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Local Television and Newspaper Coverage of Political Advertising

Erika Franklin Fowler
RWJ Scholar in Health Policy
Univ. of Michigan\Wesleyan University
109 Observatory, SPH-II, M2234
Ann Arbor MI 48109

Travis N. Ridout
Assistant Professor
Department of Political Science
Washington State University
816 Johnson Tower, Troy Lane
Pullman WA 99164-4880
tnridout@wsu.edu

Abstract: How often do the news media cover the advertising of political candidates? And how do the characteristics of the news outlet, the media market, the race and the advertisements themselves influence the extent to which this ad amplification takes place? Examining Senate and gubernatorial campaign coverage by several newspapers and local television stations in five Midwestern states in 2006, we find that coverage of advertising is quite extensive, most of it is low quality, and its volume depends both on the size of the market and the tone of the spots aired. Surprisingly, however, television stations were not more likely than newspapers to cover advertising, though television does appear to be more sensitive to negative advertising, consistent with our theory.

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Local Television and Newspaper Coverage of Political Advertising

Candidates for office focus most of their time and resources on reaching voters through mass media, both by airing paid television commercials and by attracting favorable media coverage of campaign activities. Though campaigns typically employ distinct strategies for obtaining paid and free media, advertising efforts occasionally wind up appearing in news media coverage, receiving additional (and in some cases substantial) free airtime. President Johnson's 1964 "Daisy Girl" ad is probably the most frequently cited example; however, the 1988 "Willie Horton" ad and the 2004 "Swift Boat" ads – along with policy-related "Harry & Louise" spots from the mid-1990s – all suggest that news coverage of advertising may increase the viewership and potential impact of paid media. Although only a few ads may gain national media attention, local media may find campaign ads from local races to be just as newsworthy, thereby increasing the profile of some paid messages—and doing so for free.

Political communication research typically acknowledges the importance of both paid and free media as primary information sources for voters. Yet traditionally little attention has been given to the additional influence advertising may have as a result of the news media. That is an oversight because without an understanding of how often and under what circumstances advertising appears in news coverage, studies of advertising risk underestimate citizen exposure to paid media. Perhaps more importantly, if free media coverage of campaign advertising is not an accurate reflection of spots actually airing (and research suggests this is the case), then news coverage of elections may skew citizen perceptions of the campaign being waged, leading them to believe campaigns are more negative than they actually are. Clearly, the link between paid and free media deserves more attention.

Despite the lack of scholarly attention to news coverage of advertising, market theories of news production suggest that advertising will appear frequently in election coverage; coverage will disproportionately feature negative and contrast advertising compared to positive messages, and tone and quality of advertising coverage will differ by medium and market size. Drawing on an impressive collection of advertising, local television, and newspaper data from five gubernatorial and four senatorial races in eight Midwest media markets in five states during 2006, we demonstrate that advertising coverage is widespread and tends to focus on negativity. In addition, we examine how differences in race context, medium (television v. newspaper), market size, and other factors explain differences in the volume and quality of free media coverage of campaign advertising across the various races and news outlets. In doing so, we also provide the first comparison of television and newspaper coverage of campaign advertising generally (as opposed to just ad watch coverage) and one of the first examinations of ad coverage at the local level.

News Production & the Market for News Coverage of Advertising

It is widely recognized that the content of news is shaped by economic factors inherent in the relationships between news owners and organizations, journalists, advertisers, and potential consumers (Gans 1979; Hamilton 2004; Kaniss 1991; McManus 1995). Such market theories of news production tend to focus on the quality of news content (see Zaller 1999). Furthermore, they emphasize that ‘news is a commodity, not a mirror image of reality’ (Hamilton 2004, p. 7).

Although economic theories do not examine coverage of advertising specifically, we can extend their logic to better understand why journalists would choose to cover political advertising and how news production factors may lead to coverage that distorts the tone of spots actually airing. The choice to cover political advertising is rational for journalists during

campaign season for at least three distinct reasons: (1) it lowers the costs of certain aspects of news production, (2) it comports with journalistic values, and (3) it offers the opportunity to highlight aspects of the campaign thought to boost audience interest. We take each rationale in turn.

McManus (1995) articulates three stages of news production: discovery (learning what is going on that might be newsworthy), selection (or choice of what to cover based on what is learned through discovery), and reporting (deciding how to cover a topic once selected). Political advertising is attractive first because it takes little effort in terms of discovery. Election season has become virtually synonymous with advertising, and therefore, advertising coverage may occur as a result of the campaigns unveiling new spots, but it may also be reserved for otherwise slow news days on the campaign trail when candidates are talking about the same issues over and over again. In addition, coverage of political ads may also reduce the costs of obtaining sources (a central part of reporting) as the sound bites for ad stories are readily available within the 30-second spot.

Advertising coverage is also attractive for news organizations as it fits well with two journalistic values: emphasizing conflict and exposing inaccuracies. The tendency of news media to cover campaigns through a frame of conflict and controversy is nothing new (Bartels 1988; Patterson & McClure 1976; Robinson & Sheehan 1983). A less recognized side effect of this tendency is that advertising, and negative attack ads in particular, provide yet another opportunity for news media to highlight candidate disagreements. As such, advertising strategies and the dialogue occurring through paid media fit well within the media's broader focus on campaign strategy at the expense of substantive issues (Graber 2001; Kaid, Gobetz, Garner, Leland, Scott 1993; Patterson 1994) and on campaign controversies or campaign issues that do

not necessarily hold any public policy relevance (Leighley 2004). In addition, advertising provides the opportunity for journalists to fulfill the role of the watchdog (Norris 2000), assessing the validity of claims made in political advertisements through ‘adwatch’ segments (Just et al. 1996; Kahn & Kenney 2004; Tedesco, McKinnon, Kaid 1996). While the latter has been widely recognized in the literature, the former has received very little attention (but see Ridout & Smith 2007).

Finally, although citizens tend to pay little attention to politics, economic theories of news production argue that individuals may tune in during election season for a variety of reasons including a sense of civic duty, a genuine interest in the race (similar to a sports fan’s interest in statistics), or because of the drama and human interest part of campaigns (see especially Hamilton 2004). Coverage of political advertising, which is simultaneously a fundamental aspect of candidate playbooks and arguably one of the most dramatic features of the campaign, is therefore an optimal strategy for reporters seeking to capitalize on audiences that enjoy either following the strategies and tactics or the drama of elections.

In short, we have argued that the market for news coverage of advertising is potentially quite large in terms of audience interest and offers the simultaneous benefit of lowering particular production costs while allowing reporters to frame the coverage in ways that comport with both journalistic and audience values. It should not be surprising, then, that advertising is a regular feature of campaign news coverage.

The extent to which coverage of political advertising represents a low-cost news story, however, depends in part on how readily advertising material is available, which in turn depends in part on both the number of unique ads and the number of ads actually airing. Furthermore,

advertising arguably becomes more newsworthy as a race becomes more competitive and the number of advertisements airing increases. Therefore,

H1a: Coverage of advertising should increase with the competitiveness of the race.

H1b: Coverage of advertising should be greater in markets with more advertising.

H1c: Coverage of advertising should increase with the number of unique spots being produced.

All advertising, however, is not equal when it comes to selecting which spots to feature in news. Whether coverage is intended to highlight controversy, campaign tactics or drama—all thought to boost audience attention—or whether it is intended to fulfill the watchdog role of exposing inaccuracies in coverage, there can be little doubt that positive advertising provides fewer opportunities to highlight conflict and drama and fewer controversial claims to criticize. Therefore, advertising coverage should not mirror the tone of spots actually airing, instead:

H2: Negative and contrast advertising should feature more prominently in campaign coverage than positive advertising.

Television versus Newspaper Coverage of Advertising

Finally, market theories also suggest potential differences in the extent to which particular mediums will focus on advertising, and especially on negativity in advertising. Although both local print and broadcast media respond to similar economic forces (Kaniss 1991; Hamilton 2004), there are good reasons to believe that production constraints in local television may lead to a greater emphasis on advertising and on negative ads in particular. Gans' (1979) pioneering study of network news and news magazines emphasized the role that deadline pressures and limited time played in limiting the journalist's search for stories and sources. Perhaps nowhere is such deadline pressure as evident as local television news (Kaniss 1991).

Further as local newscasts devote a majority of their resources to anchor salaries and buying the latest technological equipment, the resulting lack of resources (both in budget and personnel) for news gathering, along with the lack of a beat structure, leaves local television especially dependent on easily accessible sources for stories (Kaniss 1991). Finally, the quality of the video and the catchiness of the sound bite rather than the importance of a story frequently determine not only the ranking of stories within a newscast but also whether they get airtime at all (Kaniss 1991).

Although newspapers may have more room to mention advertising, the many ways in which ad coverage makes television news production easier leads us to believe:

H3a: Local television will focus as much as or more on advertising than local newspapers.

Local television and newspaper coverage obviously differ most notably in format with the former drawing on compelling visuals (Graber 2004; Kaniss 1991) that no doubt enhance television's penchant for more emotional language than print (Cho et al. 2003; Kaniss 1991). Given the high value placed on both drama and video in local television (Kaniss 1991), it makes sense that negative and contrast ads—with their careful choice of striking visuals, ominous music, and greater emotional appeal (Brader 2006; Nelson & Boynton 1997)—will be more likely to be prominently featured in television newscasts than in newspapers (see Kaid et al. 1999 for some examples of this).

H3b: Local television news should feature negative and contrast ads more often than local newspapers.

Variation in the Quality of News Coverage of Advertising

Although existing theories of news production merely suggest how the volume of advertising coverage may be affected by economics, they (along with other comparisons of news content) provide much more explicit guidance as to how the quality of news coverage – typically measured as ‘higher’ quality hard news (government or policy relevant information) compared to ‘lower’ quality soft news (entertainment, human interest, and drama) – may differ. Though much academic attention has been devoted to adwatch coverage, which (in intention at least¹) embodies more of the characteristics of higher quality, issue-oriented journalism (Just et al. 1996; Kahn & Kenney 2004; Tedesco, McKinnon, Kaid 1996), as mentioned previously, advertising coverage may also be used primarily to highlight candidate strategy and tactics, which more closely resembles soft news journalism (Kaid et al. 1999). Given the market for sensationalism (Bartels 1988; Patterson & McClure 1976; Robinson & Sheehan 1983), we believe:

H4: Advertising will be featured primarily in low quality coverage (coverage emphasizing strategy, tactics, character drama, or tone of the race) rather than high quality coverage (adwatch and policy concerns).

In addition, the literature suggests that the quality of advertising coverage (hard versus soft news focus) should vary according to medium and market size. We briefly articulate the expectations for each.

Variation by medium: Numerous studies suggest that newspapers and television differ both in volume (Druckman 2005; Just, Crigler, Alger, Cook, Kern & West 1996) and in content² of campaign coverage (Chaffee & Frank 1996; Cho, Boyle, Keum, Shevy, McLeod, Shah & Pan 2003; Just, Crigler & Buhr 1999; Robinson & Sheehan 1983). Local television is widely perceived to be ‘softer’ and the least likely outlet to carry substantive coverage compared to most

other traditional news sources (Just et al. 1996; Just, Crigler & Buhr 1999). As one study put it, “Graphic images of death and human suffering routinely populate television newscasts” (Newhagen 1998, p. 265). Others have found that tabloid, sensationalism, and ‘Mayhem’ news – coverage of crime, disaster, and war – comprise more than half of local television broadcasts (Klite 1995). Therefore, we expect:

H5: Local television news should provide more sensational coverage of advertising.

Variation by size of the media market: Other studies have pointed to the effect of media market size on news outlet competition, on resources available, and subsequently on the content and quality of coverage (Althaus & Trautman 2004; Just et al. 1996; Sabato 1991). Zaller (1999) in particular argues that as the size of the market increases, so does competition between news outlets for market share. While increased advertising revenue from large markets will add to the resources outlets have to devote to their news coverage, the effect of increased competition between news sources will work primarily to decrease the quality of news within the market. Zaller further speculates that competition will be strongest for local television given the larger number of broadcast outlets within a given market. However, he also acknowledges that with the exception of prestigious newspapers (like the *New York Times*), print competition within larger markets may also decrease the quality of newspaper coverage. To the extent that coverage of advertising tactics detracts from coverage of substantive campaign issues, we should therefore expect ad amplification to occur more frequently in larger markets where outlets increase sensationalistic coverage in search of wider market share. Thus,

H6a: Outlets in larger markets should be more likely to carry coverage of advertising.

H6b: Outlets in larger markets should provide more sensational, soft news coverage of advertising.

Data

Our focus was on nine different races – five gubernatorial and four U.S. Senate – in five different Midwestern states: Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin. We chose to examine these races because we had access to advertising tracking data from these states. Our time frame was from September 7, 2006, to November 6, 2006, the day before Election Day. Specifically, we tracked advertising and news coverage from the capital city and largest metropolitan media market for each of the five states with two exceptions. The Minneapolis/St. Paul media market is both the state capital and the largest media market for Minnesota, and the Lansing, Michigan, media market is too small to be tracked by the commercial firm that provided the raw ad data. Therefore, we examine the eight markets listed in Table 1.

Although this sample is limited to Midwest states, we believe our results should generalize more broadly.³ Our eight media markets span a wide range of races, both in competitiveness and size of state, and we also include two open seat contests: Ohio's gubernatorial and Minnesota's senatorial races. Three of the states examined (Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan) have predominantly moralistic political cultures, while two (Illinois and Ohio) are predominantly individualistic (Elazar 1984). In addition, our markets span a wide range in terms of size as we include the third largest market in the country (Chicago), several large markets (Detroit, Minneapolis, and Cleveland), medium sized markets (Columbus and Milwaukee), and two smaller media markets (Champaign/Springfield and Madison).

[Table 1]

In each market, we examined the largest newspapers, coding at least two outlets per state, and we coded local television coverage from the four major local affiliates (ABC, CBS, Fox, and

NBC). We also had coders identify Senate and gubernatorial campaign-related newspaper articles using two on-line sources: Lexis-Nexis and NewsBank.⁴ Local news data came from the University of Wisconsin NewsLab,⁵ whose coders characterized each campaign-related⁶ story on a variety of factors, including whether and the extent to which it mentioned advertising. The coders then noted mentions of television advertising in each of these articles, coding each as having no ad content, some mention of advertising (ad-related) or having advertising as its focus (ad-focused). Inter-coder reliability on this question was quite high; for the newspaper stories, coder agreement was 82 percent, with a Krippendorff's R of .81. For local television stories, coder agreement was 87 percent with a Krippendorff's R of .77. Coders also examined the television and newspaper stories more closely, deciding (from a list of 8 choices⁷) the primary reason that advertising was mentioned in each. Some of these reasons come from a similar analysis that Just, et al. (1996) conducted, and some were developed as we examined the articles themselves.

Following this process, for each television or newspaper story that mentioned a specific ad, we matched that article to the specific ad (or ads) mentioned. Our source for the ad tracking information was the Wisconsin Advertising Project,⁸ which processes and codes ad tracking data captured by a commercial firm, TNSMI/CMAG. These Wisconsin data contain detailed information about the ads aired in each of the media markets that we examined, including the number of spots aired each day, the sponsor of each ad, and the tone of the advertisement. These factors serve as predictors in the statistical models that we present in the next section.

Figure 1 shows the tone of advertising in each of the races examined. Obviously, there is some variation here, ranging from all positive Senate ads in the Milwaukee market (where few

ads were aired) to only 7.4 percent positive gubernatorial ads in the Madison, Wisconsin, media market. We expect these differences in tone to help explain variation in ad-related coverage.

[Figure 1]

Local Media Coverage of Advertising

How much coverage of political advertising is there? Although the answer to that question varies by news outlet, on average, coverage of advertising is considerable. Table 2 speaks to newspaper coverage of the races (both gubernatorial and senatorial) in the five states we examined. Of the 1,630 gubernatorial campaign-related stories in these 15 newspapers, 18.5 percent had at least one mention of candidate advertising (what we have labeled “ad related”). Contained within these ad-related stories were some deemed by coders as focusing almost entirely on advertising. These “ad focused” stories comprised 6.3 percent of all gubernatorial campaign stories.

Newspaper coverage of Senate campaigns was higher; over 30 percent of coverage was campaign-related, and 12.9 percent of articles were focused on political advertising. Although these aggregate percentages tell an important story, they do cover up some differences across outlets and races in their coverage of advertising. For instance, none of Wisconsin’s newspapers mention candidate advertising in conjunction with that state’s U.S. Senate race, likely due to the very small amount of advertising in the non-competitive race. At the other extreme, half the articles in the Columbus Dispatch about Ohio’s tightly contested Senate race between Mike DeWine and Sherrod Brown mentioned advertising. And almost 35 percent of the newspaper’s articles were focused on the advertising in that race. There were even some differences across newspapers covering the same race in the percentage of coverage that was ad-related and ad-

focused. For example, 46 percent of coverage of Ohio’s Senate race in Cleveland’s Plain Dealer was ad-related, compared to only 17.5 percent in the Akron Beacon-Journal.

[Table 2]

The amount of advertising coverage was significant as well on local television stations, as Table 3 attests. Across all television stations, an average of 17.3 percent of total gubernatorial coverage mentioned advertising. Ad-focused coverage was less but still substantial, constituting almost 7 percent of gubernatorial race coverage. In the U.S. Senate races examined, ad-related coverage (stories that mentioned advertising) constituted 20.9 percent of total campaign coverage, while 9.6 percent of U.S. Senate coverage was focused on advertising. As with newspapers, television coverage of the same race sometimes varied substantially across television stations even within the same media market. Milwaukee serves as a good example. In Wisconsin’s gubernatorial race, 31 percent of station WISN’s campaign coverage was ad-related, and 19 percent of it focused on advertising. But at rival station WITI, only 4.8 percent of coverage was ad-related, and the station aired no ad-focused stories.

[Table 3]

Obviously, there was a lot of ad coverage in these races and markets in 2006, and there was tremendous variation across news outlets in the attention they devoted to coverage of advertising. One question that remains is *how* these news outlets covered political advertising. Table 4 speaks to this question, showing the frequency with which eight different reasons were coded as the primary reasons for mentioning advertising. The two “high quality” reasons (illustrating a policy issue and evaluating the factual claims of an ad) together make up roughly 20 percent of the stories. By contrast, the remainder of the explanations (“other” excluded), such as making a point about strategy or illustrating the tone of the race, represent lower quality

reasons for mentioning stories. In sum, low quality ad mentions exceed high quality mentions by at least a three to one margin.⁹

[Table 4]

What is also striking is that there are relatively few differences between television stations and newspapers in their reasons for mentioning advertising. Newspapers are more likely to use advertising to illustrate the tone of the race, and they are more likely to mention advertising in conjunction with low quality reasons. But for both mediums, the dominant use of ad mentions is to illustrate campaign strategy or tactics (32 percent for newspapers versus 35 percent for television). In sum, it appears that the same reasons drive both television and newspaper mentions of television advertising, and the vast majority of these reasons are low quality, focused on tactics, strategy, the tone of the race or non-policy issues, as H4 suggests.

Multivariate Model Results

To this point, we have established that media coverage of political advertising is substantial. But there is still a lot of variation in coverage to be explained. Therefore, we estimate two statistical models predicting the amount of ad-related (or ad-focused) coverage aired or printed by the different news organizations in each race. The dependent variable is measured as the proportion of ad-related (or ad-focused) stories about the U.S. Senate or gubernatorial race on each news outlet. Because the dependent variable is continuous, ranging from 0 to 1, we used a generalized linear model with a logit link function, and we also clustered on race so as not to bias our standard errors. One of our predictors is the tone of the advertising in the race as measured by two variables: the percentage of negative ads aired in the race and the percentage of contrast spots aired in the race. As we are interested in how competitive pressure affects news quality, we incorporate the size of the media market (in millions of households) as

reported by Nielsen Media Research.¹⁰ Additionally, we include an indicator of whether the outlet is a newspaper as opposed to a television station, the total number of campaign-related stories about the race aired or printed, a measure of the competitiveness of the race,¹¹ the total number of spots aired in the race, the number of unique ads (“creatives”) that were broadcast,¹² and the total length of stories mentioning political advertising. This last variable, coded as the number of words,¹³ was designed to control for the fact that longer stories allow for a better chance for advertising to be mentioned. We only include this variable in the model predicting ad-related coverage, however, because whether a story focuses on advertising or not should not depend on its length. Finally, we include an indicator of whether the race is a senate race as opposed to a gubernatorial race as some evidence from local print and broadcast television suggests that coverage of the two races are different in volume and focus (Kahn 1995; Fowler et al. 2007).

What could account for the variation in ad coverage across races? One important answer is the tone of the advertising, as H2 suggests. Indeed, Table 5 shows that as the percentage of negative ads aired in the campaign rises, so does the amount of coverage that mentions advertising. The model predicts that in a campaign whose ads were only 10 percent negative, the proportion of ad-related stories would be .06, but that proportion would rise to .12 if half of the campaign’s ads were negative.¹⁴ This finding, however, does not hold for the percentage of contrast ads aired in a campaign, which is not associated with the amount of ad-related coverage. In sum, the less positive the advertising in the campaign, the more attention that advertising will receive. This finding is consistent with models of the media that suggest coverage is driven by controversy and conflict.

[Table 5 and Table 6]

Turning to ad-focused coverage in Table 6, however, one sees that the percentage of negative advertising is unrelated to the number of ad-focused stories aired or printed. That said, as the percentage of contrast ads in the race increases, the proportion of ad-focused stories increases. Increasing contrast ads from 10 to 50 percent leads to an increase in the proportion of ad-focused coverage from .04 to .10. It seems safe to conclude, then, consistent with H2, that the controversy and conflict often invoked by negative and contrast advertising leads to more media coverage of political advertising.

Are television stations devoting more coverage to political advertising than newspapers, as was our expectation? In order to answer this, we turn to again to the estimates reported in Table 5. The sign on the newspaper indicator variable is positive and statistically significant, suggesting that the proportion of ad-related stories is greater in newspapers, but this could be potentially misleading. Given that most real-world ad campaigns are unlikely to be entirely positive, we should also consider the interaction of the newspaper indicator and the total percentage of ads in the race that are negative and contrast. Because the coefficient on this interaction is negative, it is possible that the seemingly higher share of ad-related stories in newspapers might only hold for unrealistically low levels of ad negativity. We therefore predicted the proportion of ad-related stories in a newspaper and on a television station, both with an average percentage of negative and contrast ads (61.6 percent). In this situation, the predicted proportion of ad-related articles in a newspaper is .17 but is only .14 on a television station. When the percentage of negative and contrast ads rises to 80, however, the predicted proportion of ad-related coverage in newspapers and on television is the same, .19, and when all campaign ads are negative or contrast, the proportion of ad-related coverage on television is actually higher, .25 versus .21 for newspapers. In sum, the evidence is unresponsive of our

expectation that television would pay more attention to advertising (H3a); how often ads get mentioned in each medium depends on the level of negativity in the race being covered.

Examining the effect of medium on the proportion of ad-focused (as opposed to ad-related) stories in Table 6, we find that neither the newspaper coefficient or the newspaper-by-negativity interaction coefficient is statistically significant, and so again we reject the idea that there are differences in the likelihood of producing an ad-focused story by medium.

A closely related, but distinct, question about differences by medium is whether the airing of some negative ads has more of an impact on the likelihood of a television news broadcast airing an ad-related story than a newspaper, as H3b predicts. To answer this question, we turn back to Tables 5 and 6 and the interaction of the newspaper indicator variable and the total percentage of ads in the race that are negative and contrast. The coefficient on this interaction term in the model predicting ad-related stories lends some support to our hypothesis. The negative sign on the coefficient indicates that newspapers are less likely than television news to ramp up their coverage of advertising when the campaign becomes more negative (and the relationship is statistically significant at the .05 level). To illustrate, when negative and contrast ads rise from 10 percent to half of total ads, the proportion of ad-related stories in a newspaper rises by .04, while the comparable jump for local television is .06. Clearly, television is more responsive to negativity than are newspapers. We cannot, however, draw the same conclusion from the model predicting the proportion of ad-focused stories where the interaction term is an insignificant predictor. In sum, when campaigns turn negative, television stations increase their mentions of advertising at a higher rate than newspapers (though not stories that focus on advertising), even though television stations are no more likely than newspapers to cover advertising overall.

One other factor that helps predict the number of ad-related and ad-focused stories is the size of the media market (consistent with H6a). A larger media market is associated with more ad-related coverage, as Table 5 shows. Indeed, the predicted proportion of stories that mention advertising for each outlet in each race rises from .09 in a market of one million households to .15 in a market of two million households. A larger media market is also associated with more ad-focused coverage (Table 6), increasing the predicted proportion of such stories from .05 in a market of one million households to .08 in a market of two million households. These results provide evidence in favor of our expectation that the competitive pressures faced by news outlets in larger media markets drive them to the type of sensational stories typified by ad coverage.

Finally, the total number of campaign-related stories carried by the news outlet is also a significant predictor. Consistent with our expectations, as the volume of campaign coverage increases, the number of ad-related and ad-focused stories increases as well. The competitiveness of the race is also positively related to the number ad-related and ad-focused stories, confirming H1a. The number of unique ads produced was unrelated to the proportion of ad-related or ad-focused coverage, contrary to the expectation of H1b. The number of spots aired by the candidates was positively related to the number of ad-related articles produced, as predicted by H1c, but that relationship did not hold for ad-focused articles. And we find no evidence that U.S. Senate races receive more coverage than gubernatorial races.

There is one additional question to consider: How do the characteristics of the news outlet and the media market affect the quality of ad-related coverage? Our expectations were that local television should provide more sensational, lower quality coverage of advertising than newspapers (H5) and that outlets in larger markets, due to greater competitive pressures, should provide lower quality coverage than outlets in smaller media market (H6b). To investigate these

ideas, we estimated a final generalized linear model predicting the proportion of ad coverage that was low quality—defined as coverage other than ad watch or policy-based coverage—featured on each news outlet in each race. Table 7 reveals no difference between newspapers and television in their relative mix of high- and low-quality ad-related coverage, but we do find support for the idea that outlets in larger markets provide lower quality ad-related coverage. Indeed, the magnitude of the market effect is quite large. Our model predicts that the proportion of low quality coverage rises from .49 in a media market with one million households to .84 in a media market with two million households. Therefore, market size serves as an important part of our explanation of variation in patterns of ad coverage.¹⁵

[Table 7]

Discussion

Our research points to several conclusions about the conditions under which advertising is likely to receive media attention. We demonstrate that in all but the least competitive races, mentions of advertising in news coverage are substantial, surpassing one-third of total coverage in some races in some media outlets. By and large, however, this coverage is not high quality coverage that primarily focuses on issues or discusses the merits of claims found in advertising. Rather, the majority of ad-related coverage concerns the personalities and characteristics of the candidates or the tone and tactics of the campaign. Newspapers are no more likely to mention advertising than local television news, even when we take into account newspapers' larger news hole. Thus, we have no support for the popular stereotype that local television broadcasts cover more “low quality” news in the form of ad-related stories. But we do have evidence that newspaper coverage is less sensitive to negativity than local broadcast coverage. When the campaign goes negative, local television stations ramp up their coverage of advertising more

quickly than local newspapers. And market size affects ad coverage, increasing the amount of both ad-related and ad-focused coverage, much as Zaller (1999) suggested. Another consistent driver of ad coverage is the tone of the ads: the greater the percentage of negative ads, the larger the proportion of ad-related coverage, and the greater the percentage of contrast ads, the larger proportion of ad-focused coverage.

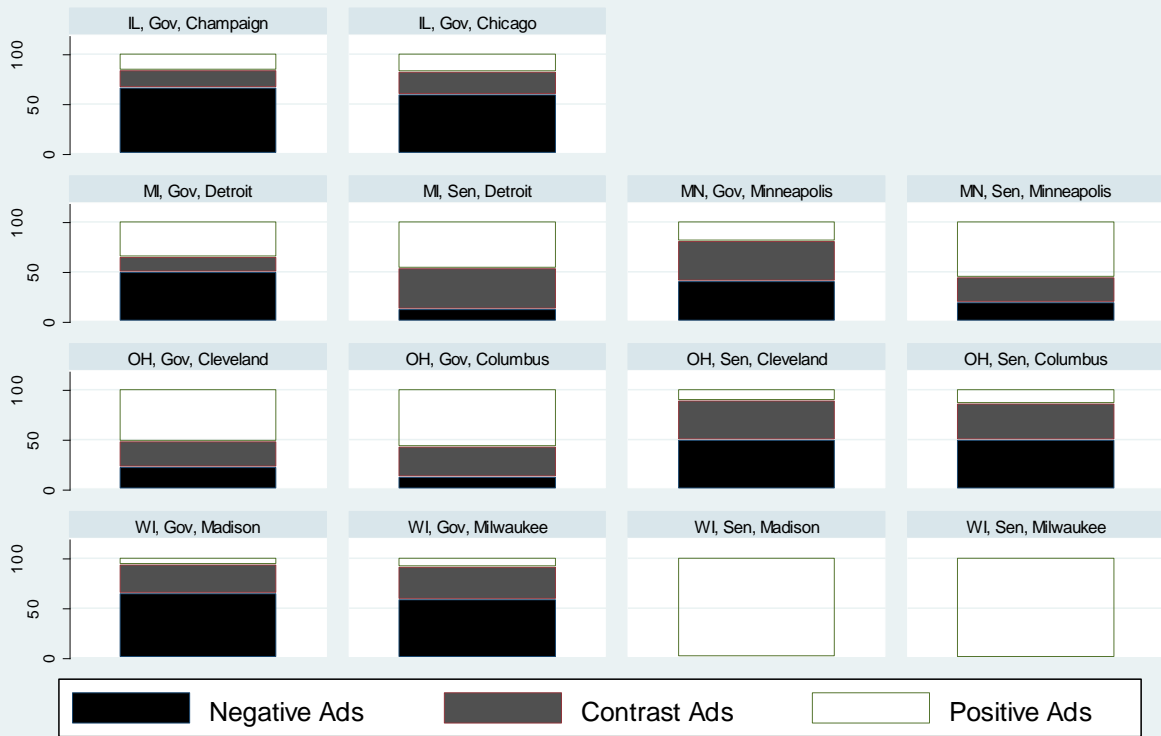
The frequency with which the news media devote coverage to political advertising holds some important lessons for those who study political advertising. First and foremost, the content of the advertising that is aired in a campaign may not serve as a good guide to the content of the advertising that voters are receiving because free media are amplifying some types of ads and ignoring others. The ads that are typically amplified are those that are negative or contrast in tone, and thus the picture of the campaign that the electorate gets from free media is one that is more negative than the true campaign in paid media. Furthermore, although consumers of both local print and broadcast media are likely to gain added exposure to campaign advertising, our findings suggest that viewers of local television news may perceive the tone of advertisements being aired to be even more negative if broadcasters are more sensitive to negativity than is print.

One area worthy of further research is a more dynamic analysis of the campaign—how the launching of a new negative ad one day affects coverage on the next. Indeed, while the unveiling of a new ad may affect coverage, a change in tactics may as well. We noted on one local news broadcast, for instance, that a change in tactics—the candidate aired a positive ad in what had been an acrimonious race—provoked a news story. In addition, while we have begun an investigation into news quality, demonstrating that much ad coverage is “low quality,” there is certainly room for a more in depth examination of the ways in which advertising is portrayed in the news media. Finally, though our content analysis has determined how advertising in free

media varies, what remains to be determined is how advertising amplification filters into citizens attitudes and perceptions of the campaign. Might, for instance, exposure to ad coverage, in addition to exposure to advertising itself, influence perceptions of campaign tone?

In sum, our research has taken some important steps toward understanding the news media's coverage of political advertising. Not only have we shown its ubiquity in both print and broadcast formats and across types of political races, we have also shown that the extent to which ad amplification takes place varies systematically, depending on the tone of the ad, the competitiveness of the race, and the size of the media market.

Figure 1. Tone of Advertising by Market and Race



Graphs by State, Race, and Media Market

Table 1: Market Characteristics

		TV Households†	Competitiveness (by state)‡	
			Governor	Senate
Illinois	Champaign/Springfield	378,100	Lean Dem	-
	Chicago	3,430,790	Lean Dem	-
Ohio	Cleveland	1,541,780	Lean Dem	Toss-Up
	Columbus	890,770	Lean Dem	Toss-Up
Michigan	Detroit	1,936,350	Toss-Up	Lean Dem
Minnesota	Minneapolis/St. Paul	1,652,940	Lean Rep	Toss-Up
Wisconsin	Madison	365,550	Toss-Up	Solid Dem
	Milwaukee	880,390	Toss-Up	Solid Dem

† Nielsen Media Research, Local Universe Estimates

‡ Cook Political Report, September 7, 2006

Table 2: Ad-related and Ad-focused Stories by Newspaper and Race

	Gubernatorial			Senate		
	Total articles	Percent ad- related	Percent ad- focused	Total articles	Percent ad- related	Percent ad- focused
Illinois						
Chicago Sun-Times	74	18.9	5.4			
Chicago Tribune*	102	23.5	3.9			
Springfield State Journal Register*	91	22.0	2.2			
Champ. Urbana News Gazette*	27	18.5	7.4			
Michigan						
Detroit News*	135	21.5	7.4	45	13.3	4.4
Detroit Free Press*	180	24.4	5.6	38	18.4	2.6
Ann Arbor News	32	21.9	3.1	2	0.0	0.0
Minnesota						
Star Tribune	121	26.4	12.4	95	28.4	11.6
Pioneer Press	73	9.6	6.8	70	31.4	10.0
Ohio						
The Plain Dealer	111	10.8	1.8	83	45.8	12.0
Akron Beacon-Journal*	63	15.9	6.3	57	17.5	3.5
The Columbus Dispatch	129	16.3	9.3	92	48.9	34.8
Wisconsin						
Wisconsin State Journal	161	12.4	6.8	9	0.0	0.0
Capital Times	124	9.7	7.3	9	0.0	0.0
The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel	207	21.3	5.3	5	0.0	0.0
Total	1630	18.5	6.3	505	30.7	12.9

*Data come from NewsBank

Table 3: Ad-related and Ad-focused Stories by Television Station and Race

		Total	Gubernatorial		Total	Senate	Percent
		stories	Percent	Percent	stories	Percent	Percent
			ad-	ad-		ad-related	ad-
			related	focused			focused
Chicago	WBBM	28	21.4	10.7			
	WFLD	25	16.0	4.0			
	WLS	33	24.2	9.1			
	WMAQ	37	21.6	2.7			
Columbus	WBNS	27	3.7	3.7	23	26.1	4.3
	WCMH	9	0.0	0.0	15	6.7	0.0
	WSYX	21	0.0	0.0	16	0.0	0.0
	WTTE	9	0.0	0.0	13	0.0	0.0
Cleveland	WEWS	52	3.8	0.0	39	12.8	5.1
	WJW	3	33.3	0.0	7	28.6	0.0
	WKYC	13	7.7	0.0	23	26.1	17.4
	WOIO	5	0.0	0.0	13	23.1	7.7
Detroit	WDIV	48	14.6	4.2	15	13.3	0.0
	WJBK	15	20.0	0.0	4	25.0	25.0
	WXYZ	69	14.5	10.1	22	18.2	13.6
Madison	WISC	62	27.4	19.4	1	0.0	0.0
	WKOW	25	24.0	8.0	2	0.0	0.0
	WMSN	13	30.8	7.7	0	0.0	0.0
	WMTV	32	28.1	9.4	0	0.0	0.0
Milwaukee	WDJT	43	9.3	4.7	2	0.0	0.0
	WISN	42	31.0	19.0	0	0.0	0.0
	WITI	21	4.8	0.0	1	0.0	0.0
	WTMJ	39	23.1	12.8	1	0.0	0.0
Minneapolis	KARE	30	20.0	3.3	32	31.3	15.6
	KMSP	12	16.7	0.0	11	45.5	36.4
	KSTP	28	28.6	14.3	21	19.0	9.5
	WCCO	24	25.0	12.5	21	47.6	19.0
Springfield	WAND	34	26.5	0.0			
	WCIA	26	11.5	3.8			
	WICS	71	8.5	1.4			
	WRSP	15	26.7	0.0			
Total		911	17.3	6.7	282	20.9	9.6

Table 4: Percentage of Ad Mentions by Primary Reasons for Mention

Primary Reason for Ad Mention	Newspaper	Television	Total
Illustrate a point about the tone of the race	14.6	9.1	12.8
Illustrate a point about strategy or tactics	32.2	35.4	33.2
Illustrate a policy issue	8.8	7.7	8.5
Illustrate a character or other non-policy issue	9.7	3.8	7.9
Merely describe the ad	0.2	5.3	1.8
Evaluate the success of an ad	4.0	5.3	4.4
Evaluate the factual claims of an ad (ad watch)	11.0	13.4	11.8
Other	19.0	20.1	19.3

Table 5: GLM Model Predicting Proportion of Ad-related Stories

	Coef.	S.E.	p-value
Percent of Ads Neg.	0.021	0.008	0.006
Percent of Ads Con.	-0.024	0.023	0.296
Newspaper	0.998	0.340	0.003
Senate Race	-0.494	0.320	0.122
Total Campaign Stories	-0.007	0.001	0.000
Competitiveness	1.092	0.372	0.003
Number of Ads Aired (1000)	0.034	0.017	0.048
Story Length	0.030	0.006	0.000
Number of Creatives	0.037	0.029	0.211
Market Size	0.621	0.218	0.004
Newspaper by Neg./Con.	-0.013	0.005	0.007
Constant	-4.868	0.897	0.000
N	80		
BIC	-38.71		
AIC	.775		

Standard errors estimated clustering on race

Table 6: GLM Model Predicting Proportion of Ad-focused Stories

	Coef.	S.E.	p-value
Percent of Ads Neg.	-0.009	0.016	0.565
Percent of Ads Con.	0.029	0.017	0.094
Newspaper	-1.072	1.389	0.440
Senate Race	-0.131	0.538	0.808
Total Campaign Stories	0.005	0.004	0.222
Competitiveness	1.253	0.435	0.004
Number of Ads Aired (1000)	-0.050	0.179	0.779
Number of Creatives	-0.009	0.033	0.797
Market Size	0.414	0.218	0.057
Newspaper by Neg./Con.	0.011	0.019	0.554
Constant	-6.462	1.091	0.000
N	80		
BIC	-22.44		
AIC	.599		

Standard errors estimated clustering on race

Table 7: GLM Model Predicting Proportion Low Quality Ad Mentions

	Coef.	S.E.	p-value
Percent of Ads Neg.	0.106	0.014	0.000
Percent of Ads Con.	0.024	0.019	0.216
Newspaper	-0.777	0.635	0.221
Senate Race	-0.738	0.463	0.111
Total Campaign Stories	0.013	0.011	0.214
Competitiveness	0.690	0.511	0.177
Number of Ads Aired (1000)	-0.132	0.162	0.413
Number of Creatives	-0.116	0.023	0.000
Market Size	2.875	0.407	0.000
Constant	-4.918	0.985	0.000
N	80		
BIC	-263.67		
AIC	.928		

Standard errors estimated clustering on race

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Endnotes

¹ Experimental evidence suggests that ad watches have the paradoxical effect of causing viewers to remember the ad message more than the reporter's analysis of message accuracy (Ansolabehere & Iyengar 1995; Pfau & Louden 1994).

² This view is not universal; Druckman (2005) contends that newspapers offer more coverage than TV but that the two do not differ drastically in content.

³ The dearth of data on local media coverage of advertising generally (as opposed to simply adwatch coverage) makes it difficult to be certain of generality when comparing to other studies of news coverage. However, within our sample, we include a wide range of large, medium, and small media markets (similar to the range in Just et al. 1996), and our results for volume of newspaper coverage of advertising are consistent with a wider sample of papers throughout the country (Ridout and Smith 2007). Furthermore, examinations of local television in the top 50 media markets (covering 67 percent of the television viewing population) found few regional differences in terms of overall volume of election coverage; however, there was some evidence of more gubernatorial coverage in the South and less senatorial coverage in the Northeast (Fowler 2007). To the extent that coverage of *advertising* follows a pattern similar to election coverage more generally (an empirical question that has not yet been answered), we might expect to find some modest differences between our results and findings for gubernatorial coverage in the South and senatorial coverage in the Northeast. Given the lack of research on advertising in news, we believe our study is an important contribution even for readers who may still be skeptical of the regional generalizability. On other dimensions of competition, open-seats, and market size, we believe our sample incorporates sufficient variation to generalize more broadly.

⁴ Because the content of some newspapers was unavailable in Lexis-Nexis, we conducted some of our searches in NewsBank, an archive of news coverage from more than 2000 newspapers. To ensure that our results were reliable across the two search engines, we compared NewsBank and Lexis-Nexis search results for four different newspapers that were available from both sources. The two sources gave very highly consistent results. There was only one article found in one source that was not identified in another: a September 22 *Chicago Sun Times* article that appeared in Lexis-Nexis but not in NewsBank. The only other issue identified was that Lexis-Nexis incorrectly doubled up five *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* articles that NewsBank correctly located only once.

⁵ The Midwest News Index, a project of the University of Wisconsin NewsLab, monitored the highest-rated early and late-evening half-hour of news coverage aired during the 60 days prior to Election Day 2006 on 35 stations in the five Midwestern states. UW NewsLab captured 97.6 percent of targeted broadcasts on the 31 stations tracked in this manuscript. For more information on the UW NewsLab, see <http://mni.wisc.edu>.

⁶ To match the newspaper searches, we limited our analysis of the television news stories to those that mention both candidates running for the Senate or gubernatorial race in the state served by the media market.

⁷ The eight choices were: advertising was mentioned to (1) illustrate a point about the tone of the race, (2) illustrate a point about the strategy or tactics of the campaign, (3) illustrate a policy issue that is being mentioned in the race, (4) illustrate a character or other non-policy issue that is being mentioned in the race, (5) merely describe the ad, (6) evaluate the success of an ad, (7) evaluate the success of an ad, and (8) other (specify).

⁸ More information about the Wisconsin Advertising Project may be obtained at: <http://www.polisci.wisc.edu/tvadvertising/>.

⁹ Some might consider “describing an ad” as a high quality mention, but adding such ads to the high quality category does not change the dominance of low quality ad mentions.

¹⁰ Nielsen Media Research, Local Market Universe Estimates, available at:

<http://www.nielsenmedia.com/nc/portal/site/Public/menuitem.55dc65b4a7d5adff3f65936147a062a0/?vgnnextoid=6573d3b8b0c3d010VgnVCM100000ac0a260aRCRD>. Accessed November 20, 2007.

¹¹ Competitiveness data came from the September 7, 2006, Cook Political Report. We coded tossup races as 3, leaning races as a 2, races in which one candidate was likely to win as a 1, and races that were safe for one candidate as a 0.

¹² We estimated some additional models in which the competitiveness of the other statewide race was included as a predictor. We thought that the presence of another highly competitive race might detract from coverage of the race in question, but the variable was a statistically insignificant predictor. Because of this, and the fact that it boosted the collinearity of the predictors substantially, we decided to eliminate this variable from the models we report.

¹³ Although we were able to tabulate the total number of words in each newspaper article, we used an estimate of 100 words per minute for television broadcasts (so TV word count is equal to the total story time in minutes times 100), which is the speed of slide presentations (Williams 1998).

¹⁴ These predicted values are based on holding all variables in the model at their actual values, varying only the percentage of negative coverage. We follow the same procedure for calculating all predicted values, altering only the independent variable of interest and holding all others at their actual values.

¹⁵ One further idea that we wanted to test was whether market size might work differently for television stations and newspapers, given the generally weaker competition faced by newspapers. To assess this, we re-estimated the model shown in Table 7, including an interaction of the newspaper indicator with market size. This interaction was not a significant predictor of high-quality ad coverage, and the newspaper main effect remained an insignificant predictor.