

The public versus CNN: Agenda setting and the Youtube presidential debates in the United States

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Abstract

The CNN-YouTube Presidential Candidate Debates provided a unique opportunity for the public to become involved in national political discussion. Although the debates' questions were produced by the public, the videos appearing in the broadcasts were selected by a CNN selection committee; thus, prompting criticism that CNN established the agenda of the publicly created debates. Using content analysis, this study investigated the characteristics of the broadcast videos and the online video submissions to determine if significant differences in the videos' characteristics existed between the two samples. The results indicate minimal differences between the samples, suggesting that agenda setting was not evident in the videos selected by CNN for broadcast during the CNN-YouTube debates.

Key Words: Political Debates, YouTube, Agenda Setting

Introduction

Internet-based technologies have radically altered the face of politics in the United States. Web 2.0 technologies have allowed varied and increased parties to become creators and disseminators of political information and have provided evolving avenues for democratic engagement. In June of 2007, CNN and YouTube attempted to capitalize on the proliferation of the political Internet by creating a set of user-generated debates called the CNN-YouTube Presidential Candidate Debates. The public was encouraged to create and upload video debate questions to YouTube for potential inclusion two live candidate forums, one Democratic and one Republican, to be broadcast on CNN. The creators anticipated that the debates' format would change the face of presidential debates in the United States by providing a link between the public and politicians not previously available. While the debates generated a large number of submissions and high television ratings, critics questioned the user-generated nature of the debates. Although the videos were created by the public, a CNN selection committee retained control over which videos were chosen for the national broadcast. This prompted criticism that CNN enacted media control in the YouTube environment, a venue historically free of undue editorial control; thus, not presenting a true user-generated debate, rather, simply a clever way for CNN to establish the political agenda for the debates.

The CNN-YouTube debates provided a unique shift in the political debate landscape. For the first time, the public was invited to become an instrumental participant in the creation of debate material. While some candidate forums, such as town halls, have previously allowed for audience involvement, for the most part, public participation in

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JCMR Journal of Communication and Media Research, Vol. 2, No. 1, April 2010, 67 – 77
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tional political debates has been restricted. By fostering national political conversation through converging technologies, the CNN-YouTube Debates opened a traditionally static political institution to dynamic, transnational discourse.

Agenda Setting

Major media outlets play an important role in setting both social and political agendas (Weaver, McCombs, & Shaw, 2004). The theory of agenda setting provides that there is a correlation between the level of importance ascribed to issues in the media and the priorities of the public. Although the relationship between the media and the public is mutually dependent, media agendas are often a function of influential groups that have the ability to dictate the relative importance of issues displayed to the public. Opinion leaders also function as agenda setters by creating, filtering, and promoting information flow through social discourse and networks (Brosius & Weimann, 1996). The media's collective socializing power has been extensively examined and documented with regard to traditional forms of media. However, what has not been thoroughly discussed is the potential that this socializing power is, perhaps, enhanced when the creators of political messages are members of the public-at-large and not members of the traditional media establishment.

The CNN-YouTube Debates provide a distinctive case through which to examine the theory of agenda setting. The question topics were decided upon by individuals that elected to create and upload videos to YouTube and not by media counterparts or opinion leaders, which is common of more traditional political debates. This practice, ostensibly, provided an opportunity for the public to set the agenda for these debates. However, the public had no role in the selection of the videos; therefore, limiting the overall public impact upon the debates and potentially opening the door for CNN to establish the debates' agenda.

The debates were created with a specific goal in mind: to harness the power of the Internet in order to allow the public to play an integral role in the creation of national political dialogue (YouTube, 2007). The overarching idea behind the debates was to bring a level of inclusion and transparency to a political process that has not traditionally welcomed public participation (i.e., Blimes, 1999; Commission on Presidential Debates, 2000, 2004; Seltz & Yoakam, 1976). However, while both CNN and YouTube positioned the debate format as one that would bring equality through participation, the selection control retained by CNN ensured that only videos selected by CNN would be broadcast during the national live forums.

Additionally, the criteria for video selection were never made public,¹ effectively allowing CNN control everything from questioners' demographics to the topics addressed during the broadcasts. These measures potentially served a gatekeeping function, allowing for the selection of debate topics that supported a media agenda and not necessarily one that was representative of the issues salient in the online video population.

The selection process may have also allowed for priming, another function of agenda setting, to occur. Priming takes place when the media's contextualization of an issue or

¹Host Anderson Cooper did make a statement at the beginning of each debate regarding what types of videos would not be seen during the debates; specifically, videos where children were the primary speaker, speakers in costumes, and videos that used animation, but provided no elaboration regarding how or why videos were chosen.

set of issues helps to define public opinion and when topic selectively forces issues to the forefront of public consideration (Rogers & Dearing, 1988; Woodward, 1997). By determining what videos would be broadcast, the order in which they would be shown, which questions the candidates would answer, and the number of questions each candidate received, CNN effectively dictated which topics were viewed as publically salient and which candidates were provided the most significant opportunities to address the public.

The CNN- YouTube Presidential Candidate Debates

The CNN-YouTube Debates offered new opportunities for democratic engagement and spurred public interest; nearly 8,000 videos were submitted for possible inclusion in the live candidate forums (Ricke, 2010). The broadcasts were also successful in drawing in a significant audience share. The debate between Democratic candidates in July of 2007 had roughly 2.6 million viewers, just shy of the 2.8 million viewers that tuned in to the traditional primary debate in New Hampshire just one month prior (Toff, 2007). The Republic debate in November of 2007 recorded 4.49 million viewers, making it the most watched debate in cable news history to date (Crupi, 2007). Both debates were also successful in capturing the politically sought after 18-34 year-old demographic, a population known for an overall lack of political engagement and participation (Ricke, 2010). The candidates responded with collective positivity with regard to the debate format and other media outlets followed suit by producing user-generated debates of their own (Seelye, 2007).

While these factors indicate a level of success achieved by the debates' format, there were undoubtedly critiques. Some overarching criticisms related to participation entry barriers, such as a necessary level of technological sophistication. Additionally, there were condemnations that the debates were simply flashy political stunts that provided no real substance (Levy, 2007), and that the public, as an entity, was not capable of constructing debate-worthy questions and, therefore, unable to contribute substantively to national political conversation (Vargas, 2007).

A significant criticism of the debates targeted CNN's use of an undisclosed selection committee and selection process to choose the questions that would be answered by the candidates during the live broadcast forums. Many participants and critics called for a system through which an online voting system or a count of how many times a video was marked as a "favorite" would be used to choose the videos that would air during the broadcasts. The argument posed was that if the debates were truly user-generated, then the public, not CNN, should be allowed to select the questions they would like to see the candidates respond to. The creators provided a brief counter to this argument, defending the selection process as the most equitable selection solution amid concerns that allowing online voting may lead to campaigns "stuffing the ballot box," and therefore, leading to a less diverse set of questions.

The promotion of the debates as entirely user-generated, in conjunction with the nature of the YouTube platform, led many to argue that the establishment of a selection committee convened by a major media outlet violated the editorial-free environment that YouTube is prized for – in short, user-generated should mean: user conceptualized, user created, user selected. The selection process, according to critics, infringed upon the basic nature of YouTube and allowed CNN to participate in a level of media control by setting the agenda for the debates (Baldwin, 2007; Levy, 2007).

The CNN-YouTube Presidential Candidate Debates offer a unique case through which to examine the converging nature of traditional media and Web 2.0 technologies. Because, as a great deal of research has posited, the power to set the public agenda lies in the ability of news organizations to determine the salience of issues for public consideration, examination of the Debates will uncover if CNN advanced an agenda

through the videos they selected for the broadcasts that was contrary to the public agenda, as measured by the online population of video submissions.

In order to determine CNN's agenda setting role in the debates, this analysis examined the demographic characteristics of the video's primary speakers and the characteristics of the questions asked in both the broadcast debates and the online population of video submissions. The following hypotheses and research questions were used to ascertain any significant differences between the population of online submissions and the broadcast debates.

H1: There will be a significant difference in the demographic characteristics of the primary speakers between the population of online submissions and the broadcast debates.

RQ1: What were the demographic characteristics of the primary speakers in the population of online submissions?

RQ2: What were the demographic characteristics of the primary speakers in the videos selected by CNN for broadcast?

H2: There will be a significant difference in question characteristics between the population of online submissions and the broadcast debates.

RQ3: What were the question characteristics of the videos in the population of online submissions?

RQ4: What were the question characteristics present in the videos selected by CNN for broadcast?

H3: There will be a difference in the demographic and/or question characteristics between the Democratic and Republican debate broadcasts.

Method

Content analysis provided a logical method through which descriptive data regarding the demographic characteristics of the primary speakers and the characteristics of the video-based questions could be generated. In order to compare the broadcasts to the population of online video submissions, all 72 videos (38 Democratic and 34 Republican) from the broadcasts and the entire population of online submissions, consisting of 7,916 videos (2,989 Democratic and 4,927 Republican), were examined.

Systematic random sampling was used to determine the final sample of the online video submissions; the sampling method helped control for potential order bias stemming from multiple submissions by the same individual. The final sample for the online population consisted of 698 videos (341 Democrat and 357 Republican) at a 95% confidence level (Krejci & Morgan, 1970). Because each video was limited to 30-seconds in length, the individual video served as the unit of analysis.

Coding

A sampling frame was constructed using the unique video submission numbers assigned by YouTube; each coder was then given a list of video numbers, ensuring submissions were not coded more than once. Although downloading the videos to control for any potential bias created by elements in the YouTube environment, such as comment postings, would have been optimal, it was discovered during the pilot study that low resolution quality eliminated this possibility; therefore, all videos were accessed directly through the YouTube's dedicated debate site.

In an effort to avoid gender biased content evaluation, coding was completed by two females and one male; however, all coders were Caucasian, between the ages of 26 and 30, and had some level of college education. Because the sample was so large and the nature of the data produced many emergent categories, coders individually examined a random sample of 70 videos (35 from each debate) during a pilot study in order to

establish a coding scheme that was mutually exclusive, exhaustive, and equivalent. The videos were then incorporated back into the final sample.

Following final codebook revisions, each coder independently coded 10% of the sample, pursuant with acceptable standards for content analysis, in order to calculate intercoder reliability. The nature of the data violated the assumptions of Scott's pi, making it necessary to instead use the coefficient of reliability as the measurement of intercoder reliability. The large sample size also required reassessing reliability during the coding process to control for potential coder drift. Coder drift reliability was measured after each coder had examined 1/3 of their videos; both initial and drift reliabilities are reported below.

The following coding categories were used to determine the demographic characteristics of the primary speakers and the question characteristics present in the debate videos.

Speakers' Demographic Characteristics

The demographic characteristics typically captured in political communication research (e.g., Carlin & McKinney, 1994; Wright & Davies, 2004) and that could be inferred from the videos were captured. Demographic characteristics included: age (initial .90; drift .92); sex (initial .99; drift .99); ethnicity (initial .96; drift .95); and sexual orientation (initial .99; drift .98). It is important to note that sexual orientation was only assessed when such orientation was specifically stated by the speaker.

Question Characteristics

Literature on question construction (e.g., Dillon, 1983; Mischler, 1991), outlined elements necessary for appropriate question construction and clarified the different levels of complexities found within questions.

It was first necessary to determine if there was actually a question being asked or if the video instead made a statement to the candidates (initial .98; drift .97). Question characteristics included whether the question was open or close-ended (initial .97; drift .97) and simple or complex in construction (initial .96; drift .97). Other characteristics included: question type (i.e., who, what, when, where, why, how or do) (initial .95; drift .96); type of question setup (i.e., name/hometown, narrative/ autobiographical, or situational/informational) (initial .95; drift .95); inclusion of counter arguments (initial .95; drift .95); type of answer requested (i.e., neutral, take a stand, or balanced) (initial .90; drift .91); inclusion of specific answer alternatives (initial .92; drift .94); to whom the question was directed (initial .98; drift .97); and if the question was politically relevant (initial 1.0; drift .99).

Results

Demographic Characteristics

Hypothesis 1 anticipated a significant difference in the demographics represented between the population of online submissions and the broadcast debates.

Online Population

The data for the online population were initially reported in Ricke (2010).² The data indicate that speakers were male in over half, 64%, ($N = 447$) of the videos; women were

²Some of the statistics for the online population were reported in the article Ricke, L. (2010). A new opportunity for democratic engagement: The CNN-YouTube Presidential Candidate Debates. *Journal of Information Technology and Politics*, 7(2), 1-14. They are offered here to establish a comparison between the online population and the broadcast debates.

the primary speaker in 28.5% ($N = 199$) of the videos. It was not possible to identify the speaker's sex in 5.6% ($N = 39$) of the videos, many of these videos included the use of animation or slide shows, and in 0.02% ($N = 13$) there was no apparent speaker. Male speakers predominated, accounting for a significant difference between the frequency of male and female speakers, $\chi^2(1, N = 645) = 94.59, p < .001$.

Speakers categorized as being 26-40 years-old were represented most frequently, being present in 28.9% ($N = 202$) of the videos. Speakers classified as 18-25 years old were present in 27.5% ($N = 192$) of the videos; 41-55 in 14.6% ($N = 102$) of the videos; under 18 in 14.3% ($N = 100$) of the videos; and over 55 in 10.7% ($N = 75$) of the videos. It was not possible to determine the age of the primary speaker in 3.9% ($N = 27$) of the videos. There was a significant difference amongst the ages represented in the population of online submissions, $\chi^2(4, N = 671) = 1.02, p < .001$, with individuals categorized as being 18-40 years-old representing nearly one-half of participants.

The primary speakers were predominately White, represented in 61.1% ($N = 426$) of the videos. Speakers categorized as Black were represented in 13.2% ($N = 92$) of the videos; Hispanics in 11.6% ($N = 81$) of the videos; Asian/Pacific Islanders in 4.4% ($N = 31$) of the videos; American Indian/Alaskan were present in 1.9% ($N = 13$) of the videos; and other racial categories were represented in 4.0% ($N = 28$) of the videos. It was not possible to determine the racial characteristics of 3.9% ($N = 27$) of the speakers. A significant difference in the race of the primary speaker was present, $\chi^2(5, N = 669) = 1.09, p < .001$, with a majority of the speakers being categorized as White.

Because most speakers did not proclaim sexual orientation, it was not possible to determine the sexual orientation for a majority, 82.8% ($N = 578$), of the speakers. Individuals declared heterosexual orientation in 14.5% ($N = 101$) of the videos; homosexual orientation in 2.6% ($N = 18$); and bisexual orientation in 0.1% ($N = 1$) of the videos.

Broadcasts

The data regarding the broadcast videos indicate that males were also the primary speaker in a majority, 68.1% ($N = 49$) of the videos; females were the primary speaker in 26.4% ($N = 19$) of the videos. The sex of the speaker could not be determined in 4.2% ($N = 3$) of the videos, and there was no apparent speaker in 1.4% ($N = 1$) of the videos. There was a significant difference, $\chi^2(1, N = 68) = 13.24, p < .001$, in the sex of the primary speaker, with males being predominate.

A majority of the speakers, 43.1%, ($N = 31$) in the broadcast videos were categorized as being members of the 26-40 year-old demographic. Speakers categorized as being 18-25 year-old were represented in 27.8% ($N = 20$) of the videos; under 18 years-old in 11.1% ($N = 8$) of the videos; 41-55 in 8.3% ($N = 6$) of the videos; and over 55 in 8.3% ($N = 6$) of the videos. The speaker's age could not be determined in 1.4% ($N = 1$) of the videos. A significant difference existed with regard to the age of the speakers, $\chi^2(4, N = 71) = 34.42, p < .001$, as those in the 26-40 year-old age group asked nearly half of the questions.

As with the online sample, a majority of the primary speakers, 61.1%, ($N = 44$) were categorized as White. Speakers characterized as Black were represented in 16.7% ($N = 12$) of the videos; Hispanics in 11.1% ($N = 8$) of the videos; American Indian/Alaskan in 2.8% ($N = 2$) of the videos; and individuals of other racial categories were represented in 2.8% ($N = 2$) of the videos. Most of the speakers were categorized as White, accounting for a significant difference in the racial demographics of speakers, $\chi^2(5, N = 72) = 1.09, p < .001$.

Speakers reported heterosexual orientations in 13.9% ($N = 10$) of the videos and homosexual orientation in 4.2% ($N = 3$) of the videos. The sexual orientation of 81.9% ($N = 59$) of speakers was undetermined. The sexual orientation of a majority of the speakers

was not declared, accounting for a significant difference, $\chi^2(2, N = 72) = 77.58, p < .001$, with regard to the sexual orientation of the speakers.

Differences between the Online Population and Broadcasts

Chi square tests were used to determine the presence of significant differences between the demographic characteristics of the primary speaker in population of online submissions and the broadcast videos. The data indicate that the videos selected for broadcast were very representative of the online submissions. In fact, no significant differences existed across any of the demographic characteristics between the two samples; therefore, hypothesis 1 is rejected.

Question Characteristics

The second hypothesis postulated that there would be a significant difference in the question characteristics between the population of online submissions and the broadcast debates.

Online Population

The data for the online population, as reported in Ricke (2010), indicate that of the online sample, 87.1% ($N = 608$) of speakers asked questions and 12.9% ($N = 90$) made statements to the candidates. Most of the questions, 76.2% ($N = 532$) were open-ended, 23.2% ($N = 162$) were close-ended, and questions could not be determined as open or closed in a small percentage (0.6%, $N = 4$) of the videos. Most questions, 67.9% ($N = 472$) were simple, with 31.5% ($N = 220$) being considered complex; the question complexity could not be determined in 0.6% ($N = 4$) of the videos. A significant difference in the use of open ended and closed ended questions existed, $\chi^2(2, N = 698) = 631.3, p < .001$, with open ended questions being asked more frequently.

Concerning question type, *what* questions (e.g. "What would you do to lower the murder/crime rate?") were asked the most frequently (44.1%, $N = 308$). *Do* questions (e.g. "Do you have a comprehensive health care plan?") were asked in 7.4% ($N = 52$) of the videos; *How* questions (e.g. "How will your administration fund all types of schools for success?") in 7.3% ($N = 51$) of the videos; *when* questions (e.g. "When will we hear the candidates' real platform, rather than what they want us to hear?") in 6.2% ($N = 43$) of the videos; *why* questions (e.g., "Why do politicians feel the need to legislate video games?") were asked in 4.6% ($N = 32$) of the videos; *Where* questions (e.g., "Where do you stand on Roe vs. Wade?") were asked less frequently, only appearing in 3.2% ($N = 22$) of the videos. Multiple question types (e.g. "When [will] the U.S. will help to finally end the inhumane genocides in Darfur? Why haven't we yet?") were present in 10.7% ($N = 75$) of the videos; *other* question types (e.g., "Would you support a significantly increased budget for NASA to further space exploration?") were found in 2.1% ($N = 15$); the question type could not be determined in 0.72% ($N = 5$) of the videos. There was a measurable difference in the type of question asked, $\chi^2(18, N = 698) = 1.09, p < .001$, with *what* questions predominating.

The mentioning a speaker's name and/or hometown (e.g. "My name is Bill and I am from New York...") was the most common type of question setup, present in 44.7% ($N = 312$) of the online submission population. Narrative or autobiographical setups (e.g. "My daughter is dying from cancer and our health care coverage...") were present in 20.5% ($N = 143$) of the videos; situational or informational setups (e.g., "The health care crisis in the United States affects millions of people . . .") were present in 18.8% ($N = 131$) of the videos; no setup was used in 16% ($N = 112$) of the videos. A significant difference with regard to the use of a setup was found, $\chi^2(3, N = 698) = 1.47, p < .001$, with a majority of the videos using a simple name/hometown setup.

Counter arguments (e.g. "I think rising gas prices are the most significant factor impacting America's economy, what do you think?") were found to be present in 44.3%

($N = 309$) of the videos. A majority of the speakers, 65.5% ($N = 457$), requested that the candidates take a stand in their answers (e.g. "What do you think is the single most important factor facing the future of America's children?"); neutral answers were sought in 26.2% ($N = 183$) of the videos; balanced answers (in which candidates were asked to examine both sides of an issue) were requested in 5.2% ($N = 36$) of the videos; the type of answer requested could not be determined in 3.2% ($N = 36$) of the videos. Alternatives (i.e., "Which front in the war on terror is the most significant?") were provided for the candidates in 28.1% ($N = 196$) of the questions. Most questions, 69% ($N = 482$), were directed to all of the candidates; 22.6% ($N = 158$) to multiple candidates; and 8.3% ($N = 58$) to specific candidates.

Broadcasts

The data for the broadcasts debates indicate that 95.8% ($N = 69$) of the videos asked questions of the candidates, with 4.2% ($N = 3$) actually being statements to the candidates or about an issue.

A majority of the questions, 73.6% ($N = 53$), were open-ended and 26.4% ($N = 19$) were close-ended; 65.3% ($N = 47$) were considered simple questions and 34.7% ($N = 25$) were complex. In regard to the type of question asked, the most frequent type of questions were *what* questions, appearing in 48.6% ($N = 35$) of the questions. *When* questions were asked in 9.7% ($N = 7$) of the videos; *how* and *why* questions were each asked in 8.3% ($N = 6$) of the videos; *where* questions in 4.2% ($N = 3$) of the videos; and *do* questions in 1.4% ($N = 1$) of the videos. In 15.3% ($N = 11$) of the videos, multiple types of questions were asked in the same video. There was a statistically significant difference in the types of questions asked during the broadcast debates, $\chi^2(7, N = 72) = 93.11, p < .001$, with open-ended and *what* questions predominating.

Most videos in the broadcasts were prefaced with a set-up. The use of a name and home town was the most common type of set-up, being used in 47.2% ($N = 34$) of the videos. Situational or informational set-ups and a narrative or autobiographical set-up were each present in 16.7% ($N = 12$) of the videos. Simple set-ups were used most frequently in the broadcast videos, accounting for a statistically significant difference in the use of set-ups, $\chi^2(3, N = 72) = 20, p < .001$.

A majority of the videos, 70.8% ($N = 51$) included a counter argument. Speakers requested the candidates to take a stand in 58.3% ($N = 42$) of the videos, while 41.7% ($N = 30$) requested a neutral answer. Alternatives to the candidates were provided in 34.7% ($N = 25$) of the videos. Most of the questions 68.1% ($N = 49$) were directed to all candidates; 25.0% ($N = 18$) were directed to multiple candidates, and 6.9% ($N = 5$) to a specific candidate. A majority of the questions, 86.1% ($N = 62$), broadcast were deemed politically relevant.

Differences between the Online Population and Broadcasts

Chi square tests were used to determine if significant differences existed in regard to the question characteristics between the population of online submissions and the broadcast videos. The data indicate that significantly more videos ($N = 90$) in the online submissions asked questions (versus making a statement) than in the broadcast videos, $\chi^2(1, N = 770) = 4.7, p = .030$. More videos ($N = 51$) in the broadcast videos utilized counter arguments $\chi^2(1, N = 770) = 18.5, p < .001$, than in the online video population. There was also a significant difference in the answer type requested from the candidates, $\chi^2(1, N = 770) = 12.13, p = .007$, with videos in the broadcast sample ($N = 42$) requesting that candidates take a stand and more videos in the online population ($N = 36$) requesting balanced answers. While there are some statistically significant differences between the broadcast videos and the online population, differences existed for only three of nine measures; therefore, hypothesis two is also rejected.

Differences between the Broadcast Debates

The final hypothesis assumed there would be a difference in either the demographic characteristics or the video question characteristics, or both, between the Democratic and Republican broadcasts. Chi square tests were used to determine if significant differences were present between the two debates. The data indicate that videos selected for broadcast between the debates were very similar. In fact, no significant difference was present amongst any of the variables for demographic or video question characteristics between the two broadcast debates; therefore, hypothesis three is also rejected.

Discussion

In this study, the videos that were broadcast during the CNN-YouTube Presidential Candidate Debates were compared against the population of online video submissions to determine to what degree the broadcast sample, selected by CNN, was representative of the online video population. By examining the participants' demographic characteristics and the video question characteristics, it can be asserted that an attempt by the CNN selection committee to set the agenda for the debates was not manifestly evident. Now, whether this was by accident or design, only the debate's creators know.

While there is no way to determine if the similarities between the two samples were intentional, the videos selected for broadcast closely mirrored the online video submissions. This, perhaps, suggests a consciousness by CNN to select a representative sample of videos for the broadcasts. There were no significant differences amongst any variables in regard to participants' demographics and only minimal differences with regard to the question characteristics. This may imply that CNN did not attempt to distort the views the public made salient in their online video submissions in an attempt to create a mediated agenda from user-generated debate content.

Although it is probable that some of the broadcast videos indeed reaffirmed the network's own agenda, the minimal differences between the videos selected for broadcast and those in the online population indicate that the viewing public was presented with a representative sample of videos that accurately portrayed the public opinion present throughout the online video submissions. The minimal differences between the Democratic and Republican candidate forums additionally suggests that there was no intent to set the agenda based on party affiliation; it appears there was an attempt to provide viewers with similar content between the two live debate forum.

Despite the fact that the videos were similar between the two broadcasts and the online population, there is still some evidence that the agenda setting functions of gatekeeping and priming occurred. It was evident during the broadcasts that certain candidates received more questions than other candidates, such as Senators Obama and Clinton, who had nearly twice as many questions directed to them as the other Democratic candidates. Furthermore, candidates who were largely considered as the elections' forerunners were allotted more time to discuss their positions. While some of the videos specifically addressed certain candidates (e.g., "Good evening, candidates. This is Seekster from Arlington, Texas and this question is for Ron Paul..."), a majority of the questions were directed to the candidates at large, and CNN decided to whom they would direct the question during the live debates. This may provide an indication that the public was interested in hearing the perspectives of multiple (or all) candidates, while the debates' creators were interested in the viewpoints of a select few candidates. Priming, such as this, pushed certain candidate's perspectives and policies to the forefront of the debates and potentially to the forefront of public opinion.

It is possible that the CNN-YouTube Debates took a step toward alleviating some of the issues prevalent in agenda setting research, such as, issues of low credibility,

conflicting media evidence, orientation, and different values (Rogers & Dearing, 1988). The invitation for direct citizen participation by CNN and YouTube may have increased public opinion related to media credibility and trustworthiness by providing the appearance that the organizations were interested in the public's point-of-view and establishing a level of public-political transparency.

Since the questions' evidence and narratives were derived directly from the public and were not constructed by either CNN or YouTube, the public functioned as the opinion leaders in this venue. This perhaps lends the network to a higher perceived level of credibility and an orientation more closely aligned with public opinion. Additionally, because the question topics were guided by members of the public, individuals with high political uncertainty may have found such a forum as a method through which they could gain a higher level of political orientation.

The data collected in this study asserts that CNN selected videos for broadcast that were very similar in nature to the population of videos submitted online. This allows for the argument to be made that, on a manifest level, CNN and its selection committee did not contrive a mediated agenda for the debates. However, looking at the conceptualization and production of these debates latently may support the argument that the debates, in and of themselves, were part of a media agenda. Even though the videos were selected by CNN, the videos were made by members of the public and featured the problems and concerns of average citizens. The nature of such videos may allow the viewer to connect with the questioner on a level not probable with traditional debate mediators. This system allows members of the public to essentially function as the opinion leaders and therefore, agenda setters.

Conclusion

As media environments continue to converge, it will be necessary to rethink the way that media agendas are established. It is no longer simply opinion leaders and media conglomerates setting the agendas, rather it is these entities selecting members of the public to establish agendas for other members of the public. As the political Internet continues to evolve, understanding the foundations and issues of agenda setting and opinion creation will remain relevant topics of investigation. The results of this study perhaps indicate that this convergence makes it more difficult for the traditional notions of agenda setting to hold firm.

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