and Media

The media in the United Kingdom is characterized in a much different light due to the system of government and its media model. In UK elections, citizens vote in a first past the post system for their candidates, much like the US. Yet in the UK, the party system is much stronger due to a number of reasons. First, the 'government of the day' is an outgrowth of the majority party in the legislature. The party with a majority in the legislature after a general election is also

in power in the government due to the UK's parliamentary system. The party elects its own leader, and due to the nature of the parliamentary system, the majority party's leader becomes the government's Prime Minister. The parties pick their candidates, thus candidates have a strong incentive to stay within the party platform or lose their status as a member of that party or the opportunity to gain a role in leadership. The party is the center of political power in the UK, dictating candidates, as well as the leaders of the UK Parliament (Scammell and Semetko 2008, 73).

The UK system of government consolidates power in the parties, but it also consolidates the media. The UK media system is categorized under the Hallin and Mancini model (2003) with the US, and other liberal western democracies, as a free-market "liberal" media model (Scamell and Semetko 2008, 74). However, there is far more regulation of political speech in the UK than in the US. The UK has a more hybrid model, which takes some of the US tradition of free markets and media self-regulation and combines this with northern European ideals of partisan news with much more highly regulated television broadcasts (Scammell and Semetko 2008, 74). The contrast is most notable between print and television, where print is opinionated and is not afraid of shaping the political agenda (Scammell and Semetko 2008, 74). In the UK, newspapers and tabloids routinely have a tilt towards one party or another. For example, *The Times* supports the Conservative Party while *The Guardian* comes down on the side of the Labour Party (Scammell et al 1991, 15). Television, by contrast, is highly regulated and must maintain impartial coverage between the political parties. Television is also the most accessible news in the UK, thus dictating what information voters in the UK get pertaining to elections. Higher regulation also involves government subsidies of broadcast news, especially on television, therefore lowering the imperative to increase ratings and profits since these subsidies are to

provide viewers with substantive information on the news and politics (Scammell and Semetko 2008, 77).

The connection between the parties and the media is also an incentive to provide citizens with more substantive policy information during election season. Due to the close connection of print media to certain parties, they have staked out a certain readership that looks for their newspaper to provide them information on their party of choice, whether it be Labour, the Conservatives, or Liberal Democrats (Scammell and Langer 2006, 66). Their connection to these parties gives them a direct incentive, when the Prime Minister calls for an election, to provide their readers with information about party policy stances and campaign rhetoric directly from these parties (Semetko et al 1991, 142). There are also no regulations in place against political advertising in the print media or overtly opinionated pieces (Scammell and Semetko 2008, 74).

The incentive to provide substantive coverage is much different for television than for print media. Subsidies are present for television that provide government funding for broadcasts as long as the television stations provide unbiased news and election coverage (Scammell et al. 1991, 7). This journalistic integrity on television is a cornerstone of British television. Each party is also granted a certain amount of time for Party Election Broadcasts (PEBs) and Party Political Broadcasts (PPBs) on each major television network. These were established by the BBC on radio, and then were continued to television to allow political parties the ability to advertise and message voters directly without broadcast journalism interference. The PEBs were continued voluntarily by rival television networks, and were then put into law in 1990 (Scammell and Langer 2006, 68). They are a major part of party election strategy and advertising and a key way the television media regulates its own broadcasting during elections, despite the fact that now the broadcasts are required by law.

The government also provides subsidies that are collected from the television license fee each television owner in the UK must purchase in order to use their television, which then fund the operations of the BBC. The BBC's competitor ITV does not receive these subsidies, yet it was set up in order to compete directly with BBC, and all people who pay the television license fee are able to watch ITV as well as BBC1 and BBC2 (Scammell and Langer 2006, 67). This sets up ITV as a direct and serious competitor with the same audience as the BBC. ITV is subject to the same government regulations pertaining to journalistic integrity as the BBC, the Broadcast code, and competes for viewers expecting similar coverage during elections (Scammell and Semetko 2008, 74).

Yet, recent studies have shown a decrease in substantive election information and overall coverage coming from print and television in the UK (Semetko et al 1991; Scammell and Semetko 2008; Scammell and Langer 2006). Reporting in the UK is beginning to mirror US news in its connection to candidates at the national lens, the horse race aspect of coverage, and less overall coverage by the news organizations (Deacon et al. 2006, 250). Political advertising shows this trend as PEBs become shorter with a stronger emphasis on the party leaders who receive the most media attention. (Scammell and Langer 2006, 79).

Campaigns, Media, and Elections in the US and UK

A comparison of campaigns, the media, and elections in the US and UK has yielded a large amount of research pointing to key differences between the two systems. These key differences include varying amounts of news coverage due to the structures present in each country, differing incentives for the media to cover campaigns, as well as political structures that yield contrasting styles of campaigning for politicians and political parties (Semetko et al 1991,

20). These structures have led to studies showing that the UK media, due to its centralized party system, has more news coverage of campaigns focused on the issues, policies, and information that voters can use to decide which party to pick on election day than the US media (Semetko at al 1991; Scammell and Semetko 2008). The US, on the other hand, has a less centralized party system, which research shows has led to a media more focused on the horse race, scandalous aspects of campaigns, the candidate's personalities, and a culture of sound-bites for these candidates on television, and thus less agenda convergence between media and campaigns (Semetko et al 1991; Hayes 2010). These conditions have led to less agenda convergence since campaigns continue to focus on the policy issues important to their candidate while the news has diverged with the campaign narrative to provide more coverage of candidate personalities and the horse race aspect of elections.

The power of the media in these two countries to set the agenda for public discourse and campaign rhetoric is also decidedly different, where in the US the media has a large agenda setting power due to its structure and importance to candidates. Yet, this research has also shown in recent years that the UK media is beginning to show signs of Americanization in their campaign coverage (Semetko et al. 1991; Scammell and Semetko 2008; Scammell and Langer 2006). There has recently been more of a focus on party leaders in Britain, television spots are becoming shorter, the media is becoming less concerned with campaigns and elections as more and more sources for information begin to surface online and elsewhere. The World Wide Web has also become a key way to communicate campaign information, advertise to voters, and attract media coverage and advertising spots (Gibson et al. 2003, 47). As the media system continues to change, how substantive election coverage continues to be may have changed as well.

Research Questions

The way campaigns and the media interact in the US and UK has yielded research pointing to a gap between a UK media with more substantive coverage and a US media focused more on the horse race. Yet, this is a gap that appears to be closing due to more of an Americanization of the UK media. This yields various questions:

1. How much media coverage is devoted to substantive general election coverage in these two countries?

The amount of media coverage devoted to the general election as well as how much of this coverage was substantive is an important comparison between the two countries. The content analysis will code each news story for its substantive nature in order to answer this question. Substantive coverage is defined as something that covers important policy or issues. This could include a story about the economy, foreign policy, or defense. Non-substantive stories are defined as coverage of the horse race, polling, campaign strategy, and more "game" aspects of politics.

2. Is the UK media truly becoming more Americanized in its coverage of general elections?

Over time, the UK media coverage of general elections has shown signs of evolving to more closely resemble the practices and focuses of the US media. When referring to an "Americanization" of election coverage, this would entail more of a focus on non-substantive issues. This change over time will close a gap in the substantive nature of coverage during national elections. Analyzing and identifying the gap between the substantive nature of election coverage in the US and UK represents important research

that will yield comparisons between media systems and assess the effectiveness of each to provide coverage of policy and issues.

Hypothesis

Hypothesis 1: In comparing election news coverage over time, there has been a gap in substantive election news coverage between the US and UK, with the UK having more substantive coverage.

Hypothesis 2: In comparing election news coverage over time, the gap in substantive coverage between the US and UK general election coverage has closed significantly over time.

Research Design

Whereas recent research suggests that elements of the US media system have crept into the UK media's election coverage, no study applies a detailed, longitudinal content analysis to assess these changes since the 1991 Semetko et al. study. This research is modeled closely on that study but looks to update the findings and extend the design longitudinally, using similar variables of substantive coverage. I will run content analysis of the election coverage of two newspapers , one from the US and one from the UK. I will run this content analysis on *The New York Times* in the US and *The Guardian* in the UK. The purpose of the study will be to determine the substantive nature of election coverage in the US and UK. By comparing two

major newspapers with large readership, each traditionally left-leaning, I will be able to compare, contrast, and discern the nature of each paper's news coverage in terms of substantive subjects.

Print News Sources

I will conduct content analysis of television news media in the US and UK by analyzing the newspapers *The New York Times* (NYT) and *The Guardian*. NYT's daily paper closely resembles *The Guardian*. Both are considered cornerstone newspapers in their respective countries as well as around the globe. They are also left leaning in their editorial pages. Many other studies have focused on these papers as well while analyzing election coverage. The content analysis will focus on the stories in the news that cover the elections once an election is called in the UK, and stories within one month before the general election within the US. The reasoning for limiting the amount of stories to analyze in the US is due to constraints on time and the ability to compare and contrast news coverage with such an extended election cycle in the US compared with the UK. My research is looking to establish this coverage gap over time when the election is most pertinent to voters, which in the UK is between 3-4 weeks. In the US it can also be argued that one month before each election, voters are more interested in the candidates than ever before. This is when news organizations, especially newspapers, will cover the election increasingly, and thus when their coverage must communicate the most to citizens. By establishing this time frame, the ability to conduct thorough content analysis will be more plausible. I will use the New York Times Historical on ProQuest to acquire the NYT articles through the 2008 election. I will use the Guardian Digital Archive for data of *The Guardian* for each election through 2001, when I will then switch to using LexisNexis archives through the 2010 election. I will start the content analysis of the NYT with the 1948 election, which covers the last 16 electoral cycles in the US, and will begin analysis of the Times with the 1951 election,

which covers the last 16 electoral cycles in the UK. For each electoral cycle, I will gather and analyze 30 news stories pertaining to the election and code for important concepts.

<div align="center">**Operationalization and Measurement of Concepts**</div>

This study will look at the effectiveness of news media to provide substantive coverage to voters in the US and UK and will test the hypotheses through content analysis and direct comparison of each news organization's ability to provide stories on the issues before each election. Each story will be analyzed at four lenses of coverage, yet these lenses are by no means mutually exclusive. These lenses will measure the types of stories, the substantive nature of news stories, as well as the focus of these news stories. The content analysis will code each story using the criteria in these lenses in order to truly and critically look at the types of stories that are substantive or non-substantive, and the general focus of each story. The advantage to looking into coverage with these various lenses is that it will yield a much broader picture of the coverage by looking into how the media is reporting each election more in-depth.

Story Lens

The types of news stories are crucial to identifying how much information, and what type, is being reported and communicated to citizens. I will code for three types of news: straight news, news analysis, and candidate profiles. Identifying the types of news stories that are being written and published provides just one way to effectively analyze the differences in coverage. The purpose behind this lens of coding is to discern what types of stories in each newspaper are substantive. In the US and UK, straight news may have less substance while news analysis and candidate profiles may turn out to be more substantive. An example of a straight news story is from Oct. 13, 1956. The NYT story title reads, "Kentucky Leans to the President: Chandler Sitdown, Popularity of Eisenhower and Vote by 18-Year-Olds Aid G.O.P." The story continues

to say that Kentucky is leaning towards Eisenhower in the polls, citing candidate quotes and poll results. This story looked at the telling the "who, what, when, and where" of a news item, with some why. The newspaper reported the polling results, but did little analysis of the state of affairs. A story that went to morel lengths to detail the why and how it might affect voters would be coded as news analysis. This comparison and connection between story lens and substance is crucial to establishing this gap over time and understanding in what types of stories substance is found.

Substance Lens

I will also code each news story as either substantive or non-substantive. Substantive coverage is characterized by news stories about policy issues, while non-substantive stories are focused on issues not related to policy. The subjects of news stories I have identified as substantive and non-substantive are as follows:

Substantive Subjects:

- Defense
- Economy
- Foreign Policy
- Energy/Environment
- Religion
- Social Welfare
- Ethics
- Civil Rights
- Parties
- Citizen Interviews
- Speeches
- Other

Non-substantive Subjects:

- Conduct of Campaign
- Horse race/polls
- Candidates/Parties
- Media coverage
- Other

The news stories will be coded using these categories, which were also used in the Semetko study. This lens is by far the most important in establishing the measurement of substance over each election and in each story. The article I described in the story lens about the Kentucky polling results was coded as Horse race/polls. A story that was coded as substantive from the same year was titled, "Eisenhower Assails Bid by Bulganin: Angered by Note – Reply Says Atom Plea is Interference in Politics of the US." This article detailed Eisenhower's response to a request from the Premier of the Soviet Union to stop the tests of nuclear weapons. The article was coded as Substantive – Foreign Policy.

Focus Lens

I will proceed to also code each news story in terms of its main focus or theme. Each story will be coded as policy, campaign strategy, campaign finance, candidates/parties, or other. By also coding each story with their general focus, my analysis will be able to determine exactly how much coverage is substantive and non-substantive that focuses on these broad themes, detailing the effectiveness of election coverage to communicate important information about candidates, campaigns, and issues. The purpose of this lens will be to discern how many stories are focused on each one of these categories. I would expect that more policy stories would also be substantive, while campaign strategy or candidate stories would not. The substantive article I coded for above was coded as policy focused due to its focus on Eisenhower's foreign policy stance.

Placement Lens

My last lens will be to code for the placement of each news story. This will be fairly simple for each newspaper, as I will code it as either a front-page story, or an inside story. This is important to include because understanding where newspapers place their stories shows which are most important to their audience. Newspapers will only put stories on the front page that they know citizens will want to read and stories that will attract customers. The previous three lenses will show exactly what stories, in terms of type, substance and focus, newspapers like to put on the precious, and important, front page.

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Analysis

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Story Lens

Figure 1 reports the findings of *The Guardian*(Guardian) and *The New York Times*(NYT) in terms of percentages of the story lens analysis by year for straight news. It paints an interesting picture between each news source and variable. When looking at the source lens for each newspaper, the types of stories over the last 60 years for each paper differed quite little. Straight news was the most common type of story, over 83% for each paper, while news analysis was used in 15% of Guardian and 14.4% of NYT articles. This shows an overall trend that the differences between each paper might not be so different after all. In each paper's early years, their content was different in terms of types of articles at the story lens. NYT focused more on

the reporting of events, while Guardian included more in depth news analysis, as showcased in

Figure 1, with a higher number of straight news stories from the NYT prior to 1960.

Figure 1: Straight News
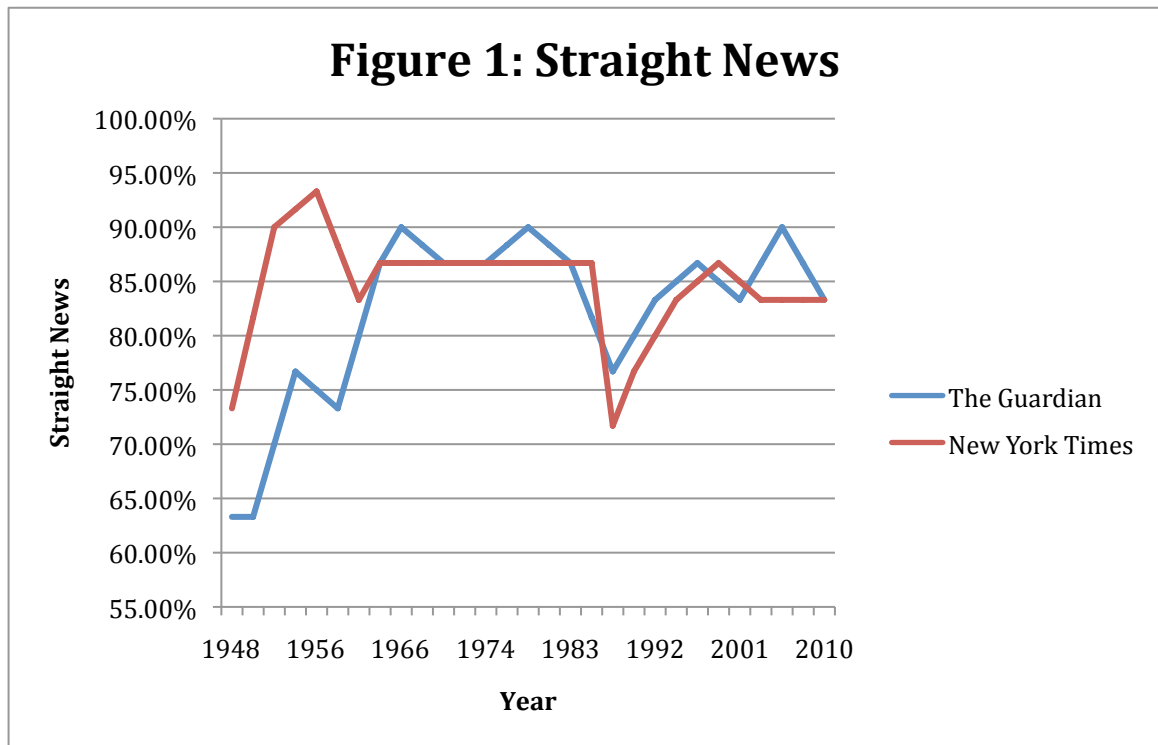
A commonplace type of article for the *Guardian* during these years was in-depth analysis of individual constituencies. The Guardian's analysis was in-depth and hard to rival, especially in a NYT that used more space to detail the numbers at campaign rallies than anything else. On the next page to the left is an excerpt from a Guardian article analyzing a constituency compared with a NYT article on the right focusing largely on how many people attended a campaign rally.

"We can do it." There would be nothing remarkable about the claim of Mr W. J. Taylor, M.P., made at his adoption meeting, were it not that at Bradford North he is defending the smallest Conservative majority in the country. In 1955 Mr Taylor, who stands as a Conservative National-Liberal, polled 21,084 —a majority of 69 over Mr Maurice Webb (Lab.)

The Conservatives have reason for confidence. Bradford has a growing light engineering industry, but depends primarily on wool. And wool is doing well. Last year's recession in textiles caused some unemployment, much of it among Pakistani immigrants, but the industry has fully recovered. Unemployment is now at about the national average.

The city has four seats, divided equally between the major parties. In the East division slum clearance has reduced the electorate by some 4,000, but the sitting member, Mr Frank McLeavy (Lab.), should retain at least half of his 8,875 majority.

The West division is held by Mr A. Tiley (C. and Nat. L.) with a majority of only 3,159. The electorate is down by a few hundred, which represents a certain amount of new private building counterbalanced by demolition of slum property. Mr Tyley is losing no sleep.

Schools a live issue

Crowds Are Sparse

In contrast to the densely packed crowds that lined the route to cheer Senator Kennedy when he came here three weeks ago, the crowds that greeted Mr. Nixon on his way from the airport to the Statler Hilton Hotel tonight were sparse. Many of the people appeared attracted more by curiosity than anything else.

Before going to his hotel, Mr. Nixon stopped to address a rally in Polish Union Hall, located in the heart of Buffalo's banner Democratic district.

Outside the hall there was a small crowd carrying Kennedy banners. Inside there were a thousand people who filled the place to capacity and gave Mr. Nixon and his wife a very warm welcome.

As is clear, these articles, the Guardian excerpt from 1959 and the NYT excerpt from 1960, show great contrast in their ability to communicate in-depth analysis. The Guardian more effectively does so, citing the issues apparent in a constituency that will impact the election, while the NYT talks of "sparse" crowds at campaign rallies.

Yet these differences gradually disappeared. The Guardian began reporting more events while the Times began include increased news analysis to bolster its election coverage. As seen above in Figure 1, the data shows that up to today, these similar story lenses of straight news have perpetuated through both newspapers. Figure 2 outlines the overall findings in terms of each source's story lens. It is clear that straight news was the most popular way to present news

by both papers, with similar levels of news analysis as well. Candidate profiles were generally

less common than I had expected heading into the research. That may have been due to the time

frame before each election, where especially in the US, the candidates had already been profiled

much before

October in the
election cycle.
Regardless, the
most notable

FIGURE 2	The Guardian	The New York Times
Straight	83.1%	84.4%
	(399)	(405)
News Analysis	15.2%	14.4%
	(73)	(69)
Candidate Profile	1.7%	1.0%
	(8)	(5)

comparison is the lack of variation between the number of straight news and news analysis

between US and UK newspapers.

Focus Lens

Figure 3 shows the focus of the news stories during election coverage in the Guardian

and NYT. The differences over time are also subtle and small. The main focus of stories turned

out to be policy for
each paper, with
candidates/parties
or campaign
strategy being

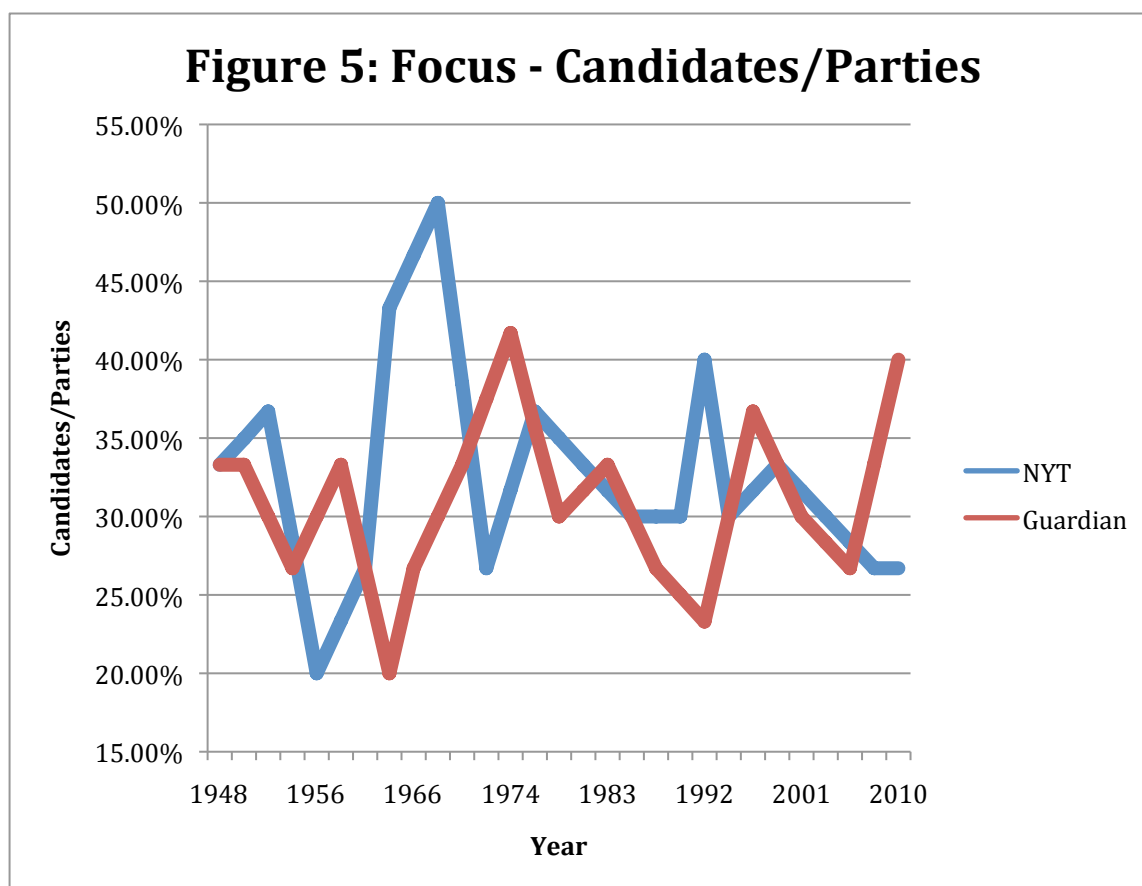| FIGURE 3	The Guardian	New York Times
Campaign Strategy	32.7%	27.3%
	(157)	(131)
Policy	34.8%	35.8%
	(167)	(172)
Candidates/Parties	30.6%	32.9%
	(147)	(158)

second and third. The NYT had more stories focusing on candidates and parties than campaign

strategy, which was most likely due to the more candidate centered electoral system. Figure 4

illustrates the amount of campaign strategy focused stories for each newspaper, Figure 5 for

candidates/parties, while Figure 6 details the policy focus.

Figure 4: Focus - Campaign Strategy
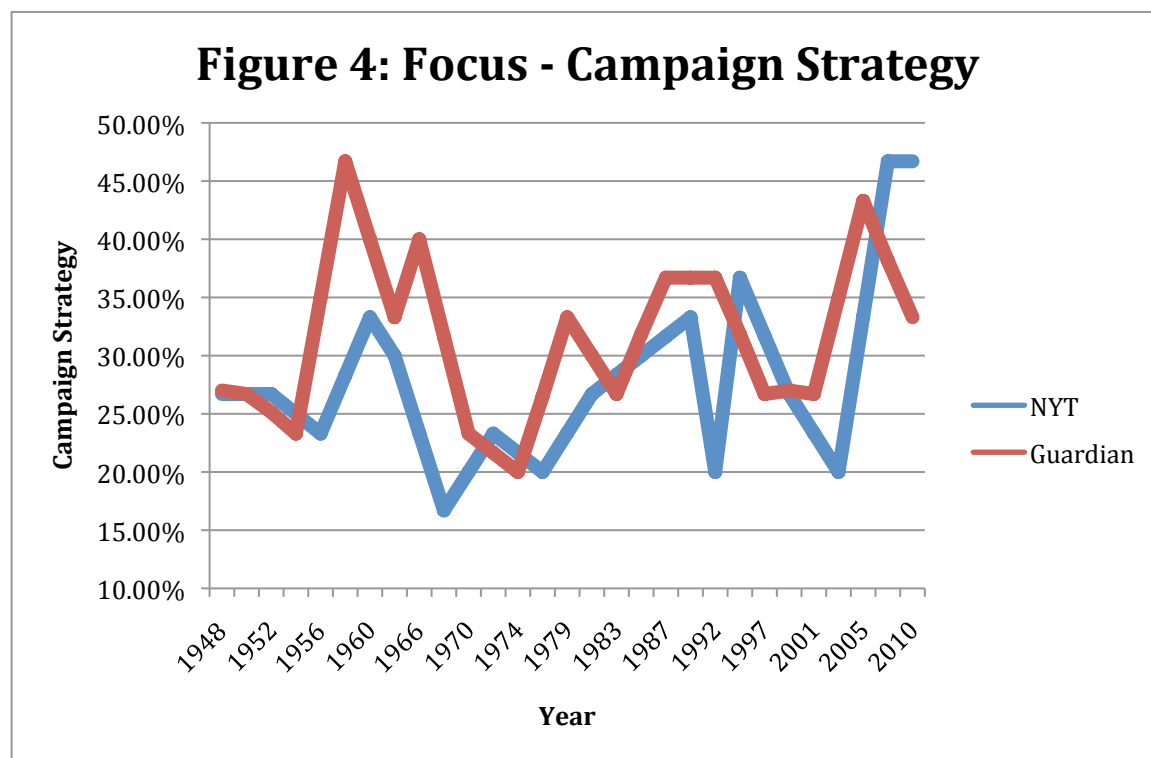
As the figures illustrate, the NYT and Guardian have shown increased campaign strategy

stories since roughly 1970. With more focus on campaign strategy in recent years, less stories are

substantive since campaign strategy stories are largely referring to subjects like the horse race or

conduct of the campaign. Candidates/Parties focused articles have been largely inconsistent in

terms of increasing substantially. What is shown is an Americanization of the UK media, and the

possibility of increased candidate stories, is that since 1992, candidate and party stories have

been 25% of UK coverage of each election. Policy's decline in the Guardian in recent years

shows a lack of commitment to policy in the month before the election. The US is the same way

due to the US electoral system where candidates have ample time to make their views and policies known to the public, but this same lack of policy focus is why previous research has shown US coverage to be less substantive. The Guardian's increased focus on candidates in recent years, illustrated in Figure 5, while policy has decreased, as shown in Figure 6, means that election coverage in the UK is largely focused on less substantive news. Their articles in the 2010 election were 40% candidates/parties, 33% campaign strategy, and a low 27% on policy. That means that in 2010, voters had a 27% chance of reading a story about policy and issues when they picked up the Guardian a month before the election. That shows a lack of substantive coverage and a similar to trend to US coverage, where citizens had only a 23% chance of reading about policy a month before the election.

Figure 5: Focus - Candidates/Parties

Figure 6: Focus - Policy
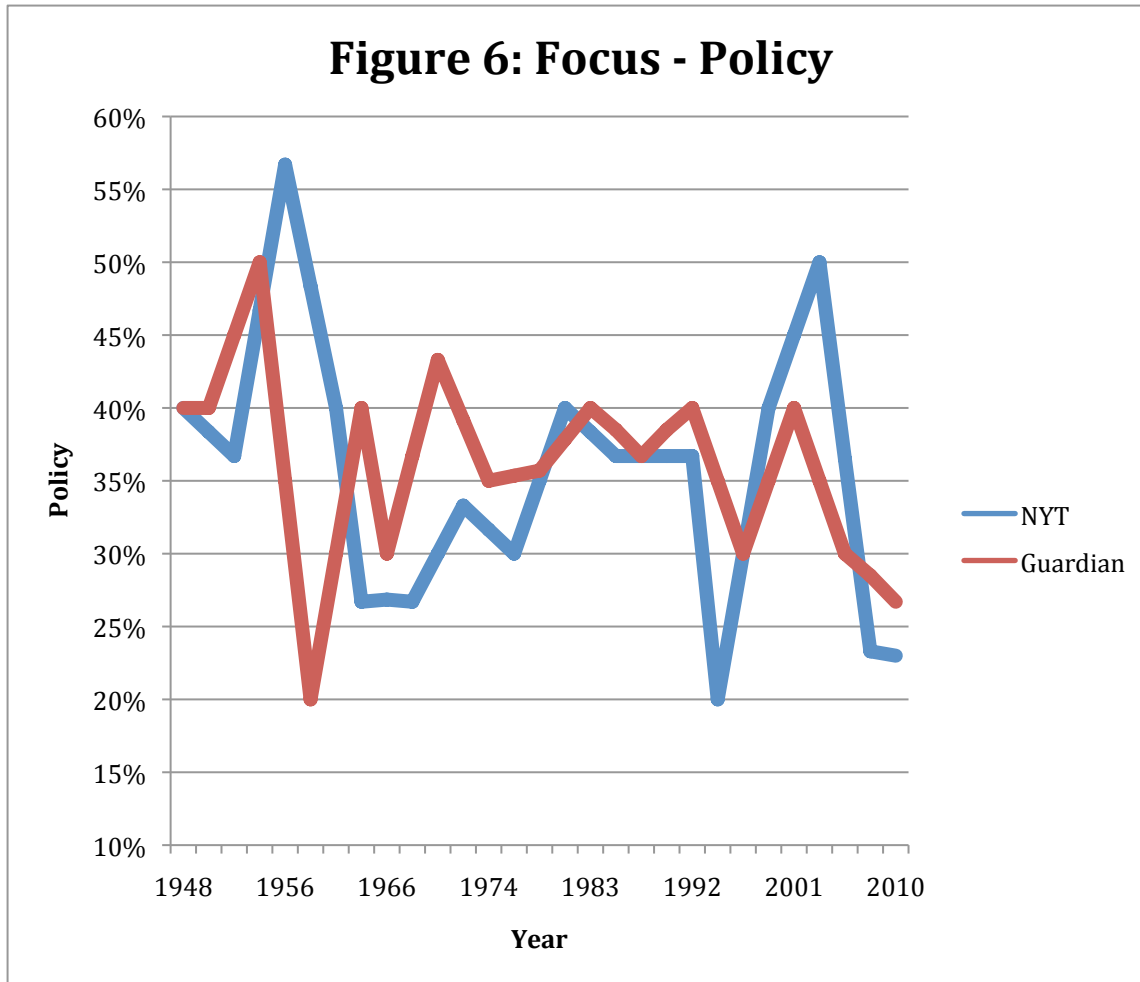
Placement Lens

FIGURE 7	The Guardian	New York Times
Front	64.6%	57.9%
	(310)	(278)
Inside	29.2%	42.1%
	(140)	(202)

Figure 7 shows the total placement of stories for the Guardian and NYT. This data shows

a large difference between the two newspapers, since the Guardian puts more election coverage

on the front page, 64.6%, than NYT, 57.9%. This suggests that the Guardian was putting election

coverage first in order to inform citizens. This data proves even more interesting when split up in

terms of the issues on the front page of each paper over time. The issues that were most written

about are the economy, foreign policy, conduct of the campaign, and horse race/polls,(See Figure

12) it is interesting to see what percentage of these issues each paper found important to include

on the front page, deeming it most newsworthy before an election. Figure 8 details the

percentage of economy stories on the front page out of the total sample for the election year. This

shows that the NYT does not favor putting the issue of the economy, a substantive one, on the

front page, and thus it finds other types of stories more important.

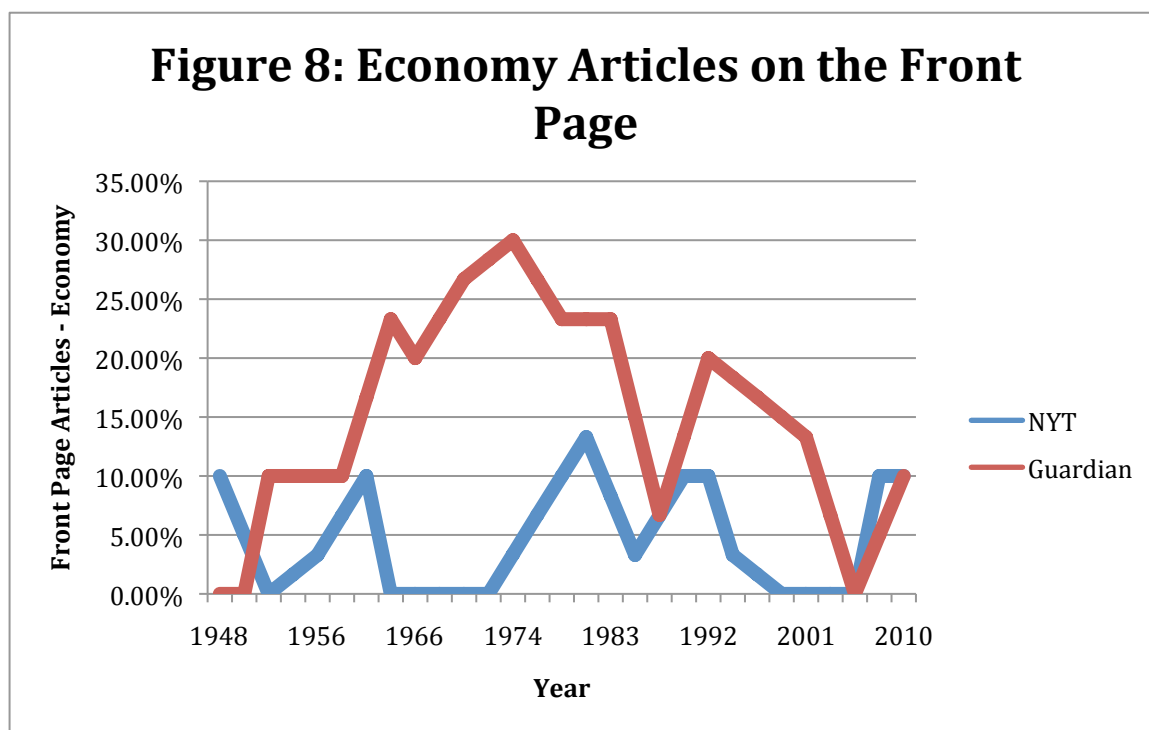
Figure 8: Economy Articles on the Front Page

Figure 8 also shows that the Guardian placed much more emphasis on the economy from

1964 – 1992, while seeing a large decline in front page economy stories after 1992. This follows

the Guardian's lack of substantive coverage and Americanization of coverage in recent years as

less stories pertaining to issues are deemed important enough to put on the front page.

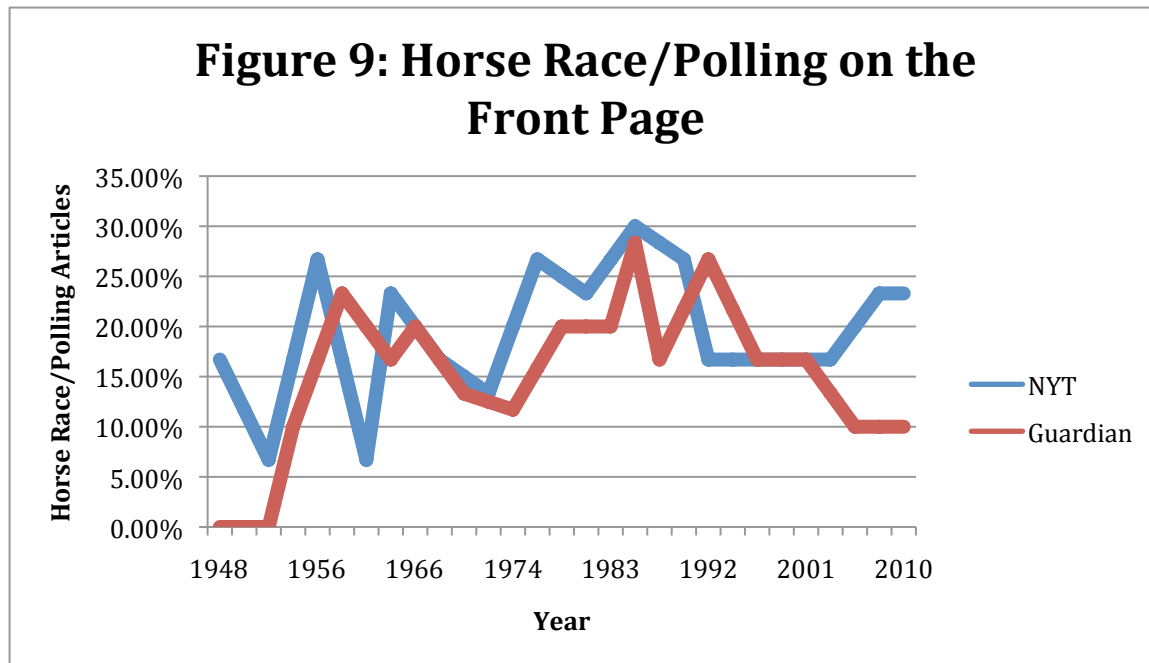**Figure 9: Horse Race/Polling on the Front Page**

Figure 9, on the other hand, shows that over time, a large amount of the front page is devoted to horse race and polling articles. While in Figure 8 the economy is at times completely ignored as a front-page story, the Guardian and NYT at least devote 10% of their articles to horse race and polling on the front page within a month before the election. This, compared with the number of economy articles on the front page shows that in recent years the Guardian has focused much less on this substantive issue while the NYT has rarely ever found it important to put more than 10% of its stories about the economy on the front page.

Substance Lens

Figure 10 shows the amount of substantive news for each source per each cycle. Keep in mind that if an article was not characterized as substantive, it was characterized in a non-substantive category, and vice versa. The findings are interesting and show adherence to the theory that UK news has historically been more substantive, yet recently it has become less so.

Figure 3 shows that in each paper's early years, their content was generally similar in terms of substance.

Figure 10: Substantive Coverage
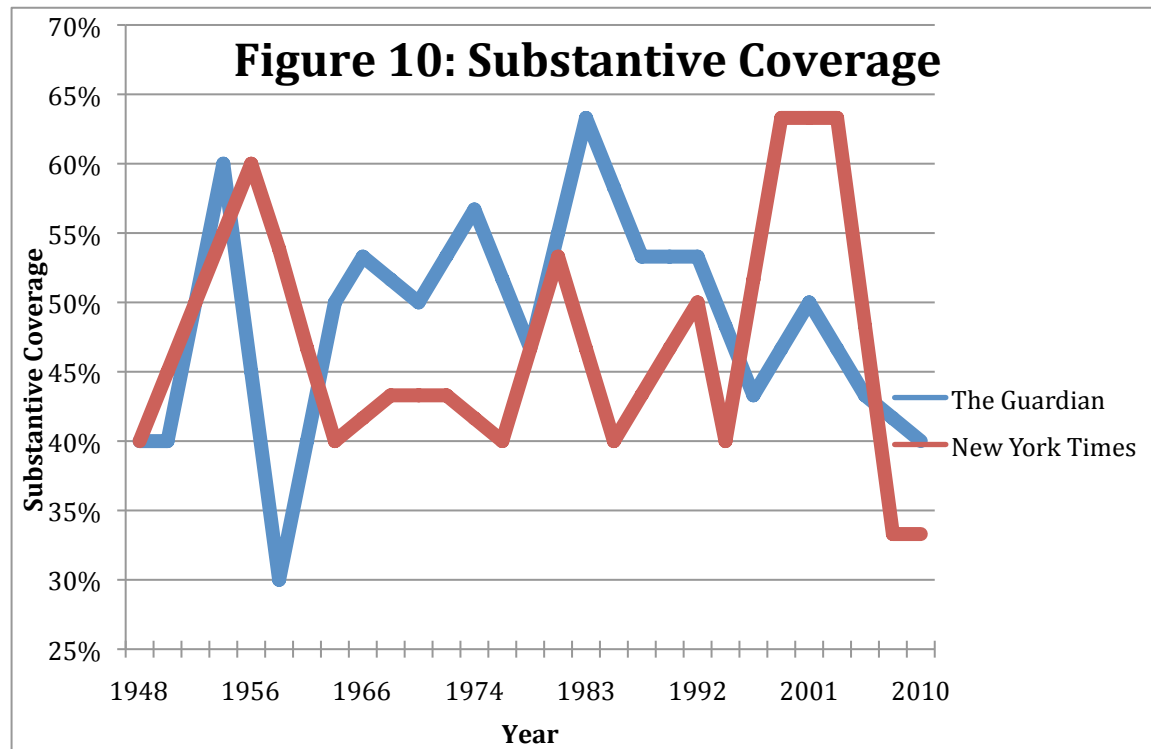
After 1960 however, a shift happened where the Guardian's coverage was focused on more substantive topics compared to the NYT, which focused largely on types of topics like the horse race and the conduct of the campaign. The NYT was also prone to stories detailing speeches and campaign movement around the country. The stories detailed the thousands attending campaign rallies rather than the speeches the people heard. Yet the NYT did publish entire speeches for their readers to read for themselves, a marked example of including substance in a US newspaper and providing voters with information they need.

The Guardian's coverage in its earlier years was generally inconsistent, as shown in the data. The data collected for the 1951 election could not include placement of articles as either Front or Inside because The Guardian was still named *The Manchester Guardian*. At this point the Guardian was adhering to its local newspaper roots that still published individual

advertisements on their front pages in older styles of broadsheets. The paper was in no way at the same national or international status of the New York Times due to its format. The articles, however tell a different story. Despite the amount of substantive coverage in the 1950's, the Guardian at this point included much more news analysis in election coverage. The stories were less straight news, and had more in-depth coverage of the campaigns and the issues. A key feature of the Guardian's election coverage is its in-depth reporting of various constituencies throughout the UK and the conduct of the campaign there. Although these stories are not substantive in terms of explaining issues and policies, the reporting is of a higher quality. This news analysis of campaign activities and strategies in key constituencies around the country provides color for the readers of the Guardian and helped solidify the paper's reputation for valuable information and analysis.

In the early 1960's the Guardian started to consistently include more substantive election coverage than the US. From 1964 through the late 1990's, this was true. As seen in Figure 10, substantive news from the Guardian remained higher than the NYT through the 1990's. This coincided with the beginning of the television age, where news became readily available over another medium. As theory suggests, despite the beginning of television debates and evening news programs, UK news continued to provide substantive coverage of elections, or at least more substantive than the US. Not to say that the coverage was completely substantive for each paper. The NYT and the Guardian reported a great deal of non-substantive news stories pertaining to the horse race, recent polling results, as well as the conduct of the campaign. In fact, during most elections, coverage for the *New York Times* was over 50% non-substantive coverage. Figure 11 tells that story very well, with 52.8% of articles being non-substantive while 47.1% were substantive. Looking at Figure 10, it is clear that non-substantive news dominated

the NYT, especially consistently from 1960 through the 1990's. The data shows a consistency to this from 1964 through 1992, where every year but one, 1980, NYT coverage was over 50% non-substantive. That is compared to the Guardian, where non-substantive coverage was slightly below 50% of stories 5 out of 8 elections between that same time period. During this time period is also when Semetko and Scammell began to study coverage in both countries. Their findings, that the UK had more substantive coverage, were well founded at this time according to the data. The Guardian was also quickly becoming a more worldly paper as well. In 1959 it changed its name from *The Manchester Guardian* to *The Guardian* as its coverage and circulation moved further around the UK and the world. After changing its name, its coverage sustained more substantive lenses of coverage than the NYT for 30 years. It sustained this coverage through the increased presence of network news and despite the possible need to attract a larger readership.

The period of 30 years until 1992 was characterized by more substantive coverage from the Guardian than the NYT. Yet after 1992, there begins a clear decline in the substantive nature of the Guardian's coverage. In 1983, the Guardian's coverage hits a peak in substantive coverage, with 63.3% being substantive. After 1983, there is a clear decline in substance over the next 17 years, ending with the lowest substance lens for the Guardian since 1960, with 40% of coverage being substantive. This decline is clear in the data and shows that the Guardian has indeed grown less substantive in its election coverage in recent years. An example of more recent coverage is to the

MARTIN Bell arrived at his press conference in trademark white suit (the one without bullet holes). He was immediately surrounded by the clatter of machine-gun fire, which is what several dozen photographers sound like. "Even for someone who is used to scary experiences, this is extreme," he said gravely.

He said everything gravely. We hacks are used to making bizarre, minor events appear like history on the march, and he did it very well.

Some reporters have a remarkable, possibly accidental, knack of becoming a part of the news which they

above, which was a front-page article from 1997 detailing a candidate for parliament at a press conference. This coverage is far more based on selling the story to the reader, as much of the language shows. It is also devoting a front page story to a candidate for parliament, not even the important Prime Minister. Increasing candidate stories have been a recent trend in the Guardian, as well as this type of reporting to tell a story rather than to talk about policy issues.

The recent decline in substantive news in the Guardian is matched in the data overall by a lack of any large difference between the two papers and their lenses of substantive coverage over time. Figure 5 shows this quite clearly. Over time, there is not a significant difference in the amount of substantive coverage between the Guardian and the NYT. This brings into question the idea that there is a large difference in substance. Many previous studies (Semetko et al.; Scammell and Semetko;) focus on election coverage within a certain time period. Generally these studies have ranged from one election cycle, to up to six. Yet to understand the progression of election coverage, see the patterns in both countries, and make assumptions about the way in which these patterns

have formed, a more longitudinal study of coverage

FIGURE 11	The Guardian	New York Times
Substantive	49.4%	47.1%
	(237)	(226)
Non-Substantive	50.6%	52.8%
	(243)	(254)

such as this one shows this more clearly. By looking simply as substantive coverage over time, it is clear that there has been an ebb and flow to each paper's coverage, but over the last 60 years, the amount of coverage has generally evened out in terms of substantive and non-substantive stories.

A closer look at substantive and non-substantive coverage yields a better picture of what types of subjects each paper focused on a month before an election. Over time, substance is in a

certain way relative, but that is not the case with the types of stories each newspaper publishes. The subjects of these stories, and the consistency with which they are published, gives a more complete account of substantive and non-substantive coverage. In Figure 12, I have broken up the individual subjects of stories between the Guardian and the NYT in order to better illustrate the subjects of the stories during elections.

The Guardian puts the most emphasis, among substantive subjects, on the economy, at 23% of total articles. The next two most substantive subjects are foreign policy and the party platform that the paper publishes before each election. These are comparably less important, since 5.2% of stories are on foreign policy, while 4.3% of stories are the party platforms. The rest of the

FIGURE 12	The Guardian	NYT
Economy	23%	12.50%
Foreign Policy	5.20%	13.75%
Defense	3.90%	4.16%
Religion	0.40%	0.40%
Social Issues	2.90%	2.50%
Ethics	0	3.50%
Citizen Interviews	0	0.60%
Immigration	1%	0
Speeches	0.40%	1.25%
Civil Rights	0.20%	1%
Debates	0.60%	3.33%
Platform	4.30%	0
Education	1.40%	0.20%
Health	1.80%	1%
Other	4.30%	4.80%
Con of Camp	18.30%	18.13%
Horse Race	27.90%	31.45%
Media Coverage	1.60%	1.45%
Candidate Qualities	2.70%	1.88%

substantive subjects the Guardian publishes take up relatively small portions of their election coverage. On the other hand, the Guardian focuses 18.3% of their stories on the conduct of the campaign and then 27.9% of stories on the horse race and polls. These non-substantive subjects take up the bulk of their coverage, and represent what the Guardian focuses half of its election coverage doing. This is despite having only three week to one month to inform the electorate before the polls open. This shows that the substantive subjects that will appear, regardless of the type of election season, were only 32.5% of total coverage over time. The non-substantive

subjects appeared in 46.2% of coverage, which shows that coverage may be even less substantive than originally thought.

The NYT is no different, except for in the issues of substance they focus on. The NYT over time had 12.5% of stories focused on the economy, 13.75% of stories focused on foreign policy, and 4.16% focused on defense. These made up the most of NYT substantive coverage, while the paper had 18.13% of articles on the conduct of the campaign and 31.45% on the horse race ad polls. By looking at this data, the types of stories that the NYT routinely includes in their election coverage that are substantive make up 30.41% of their coverage over time. Compared with 49.58% of coverage on the most popular non-substantive subjects, it appears that coverage is even less substantive than it seemed in the US as well, but again that shows there is less of a difference between papers and coverage in each country. When comparing Figure 12 with Figures 8 and 9, it is much clearer how the coverage of these issues and horse race and polling has progressed over time. It is clear that the Guardian's coverage is less about the economy and more about horse race and polling, especially on the front page.

Conclusions and Future Study

The substance of election coverage in the US and UK is at the heart of this study, and we must return to it here. The first question was how much of the media in each country is devoted to substantive election coverage? It appears that over time, the Guardian and the NYT each devote similar amounts of time to substantive election coverage. Yet, the data also showed that each paper devoted similar amounts of time to non-substantive coverage. The Guardian was more substantive in its coverage from 1960 – 1992, while in the last 20 years the paper has seen a sharp decline in its amount of substantive coverage. This leads to my second research question, as to whether the UK media has become Americanize in its election coverage. In looking at the data, I must say that it has. This is mostly apparent in terms of the substance of coverage, the changes in focus of stories, as well as the what type of substance the papers decide to put on the front page. When looking at the Guardian or NYT progression of coverage at the story lens, differences fade. Each paper has had similar amounts of straight news and news analysis.

In terms of the focus lens, the Guardian has had less of a focus on policy in the last three elections along with most of its coverage focusing on campaign strategy and candidates or parties. This is trend not to be ignored, especially when then looking at the placement of stories. It is apparent over time that coverage of the economy in the Guardian has decreased, especially in terms of front-page stories, while horse race and polling continues to dominate a large portion of front-page articles. Coverage has changed significantly over time with less economic policy, which is an important trend towards Americanization since the economy represents 23% of substantive articles over the past 60 years. Yet paired against horse race and campaign strategy stories, which continue to show up more frequently on the front page and in the paper in general, the Guardian's substance is decreasing.

The Guardian's coverage of elections has indeed become more Americanized, especially in most recent years. The coverage is less substantive and mirrors the NYT in terms of its coverage of candidates as well as campaign strategy. In moving to my hypotheses, it becomes more apparent that recent literature has been largely correct about election coverage in the US and UK. There has been a gap in substantive coverage, at least between 1960-1992. Yet over time, this gap seems to disappear in the data. The differences in substance are small and insignificant, since source does not serve as a good determinant of substance over the last 60 years as a whole. Yet when looking more closely at the trends of substance, the Guardian has closed that gap almost entirely since 1992. The second hypothesis is thus true. The gap in substance has narrowed to a point of nonexistence in terms of election coverage in the US and UK.

Future study would allow for increased testing of this point. With more time I would increase the sample size and code more stories to better gain a full perspective for the nature of coverage in each news source and country. A study of other newspapers as well, such as *The Washington Post* and *The Times* might yield a better perspective for the nature of the media and its coverage of elections from both the left and right wing. It is difficult to generalize about entire media systems when only including analysis of one media source from each country.

Regardless of the potential limitations that the study design may have yielded, this study did find that UK media has indeed become more Americanized in its election coverage and that the substance gap between the two news sources has disappeared, upholding both hypotheses. The practices and effectiveness of media in the US and UK to report on elections has profound affects on the information available for citizens to make informed decision when voting, and this study points to a potential lack of such available information. Recent research has pointed to a

lack of substantive issues in US coverage of elections while in the UK the media more effectively communicates the party policies (Semetko et al 1991). Yet in recent years, this study has shown a decline in issues in UK election coverage and a more "sound-bite" and "game" oriented media. Yet the differences overtime were largely minimal comparably to less longitudinal studies, and the US media included increased lenses of substantive coverage close to an election than had been previously found. Future study may yield more statistically significant data and a fuller picture of media coverage of elections.

Appendix A

Codebook for Variables

News Source: What was the newspaper?
1 = Guardian
2 = New York Times

Year: What election year was this article from?
1948 – 2010

Item Number: Specific Coding number for each article in each year
1 – 30

Story: What type of story is the article?
1 = Straight
2 = News Analysis
3 = Candidate Profile

Substance: Is the main subject of the story substantive? What is that main topic about?
1 = Substantive: Economy
2 = Substantive: Foreign Policy
3 = Substantive: Defense
4 = Substantive: Religion
5 = Substantive: Social Issues
6 = Substantive: Ethics
7 = Substantive: Citizen Interviews
8 = Substantive: Immigration
9 = Substantive: Speeches
10 = Substantive: Civil Rights
11 = Substantive: Debates
12 = Substantive: Platform
13 = Substantive: Education
14 = Substantive: Other
15 = Non-Substantive: Conduct of Campaign
16 = Non-Substantive: Horse Race/Polls
17 = Non-Substantive: Media Coverage
18 = Non-Substantive: Candidate Qualities
19 = Substantive: Health

Focus: What was the main focus of the article?
1 = Campaign Strategy
2 = Policy
3 = Candidates/Parties
4 = Campaign Finance

5 = Other

Placement: Where was the article placed in the newspaper?
1 = Front
2 = Inside

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