

Framing the Affordable Healthcare Act: Examining Alternative and Mainstream Media Approaches

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Abstract

In recent times few issues have been as contentious as the Affordable Healthcare Act. This study analyzed media frames between the New York Times and The Alternet.Org ($N = 1772$), one mainstream newspaper and one alternative news site, for the year 2012, to examine how two media outlets, different in approach and operational size, reported on the Affordable Healthcare Care Act, to demonstrate that the conflict frame dominated news coverage in both the organizations. Conflict framing emphasizes strife between individuals, and groups, and engenders cynicism which reduces attention to substantive issues. While alternative media is often seen to operate in opposition to mainstream media values, in this case, both mainstream and alternative media chose similar frames of coverage and thus audiences had little recourse to information that could have ensured a better understanding of the policy and its impact.

Keywords

alternative media, frame theory, audience reception, framing, mainstream media

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In what The New York Times reporters described as “an epic political battle that could define the differences between the parties for years,” (Pear & Herszenhorn, 2010), the constitutionality of the Affordable Healthcare Act (ACA) was upheld by the Supreme Court in 2012. Resistance toward the bill was widespread (Conway, 2013) and part of the driving force for founding of the Tea Party movement (O’Connor & Rapchak, 2012). This was also a time when the U.S. was suffering from an economic recession, rising unemployment, and struggling businesses across the country (Blumenthal & Morone, 2010). Healthcare, in the United States, reaches deep into the ideological divide amongst the Democratic and Republican Parties drawing on the stark views of the role of government in its citizens’ lives (Brown, 2013). The Affordable Healthcare Act seems particularly contentious where awareness about it seemed particularly lacking with people unable to even distinguish between the Affordable Health Act and ‘Obamacare’ as it popularly called.

Studies have shown news media strongly influence the approval of policy among the public (Young & Weaver, 2005). Media framing is a ubiquitous feature of political discourse and because frames permeate public discussions of politics, they help citizens on how to think about and understand complex social policy problems (Nelson et al., 1997) but rarely have studies examined the differences in framing in alternative and mainstream media especially about healthcare policy. This study seeks to compare frames or the “schemata of interpretation” between the New York Times and the Alternet.Org, one mainstream newspaper and one alternative news site, for the year 2012, to gain an understanding of the differences in frames used and examine how two media outlets, different in approach, reach and operational size, reported on the issue to influence public opinion in a bid to analyze how media coverage of the issue influenced public thought, besides examining areas of overlap between mainstream and alternative media in the context of political communication.

The New York Times often sets the news agenda for publications nationwide, commands the attention of policy makers and is considered the nation’s elite newspaper (McCombs, 2005; Stevenson et al., 1991). The two-time Webby award-winning news site, AlterNet.org has been a top content provider in the progressive and independent media world since 1997, with consistently increasing audiences currently averaging 2.7 million unique visitors per month. Since mainstream media is considered ideologically aligned with social elites, such media is expected to reproduce the prevalent status quo while the alternative press usually challenges the neoliberal economic system, presenting a counter-narrative of community rights and a negligent national government that fails to protect the health of its citizens (Hopke, 2012). To make informed choices and navigate within a complex health care system, consumers need available, accurate, and timely information. The challenge is not merely to communicate accurate information to consumers, but to understand how to present and target that information (Hibbard & Peters, 2003).

Literature on media framing of policymaking in a non-electoral context, specifically, health care reform is limited (Harcup, 2005; Younge, 2004). While the diverse effects of news media have been documented in theoretical literature (Cacciatore et al., 2016), few studies have explored the similarities and differences between two completely diverse media organizations, the mainstream, and the alternative, in the health policy context. Health care reform is a multifaceted issue, giving supporters and opponents' alike framing opportunities (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000). To ensure validity, this study uses the frames in public policy debates investigated by Jamieson and Cappella, 1996, in their study of the role of the press in the healthcare reform debate of 1993–1994 and Lawrence (2000) where she argues about the prevalence of the game frame in national level policy debates and thus examines the game or strategy frame, conflict frame, value frame, material frame and issue frame.

Articles published in the entire year 2012 in The New York Times online version and The AlterNet.Org ($N = 1772$), were content analyzed to study the dominant frames as well as the differences in the frames used in the coverage of the health care bill to define the debate in the press. The time frame for the study was chosen to coincide with the phase the controversial Act's constitutionality was ruled on and the months immediately following the ruling. Based on contemporary political communication and framing theory, this study examines the frequency of the issue, value, material, game, and conflict frames, and investigates the changes the frames undergo in the 12-month time frame for the whole year 2012.

Affordable Care Act: Background

The Affordable Care Act was designed to create new incentives to change clinical practice to foster better coordination and quality as well as provide patients more information to make them more value-conscious consumers and changes the payment system to reward value (Kocher et al., 2010). The bill was introduced on October 29, 2009 and after a long and contentious battle, the US Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the Obama Health Care Plan (OHCP), officially known as the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (2010) on June 28, 2012. Gallup Polls conducted in Feb 2012,¹ weeks before the Supreme Court's decision, showed that "Americans were "no more likely to support the law now than when it was passed."

Literature Review and Theoretical Basis

As investigations into public opinions about the healthcare reform show that while a majority agrees that a problem exists with the current health care system and that some action on health care reform was necessary, most individuals indicate satisfaction with their own health care, and clear public support for

any specific reform proposal was difficult to muster (Eckles & Schaffner, 2010). Besides public policies also are “judged in terms of expected costs and benefits for the individual and for his or her family, friends, favored groups, and the nation or world as a whole” (Page et al., 1987). Framing is an essential feature of public discourse on matters of political import and public issues are multifaceted; they are always, “many issues at once” (Verba & Nie, 1987), open to many interpretations.

Media frames are “primarily responsible for conveying to the public an impression of how the nation’s institutions are performing” (Lipset & Schneider, 1987). Exposure to political coverage influences the importance of issues (Young & Weaver, 2005) among the public and it increases talk about politics (Pan et al., 2006) which in turn influences political knowledge in general and produces greater voter participation (Prior, 2005). Frames cognitively serve to structure the public debate, influence readers, issue information and the attribution of policy responsibility.

In the area of healthcare, Johnson et al. (1993) has proved that frame manipulations influence consumer’s decisions about insurance. Policy issues such as health, welfare and environmental issues are open to differing views because in the media they are usually discussed in both moral and economic terms. For such issues the values emphasized in media coverage are likely to play a critical role in voter’s evaluations and information processing (Domke et al., 1998). When issues in elite media debate are framed in a way that draws attention to a policy’s beneficiaries, group-centrism increases but when issues are framed in ways that deflects attention away from the beneficiaries, group-centrism declines. Jamieson and Cappella (1998) in their investigation of the Clinton health care reform show that the media focused more on the conflict and strategies of the political battle that raged over the proposal rather than the actual content of the healthcare package. While Jamieson and Cappella refer to how the coverage of issues and emphasis on conflict influence the failure of the Act (Brown, 2013), they don’t underline the extent to which game frames are now a standard in coverage of public policy (Lawrence, 2000).

Frames aren’t cast in stone and as studies have shown over time media framing of issues sometimes undergo changes dependent on situations and incidents (Gamson & Lasch, 1983; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Gamson et al. have shown how changes in the framing of policy issues can be traced to certain events like for example, the media focus on nuclear technology moved from a largely positive coverage framed as “technological progress” to disturbing “runaway technology” frames following the Three Mile Island disaster (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). A war of frames is often waged because political elites know that if their frame becomes the dominant frame in public debate then the battle for public opinion in their favor is won (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000).

Studies of media coverage during the Clinton health care reform initiative underlined that for the American press, “healthcare reform was a challenging story with both social and political dimensions” (Conway, 2013; Lieberman, 1995). Journalists often frame politics as a strategic game and studies have documented clear links between exposure to game-framed (strategic) news stories and political cynicism (Schuck et al., 2013). Strategy frames pay attention to the motives of political actors where coverage of issues is framed in terms of a “game” or “strategy” (Borah, 2014). Value frames or “value conflicts” usually depict policy debates as a clash of basic values. In framing effects studies, value conflict has been examined using many issues—civil liberties conflict (Nelson et al., 1997), gay rights (Brewer, 2003), and health care (Shah et al., 1996). Value frames provide an interpretive framework to understand a political issue (Ball-Rokeach & Loges, 1996) and resonate with individuals’ preexisting schema. Shah et al. (1996) have demonstrated that value frames prompt the spread of activation to related issue schemas, influencing individuals’ judgments about other issues, vote choice processes, or candidate character. Issue frames have been found by Cappella and Jamieson (1996) in articles focusing on problems facing the country’s health care system and their solution. Issue frames in print coverage of complex policy debates also activate cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996). Material frames are an assessment of economic consequences of the policy (Lee et al., 2008). Media frames easily activate core values since they are accessible to individuals (Price et al., 1997). Strategic use of frames decreases voter turnout, influence opinions on political candidate, trust in government and civic duty (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996), reduce learning and decrease intention to participate (Valentino et al., 2001).

Since frames must be considered schemes for both presenting and comprehending news two concepts of framing can be specified—media frames and individual or audience frames (Scheufele, 1999). Entman (1993) differentiated individual frames as “info processing schemata of individuals” and media frames as “attributes of the news itself” (p. 51). Gamson and Modigliani (1989) define media frames as a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events . . . the frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue.” There are crucial links between audience or individual frames and media frames. Thus, to understand the connections between individual and media frames, we must consider both kinds of frames and link them consistently (Scheufele, 1999). Distinguishing between media and individual frames also makes clear that individuals do not always frame events in the same manner as media elites (Muddiman, 2013). The cognitive schema that citizens develop for politics may be activated when they view specific message frames (Scheufele & Scheufele, 2010). Besides, as Page et al. (1987) show public policies also are “judged in terms of expected costs and benefits for the individual and for his or her family, friends, favored groups, and the nation or world as a whole.”

Framing Healthcare

A 2014 study showed that mainstream newspaper coverage of the 2010 health care reform was largely politically focused; while a significant part of the Latino online newspaper coverage reflected the reform details and their implications for Latinos (Biswas, 2014). But the last word has hardly been said. Competing conceptions of health care have incited vigorous conflict over how healthcare policy debate should be framed (West et al., 1996). Studies that explore how the 2012 presidential candidates, Mitt Romney, and Barack Obama, framed the topic of health care during their respective campaigns, show that while Romney tended to frame discussions of health care in a strict father fashion, and Obama tended to frame using the nurturant parent model (Sours, 2013). Technology, especially the proliferation of social media and blogs, both liberal and conservative adds to the debate (Veenstra et al., 2010), as for example, Sarah Palin's Facebook note introducing the term "death panel" to the then-ongoing health insurance reform debate which quickly turned the debate about the health care reform bill toward phantom bureaucrats with the power to euthanize (Veenstra et al., 2010) and was powerful enough to shift the focus of news coverage from discussions of the "public option" and substantive coverage of the health care debate to discussions of Palin's sensationalized claims (Duffy, 2013).

Before the Affordable Healthcare Act, came the Clinton health care reform, called the American Health Security Act, in 1993. It comprised the most relevant health care reform plan prior to the Affordable Healthcare Act and the press put an emphasis on personalities and the political game (game frame), without making clear how the reform would affect readers and viewers personally (West et al., 1996). While multiple factors contribute to public misunderstandings pertaining to health care policy, the repetition of anti-reform tropes based on fundamental misperceptions of health care reform contributes to the misinformed nature of the American public (Duffy, 2013). Meyerowitz and Chaiken (1987) found that individuals were more compliant with health care recommendations when qualitative information was presented in terms of what an individual must lose rather than in terms of what an individual must gain. But scholars (Wilson et al., 1987) have also found that individuals are more willing to select risky medical options when probabilistic information is worded positively rather than negatively.

Quantitative studies conducted on the role of the government in the health care industry reveal that the public harbors serious fears that government encroachment will compromise "the cost of care, the quality of treatment, and the freedom of choice available to them (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000). The main frame of these concerns revolves around questions of government incompetence, a frame, conservatives repeatedly use, in their opposition to expansion of the government's role in social welfare (Duffy, 2013). As the news monitoring

project by the Kaiser Family Foundation, the Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press, and the Columbia Journalism Review (West et al., 1996) revealed, citizens believed 31% of the stories focused on the political impact of health care, 21% dealt with the impact of reform on the health care system, and only 17% focused on the effect of reform on individuals and families. The latter was the topic of prime interest to ordinary Americans (West et al., 1996).

Alternative and Mainstream Press

There is a long and continuing tradition of alternative media being produced to challenge the discourse(s) of mainstream media (Harcup, 2003). It has been suggested that one of the defining differences between the alternative and mainstream press is that they frequently have a different idea of what constitutes a story in the first place (Franklin, 2011). Alternative media are more likely than mainstream media to oppose dominant ideologies, agendas, and values (Boyd-Barrett, 2006). Atton (2003) uses the term alternative media to refer to a range of media projects, interventions and networks that work against or seek to develop different forms of communication against the dominant and broadly accepted ways of 'doing media'.

Journalism practiced within alternative media has typically been understood as being entirely different to and separate from journalism practiced within mainstream media (Harcup, 2003) with alternative media representing a diversity of sources and perspectives usually considered to be extreme by mainstream media (Boyd-Barrett, 2006). Johnston and Noakes (2005) have shown clear distinctions between framing issues for the purpose of social movement mobilization that most alternative media is associated with and how those issues are framed by potential participants in response to frames proposed by mainstream media frames (Downing, 2008). However, while some scholars see distinct differences between alternative and mainstream media which would suggest differences in terms of framing issues, lines between alternative and mainstream media are gradually blurring. Atton (2003) and Downing (2008) have opened dialogue about "the complex, hybrid nature of alternative media in relation to its mainstream counterparts". Alternative and mainstream journalism has always been understood to be fundamentally different; both in practice and approach, but recently scholars have started examining certain crossover characteristics (Harcup, 2005) and Hall et al. have demonstrated, mainstream and alternative media "despite the very different styles adopted by the various titles... can produce similar 'public images' which together can uphold hegemonic discourse rather than challenge it. Atton (2003) and Couldry and Curran (2003) have shown that the practices and processes of alternative media should not be considered as "entirely separate" from those of more dominant media. Harcup (2003) has suggested that there may be some crossover of ideas, content,

style, and, not least, people between what may be termed the alternative and what may be termed the mainstream; that some of the alternative media's "hybridized voices" (Atton, 2003) may on occasions resonate within the mainstream.

In this light, this study seeks to examine:

RQ1: Which frame did the New York Times and The AlterNet.Org employ the most when reporting on the Affordable Healthcare Act?

RQ2: What were the other dominant frames used and to what extents were they present in the New York Times and The AlterNet.Org's coverage of the health-care reform debate?

2A: Is there a significant difference between the frames used by The New York Times and The AlterNet when reporting on the health care reform debate?

RQ3: To what extent did the frames used by The New York Times and The AlterNet change over the time selected?

Methods

The study content analyses the news stories The New York Times (online edition) and The AlterNet (<http://www.alternet.org/>) because as a method it is "objective, systematic and a quantitative description of the manifest content of communication" (Berelson, 1952) and allows replicable and valid inferences from texts to the contexts of their use (Krippendorff, 2004). This study used the frames as defined and analyzed in public policy debates by Jamieson and Cappella (1998) in their study of the role of the press in the healthcare reform debate of 1993-1994 and Lawrence (2000) where she argues about the prevalence of the game frame in national level policy debates.

Analyzing a total of 1772 articles, this study examines five specific frames: the game or strategy frame, the material frame, the issue frame, the conflict frame, and the value frame. The game or strategy frame places political actors into a framework of winners and losers, focusing on the strategies employed by the key players to influence the outcome of the policy debate (Shehata, 2013). The material frame focuses on the economic and financial aspects of the policy. This frame will address the costs of the policy initiative, the economic consequences, and how the government will finance the new policy (Lee et al., 2008). The issue frame will address the substantive matters of the policy, such as what will be included in the legislation, the logic behind the policy, rational alternatives, politicians' stances on the issue, or the general implications of the proposed legislation (Lawrence, 2000, Cappella & Jamieson, 1996). The value frame will include the discussion of non-substantive issues related to the issue like for example as a clash of values or basic moral principles in terms of differing ideologies. The conflict frame emphasizes conflict between individuals, groups or institutions as means of capturing audience attention. The presence of this

frame often reduces attention to substantive issues (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). To operationalize the research questions, the content analysis looked at the frequency of these variables (frames) to highlight the occurrence of the frames and the changes in the frames over the 12-month period.

News articles from The NYT and The AlterNet.Org ($N = 1772$) was downloaded from the LexisNexis USA database. The unit of analysis is each news article since framing theory depends on the character of the whole text (Entman, 1993). Keywords included 'health care reform' and 'Affordable healthcare act' which had to appear as a 'major mention' (Brown, 2013) which meant that the article must be either about the Affordable healthcare act or related substantially to it. Editorials were not considered. A total of 922 articles from The New York Times and a total of 850 articles from the AlterNet.Org were analyzed for this study. All the articles found were analyzed to isolate and compare frames. An alpha level of .05 was used for all statistical tests. The unit of analysis is each article, which were read in its entirety since framing theory involves overall character of texts (Brown, 2013) and coded for the different frames under consideration. Each article was examined for one or multiple frames.

To analyze RQ1 and R2, which examined which frame did the New York Times and The AlterNet.Org employ the most and to what extent were the other frames used when reporting on the healthcare reform debate, this study depended on nominal variables that coded for the use of the game frame, material frame, issue frame, value and conflict frame as defined by the frames in public policy debates investigated by Jamieson and Cappella (1998) in their study of the role of the press in the healthcare reform debate of 1993–1994. Crosstab functions analyzed if there was a significant difference between the frames the two news organizations used and to answer RQ 2 A. RQ 3 required an investigation of articles done over the time selected. On June 28, 2012, the US Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the Obama Health Care Plan (OHCP), officially known as the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (2010). The study divides this time into four equal waves—the first wave is from January to March 2012 (when debates just before the being made an Act is intense), the next wave is from April to June (the months just before it is signed to be an Act), the third wave is from July to September (the months right after it's been an Act), the fourth is from October to December (when the rollout of the Act start). The time waves are equal in duration and designed to capture the major events that occurred right before and right after the Act was signed into becoming a law.

Inter-Coder Reliability

The author of this study trained a senior graduate student with no knowledge of The AlterNet.org news site to assist in coding. To establish inter-coder

reliability, the author and the coding assistant coded a total of 150 stories from The NYT and 150 stories from the AlterNet.Org site. Inter-coder reliability was 98%, calculated as the ratio of number of decisions agreed upon by both coders and the total number of decisions taken by them (Poindexter & McCombs, 2000). Inter-coder reliability for individual variables, the occurrence of the frames, showed a Kappa range from .61 to 1, with an overall mean of .85, exceeding the acceptable minimum standard (Poindexter & McCombs, 2000).

Results

This section is an interpretation of the content analysis of the 922 articles from the NYT and the 850 articles from the AlterNet analyzing for the differential use of frames in the coverage of the healthcare reform debate in 2012.

RQ1: Which frame did the New York Times and The AlterNet.Org employ the most when reporting on the Affordable Healthcare Act?

A frequency analysis of the frames showed:

The AlterNet

Game frame	Material frame	Issue Frame	Value Frame	Conflict
38%	36%	51%	21%	82%

The New York Times

Game frame	Material frame	Issue Frame	Value Frame	Conflict
42%	47%	40%	39%	74%

The conflict frame was the most common frame used by both The New York Times (82%) and The AlterNet (74%). The game frame (focusing on the strategies employed by the key players to influence the outcome of the policy debate) was found occurring in 38% of the total articles analyzed in The AlterNet while 42% of the articles in The New York Times used this frame.

The New York Times used the material frame in 47% of the articles (focusing on the economic and financial aspects of the policy) while 36% of the articles in The AlterNet used it.

The issue frame (focusing on substantive matters of the policy, such as what will be included in the legislation, the logic behind the policy) occurred in 51% of the articles from The AlterNet and it was used 40% of the time in The New York Times.

The value frame (non-substantive issues related to the issue like for example as a clash of values or basic moral principles) was used the least in The AlterNet; 21% of the articles used it while in The New York Times 39% of the articles

used it. Both The New York Times and The AlterNet used the conflict frame the most to frame articles focusing on the healthcare debate. A frequency analysis demonstrates that the NYT and The AlterNet framed the debate in terms of conflict (52%), issue (30%), material (27%), game (26%) and value (20%).

RQ2: What were the other dominant frames used and to what extents were they present in the New York Times and The AlterNet.Org’s coverage of the healthcare reform debate?

The conflict frame dominated the coverage of both the NYT (74%) as well as that of The AlterNet (82%). The next most dominant frame was the issue frame in the AlterNet-51% of the stories analyzed used this frame. While in the NYT the material frame (47%) was the most dominant frame, followed by the game frame (42%), the AlterNet saw the game frame (38%) followed by the material frame (36%). While the NYT value framed 39% of their stories, the AlterNet used the value frame for 21% of their stories.

RQ2A: Is there a significant difference between the frames used by The New York Times and The AlterNet when reporting on the health care reform debate?

The chi-square analysis showed that among the two news organizations there was significant difference in the way the material frame (Asymp. Sig .037) and value frame (Asymp. Sig.000) are used. There was no significant difference between the ways the two news organizations used the game (Asymp. Sig. .423), issue (Asymp. Sig.062) and conflict frame (Asymp. Sig.109).

RQ3: Did the frames used by The New York Times and The AlterNet change over the time selected?

The bar chart demonstrates the changes in news frames over the 12-month time. As discussed in the methodology section, the time frame was divided into four waves of time to demonstrate the change of frames during the coverage of the health care debate.

Game frame	Material frame	Issue Frame	Value Frame	Conflict
.423*	.037**	.062***	.000****	.109*****

*shows the significant differences in the way the news organizations used the frames ($\chi^2 = .423, df = 1, p > .001.$)

**shows the significant differences in the way the news organizations used the frames ($\chi^2 = .037, df = 1, p < .001.$)

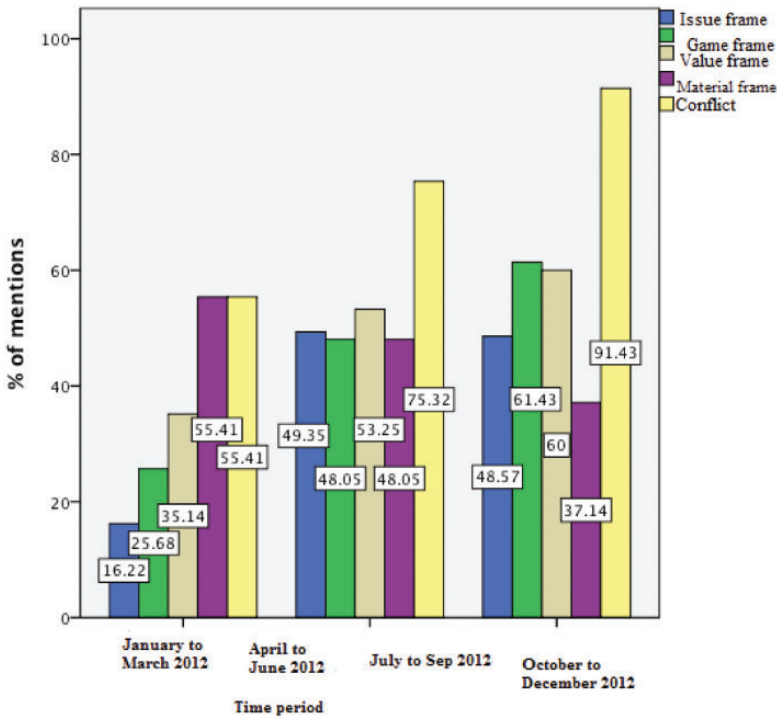
***shows the significant differences in the way the news organizations used the frames ($\chi^2 = .062, df = 1, p > .001.$)

****shows the significant differences in the way the news organizations used the frames ($\chi^2 = .000, df = 1, p < .001.$)

*****shows the significant differences in the way the news organizations used the frames ($\chi^2 = .109, df = 1, p > .001.$)

The bar chart displays frames in terms of percentages of mentions per articles in each period. The bar chart was a result of a times series analysis done on the data analysis software SPSS. This result also demonstrates a dominant and increasing use of the conflict frame. The conflict frame increased from 55% (T1- January to March 2012) of the articles to 75% (T2- April to June) and reached its highest usage of 91% in time wave three (T3) leading up to the signing of the bill into an Act. The game frame also increased over the period, reaching its peak during T3 (July to September 2012), appearing in 51% of the articles. The issue frame increased significantly between T1 and T2, from 16% to 49% then remained almost equal (48%) in T3 (July to September 2012). The value frame increased significantly between T1 and T2, from 16% to 49% then remained almost equal (48%) in T3 (July to September 2012). The value frame (non-substantive) was mentioned in more articles, gradually increasing from T1 (35%) to T2 (53%) to T3 (60%). The only frame to decrease over time was the material frame (cost). In T1 it was used equally as the conflict frame in 55% of the coverage.

Change of Frames Over Time



Discussion

Health care reform, clearly, is an issue that provides stakeholders various opportunities to frame the issue in different ways (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000). This study, which analyzed frames or the “schemata of interpretation” between the New York Times and The AlterNet.Org, one mainstream newspaper and one alternative news site, for the year 2012, to gain an understanding of the frames used and explore how two media outlets, different in approach and operational size, reported on the Affordable Healthcare Care Act, saw the conflict frame dominate news coverage in both the organizations and that while alternative and mainstream media may have differences, in covering the Affordable Healthcare Act, their framing was similar. This analysis provides insights in the ways mainstream and alternative news media work, demonstrating clear areas of overlap between mainstream and alternative media in the context of political communication, especially in the way the conflict frame has been used.

While The New York times used the conflict frame in 74% of the articles analyzed, the AlterNet used it in 82% of its articles. The conflict frame emphasizes conflict between individuals, groups or institutions as means of capturing audience attention. Conflict frames engender the growth of cynicism in audiences (Terkildsen & Schnell, 1997) and the presence of this frame often reduces attention to substantive issues (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Cappella and Jamieson (1998) in their investigation of the Clinton health care reform also showed how the media focused more on the conflict and strategies of the political battle that raged over the proposal rather than the actual content of the healthcare package. As the analysis of articles showed, few articles in the NYT and AlterNet focused on what the Act would do for people and how people were to benefit from it. A reason affecting the dominance of the conflict frame could have been the time frame of the study which was chosen to coincide with the phase the controversial Act’s constitutionality was ruled on and the months immediately following the ruling. Also, the year 2012 saw the 57th quadrennial United States presidential election which could have affected the use of the conflict frame. But overall, the dominance of this frame shows that both alternative and mainstream media covered the issue in similar ways, thus, ensuring that the public had little recourse to information framed differently that perhaps could have ensured a better understanding of the act and more public unanimity.

In the AlterNet, the issue frame, which addresses the substantive matters of the policy, such as what will be included in the legislation, the logic behind the policy, rational alternatives, politicians’ stances on the issue, or the general implications of the proposed legislation (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996; Lee et al., 2008, Lawrence, 2000), followed the conflict frame and 51% of the issues analyzed used this frame. The NYT used the issue frame 40% of the time. While the AlterNet did use the issue frame in 51% of the articles analyzed, it was clear

that the conflict frame was in direct opposition with the issue frame, and journalists, in both the NYT and AlterNet, reported on the winners, losers and tactical strategies employed by different parties rather than the policy implications of the legislation (Brown, 2013).

The material frame (which focuses on the economic and financial aspects of the policy and addresses the costs of the policy initiative, the economic consequences, and how the government will finance the new policy (Lee et al., 2008) was used in 47% of the articles analyzed in the NYT. In the AlterNet, 36% of the articles used the material frame. Public policies also are “judged in terms of expected costs and benefits for the individual and for his or her family, friends, favored groups, and the nation or world as a whole” (Page et al., 1987) and a main component of the health care reform was to cut health care spending costs (Blumenthal & Morone, 2010) and substantial articles in both the NYT and AlterNet focused on this.

The value frame (which include the discussion of non-substantive issues related to the issue like for example as a clash of values or basic moral principles in terms of differing ideologies) was used in 21% of the articles in the AlterNet while 39% of the articles analyzed from the NYT used this frame. Value frames provide an interpretive framework to understand a political issue (Ball-Rokeach & Loges, 1996) and resonate with individuals’ preexisting schema. It has been demonstrated that (Shah et al., 1996) that value frames influence individuals’ judgments about other issues, vote choice processes, or candidate character. But it was found least in the samples selected from NYT and AlterNet. While some articles especially in the NYT (39%) did focus on issues of how coverage should be extended and who should be covered, few (21%) in the AlterNet did the same. Both the material and value frames are important as policy issues such as health, welfare and environmental issues are open to differing views because in the media they are usually discussed in both moral and economic terms. For such issues the values emphasized in media coverage are likely to play a critical role in voter’s evaluations and information processing (Domke et al., 1998).

The game frame (which places political actors into a framework of winners and losers, focusing on the strategies employed by the key players to influence the outcome of the policy debate (Shehata, 2013) was used in 38% of the sample from AlterNet and in 42% of the articles from the NYT. Lawrence (2000) emphasizes the prevalence of the game frame in national level policy debates and the press is often accused of putting an emphasis on personalities and the political game without making clear how the reform would affect readers and viewers personally (West et al., 1996) as shown in the coverage of the Clinton health care reform, hailed as comprising the most relevant health care reform plan prior to the Affordable Healthcare Act.

The time frame for the study was chosen to coincide with the phase the controversial Act’s constitutionality was ruled on and the months immediately following the ruling and there were changes in news frames over the 12-month

period. As studies have shown over time media framing of issues sometimes undergo changes dependent on situations and incidents (Gamson & Lasch, 1983; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Results of a time series analysis showed an increase in the use of the conflict frame, reaching its highest usage in time wave leading up to the signing of the bill into an Act. The game frame also increased over time, reaching its peak during T3 (July to September 2012), appearing in 51% of the articles. The issue frame (from 16% to 49%) and value frame also showed increases in use and the only frame to decrease over the period was the material frame (cost). The chi-square analysis showed no significant differences in the way the two news organizations used the game (Asymp. Sig. 423), issue (Asymp. Sig.062) and conflict frames (Asymp. Sig.109) while the material frames (Asymp. Sig .037) and value frames (Asymp. Sig.000) are used significantly differently in the two organizations. This is in keeping with Harcup's (2003) suggestion that there may be some crossover of ideas, content, and style, between what may be termed the alternative and what may be termed the mainstream and that some of the alternative media's "hybridized voices" (Atton, 2003) may on occasions resonate within the mainstream. As scholars like Atton and Couldry have shown that the practices and processes of alternative media should not be considered as "entirely separate" from those of more dominant media. This resonates research done by Hall et al. who established that alternative and mainstream press can often produce remarkably similar 'public images' which together can uphold rather than oppose dominant ideology.

Studies of media coverage during the Clinton health care reform initiative emphasized that for the American press, "healthcare reform was a challenging story with both social and political dimensions" (Lieberman, 1995) Timely information is conducive to making informed choices, yet an abundance of information does not always translate into it being used to inform choices and clearly in the area of healthcare reform, the challenge for journalists and news media is not merely to communicate accurate information to consumers, but to understand how to present and target that information (Hibbard & Peters, 2003).

Limitations

The study has several imitations for example while it compares two primarily print organizations and shows crucial differences and similarities, it does not answer why they occur. Journalistic perspective can provide some rich perspectives. More attention is also necessary to understand how different media forms inform framing and especially how framing considerations shift from traditional news outlets to news on social and digital media. Future research can also examine differences in framing by comparing frames across a variety of media

including radio and television and new media like YouTube and social media as well as citizen media.

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1. See <http://www.gallup.com/poll/152969/americans-divided-repeal-2010-healthcare-law.aspx>

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