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The Power of the Press: The Effects of Press Frames
in Political Campaign News on Media Perceptions

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Abstract

This paper discusses how the behaviors, roles, and standards of mainstream journalism are framed in political campaign news and empirically examines applicability and accessibility effects of press frames on individuals' media perceptions, specifically news information quality and negative aspects of content (cf. Kosicki & McLeod, 1990). Following previous work, we posited that journalists frame the press in three ways, called conduit, strategy, and accountability. Participants in a between-subjects experiment were exposed to a political campaign story about an exemplar 'character issue' containing these frames. Regarding applicability effects, exposure to each press frame differentially prompted individuals to think frame-relevant subtopics were present in the story. Further, subjects exposed to the strategy press frame interpreted the press as being significantly more negative than individuals exposed to the conduit or accountability frame; subjects exposed to the accountability press frame interpreted the press as having higher news information quality than individuals exposed to the conduit or strategy frame. Regarding accessibility effects, only the accountability press frame prompted individuals to access prior beliefs about the news media in order to form opinions about negativity and quality. Implications for future study of press framing are discussed.

KEYWORDS: political campaign news; framing; press frames, accessibility effects; applicability effects

The Power of the Press: The Effects of Press Frames in Political Campaign News on Media Perceptions

Research shows that an individual's perceptions about the news media may be more important in understanding outcomes such as knowledge gain and political attitudes than watching or reading news alone. Media perceptions have been examined in three lines of research. In a review of work on third person effects, Perloff (1993) posited that individuals possess media perceptions consisting of beliefs about the persuasiveness and manipulative nature of the news media. In this vein, Price, Huang, and Tewksbury (1997) found that, controlling for political conservatism, political knowledge, and media use, media perceptions had a marginally significant effect on third person effects. A second line of research uses media perceptions to qualify cultivation-based models (e.g., the video-malaise hypothesis) of the effects of news media exposure on political attitudes. Austin and Pinkleton (1999) found that, controlling for media use and level of education, the perception that the news media incompletely cover politics was associated with amplified feelings of cynicism ("I'm disgusted with politics"), whereas the perception that news media oversimplified issues was associated with amplified feelings of negativism ("Political campaigns are too mean"). Similarly, Bennett, Rhine, Flickinger, and Bennett (1999) found that trust in media fairness predicted trust in government over and above the influence of use of, and attention to, news. Finally, media perceptions have been explored in an O-S-O-R model of learning from news media (Kosicki & McLeod, 1990). Perceptions of news information quality, comprehensiveness, negativity, and elitism are pre-reception orientations (the first 'O') that predict what individuals learn (the 'R' response) from news stories (the 'S' stimulus) and influence which strategies individuals employ to process news (the second 'O' rientation) (see Fredin & Kosicki, 1989; Kosicki, Becker, & Fredin, 1994).

Where do media perceptions come from? The literature suggests three inter-related sources: socially determined factors, news media use, and exposure to news content. Perceptions of the news media as biased and as hostile to political positions are linked to partisanship (Gunther, 1992; Schmitt, Gunther, & Liebhart, 2004) as well as to individuals' involvement with social groups in the news (Christen, Kannaovakun, & Gunther, 2002). Strong

partisans, particularly Conservatives, generally hold the news media in disfavor (Jones, 2004), owing to their perceptions, often unfounded, of a liberal slant in political news (Domke, Watts, Shah, & Fan, 1999). But manipulating the degree of partisan slant in stories tends to enhance perceptions of press persuasiveness, regardless of an individual's political ideology (Gunther, 1998). Media perceptions are also influenced by news consumption. For example, whereas Moy, Pfau, and Kahlor (1999) found that watching mainstream television news was associated with higher confidence in the news media, Tsfaty and Cappella (2003) found that greater trust in the news media was associated more with *nonmainstream* news use. Also, Moy et al. (1999) found that heavy use of talk radio did not decrease confidence in the news media; Pfau, Moy, Radler, Bridgeman (1998) found that it did. Finally, the content of news can shape media perceptions. For example, Fan, Wyatt, and Keltner (2001) found that the decline in news confidence was due to the news media's tendency "to report their *own* activity with a steady negative tone," thereby making the press a "suicidal messenger" (p. 830, emphasis added).

In all, media perceptions are pre-reception orientations that influence attitudes and opinions about the press and politics, over and above news consumption. But it appears that how these views are activated and used to interpret the press and politics is susceptible to exposure to certain types of news, in particular self-referential news. This study examines how media perceptions are shaped by self-referential political campaign news. Following Kerbel (1997, 1998; Kerbel, Apee, & Ross, 2000) and D'Angelo (1999, 2002; see also Esser & D'Angelo, 2003, 2006), when a political campaign story covers the behaviors of the news media, journalists, or journalism, the story not only presents the news media, journalists, or journalism as a story topic, it also presents a frame of reference about the news media. Thus, we are interested to see how *press frames* shape media perceptions.

In the following sections, we review the content analyses and framing analyses of self-referential political campaign news. Our study then reports on an experiment, conducted at the end of the 2000 U.S. political campaign, which is based on a particular framing analysis that identified three press frames in self-referential campaign news, called conduit, strategy, and accountability (cf. D'Angelo, 1999, 2002; Esser & D'Angelo, 2003). In the scheme of ongoing

research on self-referential news, our study obviously drew on findings from content analyses and framing analysis nearer to the infancy of this line of research. Thus, our experiment punctuated this ongoing work. Although dated, our findings clarify contrasting normative assessments about the nature of self-referential news, doing so by examining how exposure to press frames both activates and shapes media perceptions. How is the press framed in political campaign news? Does exposure to these frames render frame-related thoughts *applicable* to individuals for use in forming opinions about the quality and negativity of campaign news? Does exposure to news performance constrain the degree to which *accessible* attitudes are used to form opinions about press performance? This study tackles each of these questions.

The Press as a Topic and Frame in Campaign News

Content analyses of U.S. presidential campaign news have shown that stories regularly cover aspects of media politics such as candidate-press interactions and candidate performances designed to attract media attention. These studies use various terms to refer to this kind of news, including *self-referential process news* (Kerbel, 1998), *media process news* (Kerbel et al., 2000), *metacoverage* (Esser, Reinemann, & Fan, 2001), *coverage of coverage* (Gitlin, 1991; Stebenne, 1993) *stories about the media* (Johnson & Boudreau, 1996), and *media stories* (Stempel & Windhauser, 1991). This literature is based on the rudimentary point that some stories contain enough spoken, written, or visual references to “journalists,” the “press,” “reporters,” “spin doctors,” and “media consultants” to warrant the claim that the ‘press’ is a topic of the story.

Different unitizing procedures have produced a range of findings on the amount of self-referential news. Kerbel (1998, pp. 35-49) examined coverage of the 1992 presidential election on ABC’s *World News Tonight* and CNN’s *Prime News*. Using sentence-level utterances as the unit of analysis, he found that, for each network, about 20 percent of the total of 10,329 utterances was self-referential. Johnson and Boudreau (1996) examined stories about the media in the 1992 U.S. presidential campaign in print news and on television networks. Using the story theme as the unit of analysis, they found that “the press, the communication technology, or the campaign advertisement was central to the story” (p. 660) in 441 cases, about eight percent of the 4,700 stories they observed. Bennett (1992) claimed that almost two-thirds of 1988 presidential

election news was “coverage of coverage” (p. 35), adding that “nearly every campaign story in 1990 made some sort of behind-the-scenes reference to candidate strategy, polling, marketing, media manipulation techniques, commercial advertising and the like” (p. 191).

Some research has examined self-referential campaign news from a framing perspective. Two contrasting views characterize this research. First, work by Kerbel on the 1996 U.S. presidential campaign argues that self-referential news engenders a single frame of reference—a “media process” frame—which depicts the campaign, including the press and candidates, in starkly manipulative terms (Kerbel, 1997; Kerbel et al., 2000). “Readers and viewers did not have to search hard to find accounts of how the media figured in strategic considerations, stories that placed self-interested reporters at the center of the action” (Kerbel, 1997, pp. 98-99). In this view, self-referential news engenders a perspective that “campaigns [are] a cynical power quest in which candidates do what they must to snare the big prize” (pp. 86-87). Kerbel speculated that exposure to self-referential news and the media process frame cultivates cynical interpretations about the motivations of the news media and of political candidates.

The other view about press framing, held by D’Angelo and colleagues (1999, 2002; Esser & D’Angelo, 2003), accommodates a wider range of normative assessments of self-referential news. As noted, Kerbel argued that self-referential news has a cynical frame of reference on campaign politics. Other observers, however, feel that some self-referential news merely documents journalism’s role as a platform of candidates’ messages. If, for instance, a story covers a policy issue as being communicated on a news program, then the story apparently does not portray the news media and the candidate in terms of strategy and news management (Johnson & Boudreau, 1996). Finally, other observers feel that some types of self-referential news can demystify the news management environment, prompting candidates toward more edifying electioneering practices and giving audiences a constructive perspective on how candidates craft and communicate relevant character and policy messages to voters (see McNair 2000, p. 171; Sabato, Stencel, & Lichter, 2000, pp. 143-151; Sumpter & Tankard, 1994).

In a qualitative framing analysis of 1992 U.S. presidential campaign news, D’Angelo (1999, 2002) observed how each of these normative positions infiltrate self-referential campaign news. He examined one week of stories (January 24-31, 1992) about the character issue that

resulted when Gennifer Flowers revealed, prior to the New Hampshire primary, that she had had an extra-marital affair with Bill Clinton. He stipulated that ‘the press’ is a topic that occurs in conjunction with other campaign topics, including policy issues and character issues. Follow-up framing analyses confirmed that while different campaign topics are covered in conjunction with self-referential news (e.g., policy issues; candidate personality attributes), character issues—stories about a scandal or gaffe associated with a particular candidate—are particularly prone to be covered this way (Esser & D’Angelo, 2003).

D’Angelo (2002) examined 38 news stories about the Clinton-Flowers episode using a variation of the constructionist perspective on news framing. As described by Pan and Kosicki (1993), this perspective requires analyzing propositions from different sources (which may include journalists or other news personnel) in order to discern the central organizing idea (cf. Gamson & Modigliani, 1989) that, in the end, is considered a joint outcome of journalistic conventions and sponsor (i.e., source) routines and agendas.¹ One way to distill the central organizing idea from the standpoint of journalists, Pan and Kosicki (1993) suggested, is to infer the scripts that they use to craft stories. Scripts are mental patterns that guide journalists as they create stories about issues and events. According to constructionists, these procedures collectively yield a *single* frame per news article even though an ‘issue culture’—e.g., themes about nuclear power (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989)—may be composed of several different frames that are covered in different news stories at the same point in time.

D’Angelo (1999, 2002) found that some stories mostly contained propositions that referred to tactics candidates used to deal with the news media during the Clinton/Flowers character issue episode. He argued that these stories have a *strategy* press frame. The inference is that the journalist who tells this sort of story employs a script that campaign journalists—perhaps even the news media as a whole—are actors who are embroiled in news management scenarios. Furthermore, the script encompasses the adversarial stance candidates take toward the press. This stance holds that journalists can scrutinize candidates in such a way as to provoke concentrated efforts of news management (see Blumler, 1990). Following Kerbel, it is reasonable to expect that individuals exposed to stories with a strategy press frame will interpret

the press as being intrusive because the self-referential coverage portrays the press as being an actor in the campaign's news management scenarios.

Sometimes news stories mainly contain propositions about the connective function of the press; for example, "candidate 'x' appeared on *Meet the Press* yesterday to discuss policy 'y'." D'Angelo (1999, 2002) held that these sorts of stories are constructed from a script that the news media are a platform for campaign statements. He argued that these stories contain a *conduit* press frame. Regardless of the other campaign topic(s) in the story, simply reporting on the presence of news personnel and equipment at a campaign event steers the narrative away from news management scenarios. Although the press conduit frame is not as common in character issue stories as the press strategy frame (Esser & D'Angelo, 2003), when it does occur, the conduit press frame portrays journalists as merely allowing the candidate a platform to voice their displeasure about the scrutiny. It seems reasonable to suspect that exposure to campaign news with a conduit press frame will mute an individual's evaluation that journalists and the news media have an intrusive and disruptive presence in campaign politics.

Finally, D'Angelo (1999) found that some stories contained propositions, usually attributed to news professionals, which stressed democratic and professional norms that govern news performance. These stories circulate press criticism based on norms that the news media are supposed to live up to, such as: (a) provide a platform for a range of advocacy; (b) maintain constant surveillance of events; (c) hold the powerful accountable to democratic norms; (d) contextualize settings of policy debate (Gans, 2003; Gurevitch & Blumler, 1990; McQuail, 2000; Schudson, 1995). There is no consensus among journalists about how to mesh reporting with press criticism (Fengler, 2003; Pritchard, 2000). Yet, it seems safe to say that such news formats and narrative forms are being developed and used in the news media (e.g., programs like CNN's *Reliable Sources*). We contend that, during character issue episodes (and in the context of covering other topics, too), journalists will at times shift the focus of a news story from news management to news norms, setting up an *accountability* press frame. This frame deflects the narrative away from strategic maneuvering to instead contextualize journalistic practice, often via overt criticism, in terms of how well (or how poorly) journalists adhere to professional and democratic norms. To be sure, strategy-oriented propositions can infiltrate these stories—e.g., a

media advisor may grouse that journalists are doing a poor job covering their candidate's character. Still, even though the accountability press frame may use propositions that, taken alone, refer to the press's immersion in the campaign's strategic environment, this frame has a self-regulatory quality that emphasizes a concern for professional standards (cf. McNair, 2000). As a result, exposure to it should depress cynical ideation and cultivate the view that the news media are trying to live up higher standards of practice.

Overview of the Study

Data for this study were collected on Election Day 2000. Actual news stories from the Clinton/Flowers episode were adapted to construct three separate print news stories for use in a between-subjects experiment. Although these data—and that story—are dated, it is imprudent to dismiss the story as a parochial site from which to study enduring processes associated with framing effects. To be sure, we used the Clinton/Flowers episode as the basis for our stimuli because the D'Angelo (1999) study was at the time the only available qualitative analysis of press framing.² Even so, that episode represents a type of topic—a character issue—that is an enduring feature of campaign news (witness the news attention given the Swift Boat controversy in the 2004 presidential campaign that impugned the credibility of the news media and implicated the character of Sen. John Kerry). Also, since character issues supposedly ensue from a renegade variation of the press's normatively sanctioned role to scrutinize politicians (see Sabato, 1991), character issues commonly contain self-referential news. During these episodes, discourse tends to focus on *how* the press scrutinizes candidates. For example, candidates undergoing character scrutiny regularly accuse the news media of trivializing the campaign by ignoring their policy points. Even candidates who are *not* under scrutiny complain that the press is ignoring their candidacy and their policy positions. Not surprisingly, many scholars have criticized the motives and standards of the news media during character issue episodes. Arterton (1978, pp. 48-49) labeled them 'press crises' and Sabato (1991) called them 'feeding frenzies.'

Our design followed in the footsteps of benchmark news framing research in that we wanted to control for subjects' previous exposure to the topic. Thus, we reasoned that while our undergraduate student subjects may have known what character issues were, and may have been

aware of the Clinton-Flowers episode, it was unlikely that they would have read about that episode first-hand since it occurred eight years before these data were collected.³

This study examines both applicability and accessibility effects (discussed next) of exposure to press frames. To focus our analysis, we drew from work of Kosicki and McLeod (1990) on media perceptions. Whereas they conceptualized media perceptions as pre-reception orientations that guide learning from news, we conceptualized media perceptions as context-dependent and topic-specific opinions about news performance that individuals think *after* certain considerations about the news media are either invoked or evoked by a story about the news media. Drawing from Kosicki and McLeod (1990), our analysis centered on two media perceptions: (a) *news information quality* (evaluations of the news as accurate, complete, thoughtful, and responsible); and (b) *negative aspects of content* (evaluations of the news as dull, sensationalistic, dominated by bad news, biased; intrusive; and trivializing reality).

The Effects of Press Frames: Applicability of Thoughts and Accessibility of Beliefs

Theorists assert that frames in news are the result of a sub-process in which journalists are audiences for the frames of other actors (Scheufele, 1999). However, when the thoughts, opinions, attitudes of audience members are the focus of research, news frames are theorized to *initiate*, as opposed to continue, a chain of events. Research that examines framing effects at the cognitive level is situated in a theoretical debate about whether applicability effects or accessibility effects, or both, are involved in framing effects. Following Price and Tewksbury (1997), we contend that these are different types of effects. However, unlike them, we posit that both types of effects can be integrated within an analysis of framing effects. Thus, our study of the effects of press frames on media perceptions is based on view that these two types of effects should be more closely integrated to enable a fuller understanding of cognitive framing effects.³

Applicability Effects

Research on cognitive framing effects is premised on the point that exposure to a frame cues individuals to search their memory for thoughts similar to words or propositions that encode the frame. “A [thought] is deemed applicable, and likely to be activated,” Price and Tewksbury (1997, p. 190) stated, “when its key features correspond to the salient features of the stimulus.”

Stimuli are regularly presented to individuals in the form of manipulated frames, and experimental research routinely shows that news frames prompt individuals to activate frame-related thoughts (e.g., Shen, 2004a, 2004b; Valkenburg, Semetko, & deVreese, 1999). By asking individuals to “list any thoughts you have” after exposing them to a news frame, experimentalists presumably observe the matching procedure entailed in an applicability effect (see Price et al., 1997, pp. 490-491). However, cognitive scientists have long known that individuals do not canvass short- or long-term memory for all of their prior knowledge about a topic they are asked to judge or evaluate in some way (Higgins, 1996). To do so would be prohibitively time consuming, even for individuals for whom the topic is familiar (Taylor & Crocker, 1981). Rather, applicable thoughts are evoked due to a cognitive *accessibility bias* (which is not an accessibility effect), whereby salient, or momentarily prominent, information from the environment brings thoughts to mind (Iyengar, 1990). Presumably, this means that prior knowledge can be revised and updated upon exposure to a news frame (Rhee, 1997)

Thus, applicability effects in framing research have an ambiguous quality: after exposure to a frame, did an individual think a thought because it was activated, thereby being *invoked* by the stimulus, or did the stimulus *evoke* thoughts that may not have been accessible, or ‘in mind,’ at all? Experimentalists demonstrate a combination of these two scenarios: exposure to a frame not only directs an individual to call to mind thoughts that match the frame’s propositional content, it also leads individuals to re-arrange and even add to their prior knowledge. For example, in an experiment on strategy and issue frames, Rhee (1997) discovered that “characteristically different textual features [of frames] are translated into different propositional systems and assembled into the interpreter’s working memory” (p. 31).

To help clarify the ambiguous nature of applicability effects, we need to understand what prior knowledge is. Price and Tewksbury (1997) proposed that an individual’s ‘knowledge store’ consists of (a) objects or concepts and their attributes, (b) goals, values, and motivations, and (c) affective or emotional states. In their view, the knowledge store is a non-hierarchical associative network among these components (cf. Anderson, 1983). They conceptualized the knowledge store as a cognitive schema. In classical terms, a schema is a cluster of knowledge about people, issues, and events that enables an individual to categorize incoming information in

order to interpret or evaluate the person, issue, or event (Brewer & Nakamura, 1984; Taylor & Crocker, 1981). As Rummelhart (1984) stated, “Perhaps the central function of schemata is the construction of an interpretation of an event, object, or situation” (p. 166).

When schematic (i.e., prior) knowledge is theoretically defined as directing the matching procedure individuals perform upon exposure to a stimulus, the logical result is that an applicability effect occurs when exposure to a frame *activates* thoughts already in the knowledge store. Still, owing to a cognitive accessibility bias (Iyengar, 1990) or to the perception that a story topic is important (Nelson et al., 1997), individuals can be directed by a frame to revise or update their knowledge store, thereby leading to the possibility that, from the individual’s standpoint, ‘new’ ideas are learned and ‘new’ thoughts are put into their minds (Druckman, 2001). To resolve the ambiguity about the nature of applicability effects, we contend, following Cappella and Jamieson (1997), that applicability effects should be observed in two stages.

The first stage, which Cappella and Jamieson (1997) called *explicit learning*, concerns thoughts activated or ideas learned upon exposure to a news frame. Learned information encompasses *factual information* (e.g., an individual who reads a story about a political campaign, however framed, will recall more about the campaign than an individual who reads a non-related story) and *schematic information* (e.g., an individual will learn frame-relevant information). Both types of learning de-limit applicability effects to a smaller subset—objects and their attributes—of the broader knowledge store. Defining applicability effects in terms of learning and recall thus resolves the issue of whether a thought about an object is invoked or evoked by exposure to a news frame because, at this ‘lower’ level of cognition (i.e., lower than beliefs and attitudes), both processes are occurring. In most experimental framing research, explicit learning is measured via a free-recall thought-listing procedure (e.g., Price et al., 1997), whereby individuals are asked to write down any thoughts that come to mind after exposure. Cappella and Jamieson (1997) used a different procedure, cued recall, hypothesizing that exposure to a strategy frame will lead to recall of more strategy (or cynical) topics than exposure to an issue frame, and that exposure to issue frame will lead to recall of more substantive (or issue) topics than exposure to a strategy frame (see ch. 6).

Whether applicability effects are measured as thought listing or cued recall (and whether or not an individual has a well-developed schema about the topic), exposure to a story in which a topic is framed in particular way will prompt individuals to switch their train of thought toward subtopics evident in the propositional structure of the story (Price et al., 1997). For our purposes, exposure to a press frame should differentially prompt individuals to think frame-relevant subtopics are present in the story. Given that press frames occur in conjunction with campaign topics—in the case examined here, a character issue topic—we posed the following hypotheses:

H1: Individuals exposed to a strategy press frame will recall strategy topics as being more prominent in the character issue story than individuals exposed to the accountability or conduit frames.

H2: Individuals exposed to an accountability press frame will recall accountability topics as being more prominent in the character issue story than individuals exposed to the strategy or conduit frames.

If individuals learn frame-relevant topics by virtue of exposure to press frames, then individuals exposed to the conduit press frame should recall conduit topics more so than strategy or accountability topics. In addition, it seems reasonable to postulate that the script for the conduit frame—that journalists think of themselves as disseminating information to audiences (see Weaver & Wilhoit, 1991, pp. 112-117)—is a bedrock script for both strategy and accountability scripts. This means that conduit topics (i.e., a report that the press is covering a topic or event; a report that an individual is communicating a point via the press) are immanent in the script structure of other press frames (e.g., news management stories are predicated upon prior coverage of some topic or event). These points are akin to those made by Patterson (1993) and Cappella and Jamieson (1997) that issue frames are immanent in strategy frames. Thus, we posed the following hypothesis and research question:

H3: Individuals exposed to a conduit press frame will recall conduit topics about the press as being more prominent in the character issue story than individuals exposed to the strategy or accountability frames.

RQ1: Will individuals exposed to the conduit press frame recall strategy or accountability topics as being more prominent in the character issue story?

Once exposure to a frame *invokes* topics (i.e., brings them to mind from existing knowledge) or *evokes* topics (i.e., puts them in mind via learning), individuals use these topics to form opinions about the topic at hand (Druckman, 2001; Price et al., 1997). This is the second stage of applicability effects, what Cappella and Jamieson (1997) called *implicit learning*. We theorized that once a press frame either invokes or evokes applicable topics about the news media, individuals will use these topics to form opinions about the news media. As stated, we conceptualize these opinions as media perceptions. Following the operationalization of Kosicki and McLeod (1991), we focus on two media perceptions: (a) *news information quality* (the news as accurate, complete, thoughtful, and responsible), and (b) *negative aspects of content* (the news as dull, sensationalistic, dominated by bad news, biased, intrusive, and trivial). Exposure to press frames should shape these media perceptions in the following ways:

H4: Individuals exposed to a strategy press frame will perceive that the news media are acting more negatively (re: *negative aspects of content*) than individuals exposed to an accountability press frame or a conduit press frame.

H5: Individuals exposed to an accountability press frame will perceive that the news media are more concerned about *news information quality* than individuals exposed to a strategy press frame or a conduit press frame.

Accessibility Effects

Price and Tewksbury (1997) stated that framing effects are, in essence, applicability effects that occur immediately following exposure to news frame (see also, Price et al., 1997, p. 486). An applicability effect is distinguished from an accessibility effect in that the latter occurs by virtue of the “residual activation potential” of thoughts in an individual’s knowledge store (Price et al., 1997, p. 486). In their view, applicability effects are within the purview of framing research and accessibility effects are within the purview of agenda-setting and priming research. However, these processes cannot be cleanly separated. Price et al. (1997) noted, “In any single situation, applicable ideas compete for activation with other temporarily or chronically accessible ideas” (p. 486). This means that ideas are ‘accessible’ to an individual because they must have been evoked during a previous encounter with a news frame.

Accessibility effects can be observed in two ways. The first way concerns that part of the knowledge store that contains knowledge of objects and their attributes. Research in this vein has shown that prior knowledge moderates applicability effects of news frames. That is, individuals who possess more prior knowledge about a topic being framed are more likely to report frame-relevant thoughts in a thought-listing procedure than individuals whose prior knowledge is less resonant with the frame (Shen, 2004a, 2004b). This kind of accessibility effect is essentially a processing phenomenon: high prior knowledge about the attributes of a topic works in tandem with the frame to engender frame-resonant thoughts.

Second, an accessibility effect can occur within the part of the knowledge store that Price and Tewksbury (1997) call goals, values, and motivations—cognitive elements to which we will add ‘attitudes.’ In this vein, exposure to a news frame facilitates cognitive associations between already-held attitudes or beliefs—attitudes or beliefs being separate from a schema (Conover & Feldman, 1991; Pratkanis, 1989)—and an individual’s opinion or evaluation of the topic being framed. Nelson and Willey (2001) described this kind of accessibility effect when they stated, “frames affect opinions by priming specific beliefs; that is, by selectively boosting their accessibility in memory” (p. 255). There is no guarantee that exposure to a news frame will activate an individual’s attitude or beliefs about the topic at hand. But when it does, the individual’s subsequent opinions and/or evaluations of the topic are shaped via an interaction between these activated attitudes and the thoughts or ideas made *applicable* to the individual by propositions encoding the frame.

This study follows the latter route to observe accessibility effects. Specifically, exposure to a strategy press frame is likely to engender negative perceptions about the news media (e.g., that journalists are *sensationalizing* the issue at hand) more so than exposure to an accountability frame. Any number of beliefs activated by the strategy press frame can facilitate this media perception—e.g., the strategy press frame can activate the belief that the news media *unfairly* cover issues [cf. Bennett et al., 1999]). Alternatively, exposure to a press accountability frame is likely to engender the perception that the news media are trying to live up to professional and democratic norms more so than exposure the press strategy frame. Here, too, different activated beliefs can facilitate this media perception. In this study, we measured several commonly

observed beliefs about the news media—e.g., how fairly the news media cover issues and how aggressively the news media cover political candidates in general. Given the exploratory nature of the accessibility effects of press frames, we ask the following research question:

RQ2: Which prior beliefs about the news media will be activated by each press frame to facilitate opinions about *news information quality* and *negative aspects of story content*?

Given the composite topical structure of news stories containing a press frame (e.g., press topic plus character issue; press topic plus policy issue), it also seemed important to explore whether each press frame will differently activate beliefs about *people* in the news story. This seems particularly relevant for stories in which character is a salient story topic, for individuals rely heavily on their perceptions of candidate images to appraise candidates (e.g., Kinder, 1986). Accordingly, we ask:

RQ3: Which prior beliefs about political actors are activated by each press frame to facilitate opinions about *news information quality* and *news negativity*?

Method

Subjects and Procedure

To answer the research questions and address the hypotheses, a between-subjects experiment was conducted. Participants read a single news article experimentally prepared to manipulate the three press frames (conduit, strategy, and accountability). As noted, data were collected on Election Day of the 2000 U.S. presidential campaign. Participants were 138 undergraduate students enrolled in introductory communication classes at a private university in the eastern U.S. Each one was given extra credit for their participation.

Each participant was randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions. Each subject was given a folder containing two questionnaires and a stimulus article. First, subjects completed a pre-stimulus questionnaire, which included items about views of the current president (Clinton), prior beliefs about news performance, interest in the campaign, and reliance on specific news media for campaign information. After that, participants read the news story. Similar to the design of Cappella and Jamieson (1997), only the stimulus story was reproduced and presented to research subjects, and each one was set in column format typical of newspaper

stories. Pre-tests showed that 6-7 minutes was required for careful reading of the story, so all research participants were given approximately seven minutes to read the story. This means that faster readers may have read it more than once.

After reading the story, participants were instructed to put the story back into the folder, take out the post-test instrument, and close the folder. The post-test instrument contained items measuring topics participants thought were prominent in the story and items measuring media perceptions (i.e., news information quality and negative aspects of news content). The post-test questionnaire concluded with demographic items measuring participants' political ideology, party, voting intention, gender, age, race, and household income.

Thirty eight percent of the participants (n = 53) were female. Most were registered to vote (75%, n = 104), but only half had either voted or were intending to vote. Of those who were registered to vote, about half (n = 53) said they were a member of the Republican Party. The rest were evenly divided between being registered as Democrat or Independent.

Stimulus Materials

This research depends upon the successful manipulation of the three press frames. A single news story for each frame was prepared for each experimental condition: conduit (n = 46), strategy (n = 47), and accountability (n = 45). Each stimulus story constituted an emphasis frame, as opposed to an equivalency frame, and hence, our interest is in emphasis framing effects rather than equivalency framing effects. As Druckman (2001) noted, "Like equivalency framing effects, emphasis framing effects work by causing individuals to focus on certain aspects or characterizations of [a topic] instead of others." He added: "[U]nlike equivalency framing effects, the frames...for emphasis framing effects are not logically identical ways of making the same statement; rather, the *frames focus on different potentially relevant considerations*" (p. 230, emphasis added). Without a doubt, employing emphasis frames lends greater ecological validity to an experimental manipulation because, among other things, such stimuli are drawn directly from, or modeled after, real news stories. However, there is a danger that, when employing emphasis frames in an experimental manipulation, the criteria for establishing how stories are *similar in content except for a difference in the frame* can be unclear.

Complicating matters further, benchmark work using emphasis frames concedes that real news stories often co-mingle elements of different frames. For example, Iyengar (1991) stated, “While the episodic and thematic framing categories were reasonably distinct and exhaustive, relatively few [real] stories were purely episodic and thematic” (p. 18). Stories about topics of interest to Iyengar (1991)—perennial topics such as crime, poverty, and unemployment—were classified as episodic and thematic “based on the predominant frame” (p. 18). Likewise, Cappella and Jamieson stated, “The theoretical distinction between issue and strategy formats is a sharp one, clear enough to describe to coders and for them to evaluate reliably” (p. 89)—both being the case for the three press frames (e.g., Esser & D’Angelo, 2003). However, their content analyses of health care reform coverage revealed that “strategic news often includes significant substantive issue material that has been framed strategically,” adding, “substantive information is often present and sometimes is freed from what we would otherwise describe as a strategy treatment—even though the story itself is framed strategically” (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997, p. 111; see also, Patterson, 1993, p. 69).

In all, using emphasis frames inevitably entails balancing realism and precision (Iyengar, 1991, pp. 21-23). If, on one hand, experimental stimuli are radically altered to distill one frame from the others, then ecological validity is compromised—that is, research is not testing the effects of frames that readers or viewers can encounter in the real world. On the other hand, if researchers retain too much textual richness of stories containing overlapping frames, then their experimental stimuli will quite possibly vary on multiple frame-relevant dimensions which, in turn, makes data on framing effects difficult, even impossible, to interpret.

There are three remedies for confounding effects engendered by conceptually rich emphasis frames that may nonetheless lack enough precision to constitute a good manipulation. First, researchers strive for continuity in topical content that may or may not be relevant to the frame itself (see Cappella & Jamieson, 1997, pp. 90-91; Iyengar, 1991, pp. 21-22). For example, Price et al. (1997) used a common core paragraph in each of their experimental stimuli (conflict, human interest, and consequence frames). Evidently, they considered this paragraph to be ‘unframed’ information that, in turn, they employed by itself as a control group. Somewhat differently, in the print news stories employed by Cappella and Jamieson (1997) to manipulate

strategy versus issue frames, several paragraphs common to both stories were located at the end of the story (see pp. 90-91, 247-252). Evidently, these paragraphs were suggestive of an issue frame, since the strategy version of the story, which was rewritten from the original issue framed story, retained these paragraphs.

Another way that researchers who use emphasis frames control for confounding effects is to employ a manipulation check. For example, both Iyengar (1991) and Cappella and Jamieson (1997) employed a check of representational validity (e.g., evaluations of the realistic nature of the story carrying the frame) rather than the classical manipulation check which asks participants to directly rate the presence of characteristics of the independent variable (i.e., the frame itself). Finally, researchers sometimes, though not always (cf. Price et al., 1997), use multiple stories for each treatment group to control for confounding effects.

This study used one story per treatment condition, each one closely modeled after a story from the Clinton/Flowers episode coded by D'Angelo (1999, 2002) as having a conduit, strategy, or accountability frame. Appendixes A, B, and C contain the stimulus stories. To achieve continuity in topical content, each story contained the same three salient topics: (a) that there were allegations about infidelity leveled against Mr. Clinton by Gennifer Flowers; (b) that these allegations were initially reported in a tabloid newspaper, *Star*; and (c) that Mr. Clinton denied or otherwise addressed the allegations in conversations with reporters on the campaign trail or via interviews with journalists on a news program. The underlined portions of the stimulus articles in Appendixes A, B, and C indicate exactly where in each story the stories contain these common topics. Accordingly, our stimulus stories are somewhat akin to those used by Price et al. (1997) in that they orient readers toward the story *topic* via similar textual material. They are also akin to the stimulus stories employed by Cappella and Jamieson (1997) in that the similar textual material in our stories was constitutive of the one of the frames (the issue frame for them; the conduit frame for us). As noted in the literature review, we reasoned that the three press frames can overlap insofar as the script for the conduit frame is inherent in all instances of self-referential news. Thus, the similar material in our stories is not *unrelated* to a press frame; it serves both to orient readers to relevant story topics and to convey a press conduit frame.

The headline and remaining paragraphs of each stimulus story contained material exclusive to each press frame. In the story with the conduit press frame (Appendix A, story taken from the *Washington Post*, Jan, 24), Clinton “tells reporters” the charges are not true, thereby cueing the press’s connective role in reporting information about the allegations. Reporters, in essence, are ‘just there’ and report what he said (i.e., his denial). In the body of the article, it is reported that “journalists asked [Mr. Clinton] questions about the allegations” (para. 5). It is also reported that Mr. Clinton told reporters what he told Flowers in a phone conversation with her (para. 6). As per the underlying script of the press conduit frame, these ideas constitute a frame in which journalists convey information to audiences.

In the story with the strategy press frame (Appendix B, story taken from the *New York Times*, Jan. 27), the headline states that Mr. Clinton says that the press intruded on his privacy. This idea is followed-up in the body of the story. It is reported that Mr. Clinton openly criticized the press in a *60 Minutes* interview (para. 1); that Mr. Clinton had told the press a great deal about his private life (para. 3); and that voters are angry at the press for printing unsubstantiated rumors (para. 7). As noted in the literature review, ideas such as these convey the frame that journalists are actors who are embroiled in news management scenarios. It is irrelevant for the purpose of stimulus construction whether the story itself creates the problem that it reports upon—in real life, this story almost certainly forces Clinton to respond to the allegations because it reports what it shouldn’t repeat (i.e., the ‘baseless’ accusations). What matters is that the stimulus story suggests a script in the mind of the reporter (Gwen Ifell) that campaign reporters are actors in news management scenarios.

In the story with the accountability press frame (Appendix C, story from the *Washington Post*, Jan. 29), a relatively neutral headline cues the reader that the story is a ‘media’ story evidently about news practices and standards. In the body of the story, it is reported that the mainstream media has been ‘wrestling’ with whether to report on allegations about Mr. Clinton’s personal life (para. 2); that the mainstream media “initially treated the Star article with unusual restraint” (para. 5); and that “it is hard to report rumors with the proper restraint” (para. 11). As noted in the literature review, even a topic such as a character issue, which by nature portrays journalists as intruding into a candidate’s private life, can, in the end, engender coverage with an

accountability frame of reference. Such stories frame the behaviors of journalists and journalism in terms of self-regulation and professional standards.

Measurement of Variables

Prior beliefs about the news media. Drawing from the research of Austin and Pinkleton (1999) and Bennett et al. (1999) on media perceptions, we used five items to measure subjects' beliefs about the news media. Subjects responded to these items (1 = *disagree strongly* to 5 = *agree strongly*) after being directed to think about the news media in the context of the current campaign (i.e., Campaign 2000). These items were: (a) The news has given me a *complete picture* of the policies of candidates; (b) The news has *overplayed mistakes* of candidates; (c) The news has reported the issues *fairly*; (d) Journalists have been too *aggressive* with candidates; and (e) News has *oversimplified* the issues.

These items did not form a satisfactory index ($\alpha = .57$). Thus, to observe accessibility effects, we used each item separately in the data analysis, a common practice in work on media perceptions (e.g., Austin & Pinkleton, 1999; Kosicki et al., 1994).

Explicit (schematic) learning. A list of twelve topics was used to measure subjects' recall of applicable topics invoked and/or evoked by the stimulus stories. Six of the topics were entailed in the strategy press frame; five were entailed in the accountability press frame; one was entailed in the conduit press frame.⁵ Subjects were asked to indicate the presence and salience of each topic, where 0 = *not mentioned in the story*; 1 = *the topic was explicitly mentioned as a minor topic*; and 2 = *the topic was explicitly mentioned as a major topic*.

This procedure is a hybrid of the two approaches used to measure applicability effects in experimental news frame research. Akin to the procedure of Cappella and Jamieson (1997), which asked subjects to answer forced-choice questions designed to measure learning of substantive topics (re: the issue frame) or strategy topics (re: the strategy frame), our procedure asked subjects to rate the prominence of different topics that were pre-determined to entail each press frame. Having subjects rate the prominence of topics, of course, differs from Cappella and Jamieson (1997) because there are no 'correct' (i.e., frame-relevant) answers, merely subjects' perceptions of whether frame-relevant topics were present in the story. In this vein, our procedure is like that of Price et al. (1997), who used a thought-listing procedure to measure

frame-relevant topics brought to subjects' minds after reading news stories. Of course, our prominence measures do not specifically tap what came to subjects' minds after reading stories. But because our measures reflect the topics subjects perceived to be salient in the stories, they constitute an encoding task similar to what occurs in a thought-listing procedure. Because press frames are frames of emphasis, and because they have yet to be validated in an experimental setting, we also used each measure of explicit learning as a manipulation check of the content of the stories. The results of these analyses are reported in the results section.

Media perceptions. To measure subjects' media perceptions, two scales, called *negative aspects of content* and *news information* quality, were constructed. As noted, these concepts were originally formulated by Kosicki and McLeod (1990) to represent pre-reception orientations toward the news media. However, for our purposes, key words in each scale were specifically tailored to be about the story at hand (i.e., the Clinton-Flowers character issue).⁶ Thus, these scales were domain-specific, which is a technique commonly used to measure applicability effects in framing research (e.g., Rhee, 1997). Subjects were instructed to think about "the behaviors and intentions of the news media from the frame of reference of the content of the story" they had just read. The two scales formed reliable indexes.⁷

Other variables. The pre-stimulus questionnaire contained two variables that were used as covariates in the analysis: (a) interest in the 2000 campaign (1 = *not interested at all*; 5 = *interested a great deal*); and (b) reliance on media for information about the campaign (0 = *have not relied on at all*; 1 = *relied on somewhat*; 2 = *relied on heavily*), which consisted of nine items with exemplars (e.g., newsmagazines, like *Time* and *Newsweek*). In addition, approval of the President (Clinton) was measured with four items (1 = *disapprove much more than I approve*; 5 = *approve much more than I disapprove*), including: (a) overall job; (b) foreign affairs; (c) economy; and (d) personal character. These items were used to observe accessibility effects.

Results

Hypotheses 1 and 2 examined applicability effects of press frames, predicting that exposure to stories containing press frames will influence individuals to recall frame-relevant topics as being prominent in the story. Table 1 shows that, by this definition, press frames generally engendered explicit learning. Regarding Hypothesis 1, individuals exposed to the

strategy press frame felt that four out of the six strategy topics were more prominent than individuals exposed to the conduit or accountability press frame. Thus, this hypothesis was partially confirmed. The two exceptions: (a) subjects in the press accountability frame and the press strategy frame thought that the topic, “some politicians and activists think that media coverage will hurt Clinton’s chances to win the nomination,” was prominent in the story; and (b) subjects in the press accountability frame and the press strategy frame thought that the topic, “Bill Clinton thinks that media coverage will hurt his chances to win the nomination,” was prominent in the story.

Regarding Hypothesis 2, individuals exposed to the accountability press frame felt that each accountability topic was more prominent than individuals exposed to the strategy or conduit frame. Thus, this hypothesis was confirmed. Hypothesis 3 was also confirmed: Individuals exposed to the conduit press frame felt that the conduit topic was more prominent in the story. Regarding Research Question 1, subjects exposed to the *conduit* press frame did not recall any of the accountability topics or the strategy topics as being as prominent as those exposed to the accountability press frame and strategy press frame, respectively. Evidently, exposure to the conduit press frame depresses ideation about strategy and accountability.

Explicit learning measured as cued recall can serve as a manipulation check to validate the presence of a frame in a news story, particularly when the forced choices are determined beforehand to be frame-relevant. Although Cappella and Jamieson (1997) did not discuss their measures of substantive and strategy recall as being manipulation checks, instead using measures of story comprehensiveness, understandability, and typicality for that purpose (see pp. 93-97), it seems reasonable to think that frame-relevant story topics that research participants judge as being prominent in the story can serve to validate the presence of frames researchers say are present in the stimuli. Following this reasoning, our three stories were good, though not perfect, examples of the three press frames. Subjects who read the story with the strategy press frame generally recognized that campaign journalists are actors in news management scenarios; subjects who read the story with the accountability press frame generally recognized that campaign journalists can at times search for, and struggle with, standards of proper reporting for problematic events; and lastly, subjects who read the story with the conduit frame for the most

part did not think about either strategy or accountability topics. Rather, they thought about the press as simply conveying information from a candidate, albeit one who was troubled and angry, to news audiences.

Hypotheses 4 and 5, which examined applicability effects via implicit learning, predicted that once individuals thought frame-relevant topics were a prominent aspect of a story, these topics would be subsequently used as a basis to form opinions about the negativity and quality of the news media. To test these hypotheses, we ran two separate ANCOVAs, using the nine media reliance variables and the campaign interest variable as covariates. Hypothesis 4, which predicted that individuals exposed to the strategy press frame would believe that the news media exhibited greater negativity (in the context of covering the Clinton/Flowers episode) than individuals exposed to the accountability or conduit frames, was supported. Using the index of negative aspects of content as the dependent variable, subjects who read the story with a strategy frame felt that the news media exhibited more negative behaviors and intentions ($M = 3.61$, $SE = .12$) than the subjects who read the story with the conduit press frame ($M = 3.09$, $SE = .12$) and the subjects who read the story with the accountability press ($M = 2.95$, $SE = .12$), $F [2, 121] = 7.56$, $p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .11$.

Hypothesis 5, which predicted that subjects exposed to the accountability press frame would believe that the news media exhibited greater *news information quality* in covering the Clinton/Flowers episode than individuals exposed to the strategy or conduit frames, was also supported. Using the index of news information quality as the dependent variable, subjects who read the story with an accountability press frame felt that the news media exhibited more concern with news information quality ($M = 3.6$, $SE = .08$) than subjects who read the story with the conduit press frame ($M = 2.94$, $SE = .09$) and subjects who read the story with the strategy press frame ($M = 2.49$, $SE = .09$), $F [2, 121] = 35.08$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .37$.

Research Questions 2 and 3 explored accessibility effects of press frames. Specifically, Research Question 2 inquired about which *prior beliefs about the news media* were activated by each press frame to facilitate perceptions of news information quality and negative aspects of story content in the context of coverage of the Clinton/Flowers episode. Table 2 shows the results. Two trends emerged. First, controlling for interest in the campaign and reliance upon

specific news media, exposure to each press frame rarely induced subjects to activate prior beliefs about news performance to form opinions about the *quality* of press coverage of the Clinton/Flowers episode. Second, exposure to the accountability press frame, more so than exposure to either the conduit press frame or the strategy press frame, induced subjects to activate prior media images in order to form opinions about the *negativity* of media coverage of the Clinton/Flowers episode. Specifically, subjects who read the story with the accountability press frame formed opinions about the negativity of the news media in covering the Clinton/Flowers incident in the following ways: (a) participants marginally linked a belief about media fairness with less negativity in coverage of the Clinton/Flowers episode; and (b) participants linked a belief about the news media being too aggressive and a belief that the news media oversimplify issues with more negativity in coverage of the Clinton/Flowers episode.

Research Question 3 inquired about which *beliefs about political actors* were activated by each press frame to facilitate opinions about news information quality and negative aspects of story content. Partial correlations in Table 2 indicate that, controlling for interest in the campaign and reliance upon specific news media, attitudes about Clinton's overall job performance, his handling of the economy, and his personal character were activated by the strategy press frame, such that *higher* approval of Clinton overall, *higher* approval of his handling of the economy and foreign affairs, and *higher* approval of his character led subjects to opine that the news media were acting *more negatively* in covering the Clinton/Flowers incident. Similarly, the more subjects *disapproved* of Clinton overall, the more they felt the news media were concerned about professional norms in covering the Clinton/Flowers incident.

A similar, but less prominent, trend was observed for the accountability press frame and the conduit press frame (Table 2). For subjects exposed to the accountability press frame, higher approval of Clinton's character led to opinions that the news media were behaving more negatively in covering the Clinton/Flowers incident; lower approval of Clinton's character led subjects to think that the news media were more concerned about professional norms. The conduit press frame led subjects to link higher approval of Clinton overall with the opinion that the news media were behaving negatively in covering the Clinton/Flowers incident.

Discussion and Implications

This study examined how press frames in political campaign news—conduit, strategy, and accountability—influence media perceptions. While media perceptions are known to guide what individuals learn from news (Kosicki & McLeod, 1991), our focus was on processes by which the press shapes these perceptions. Our analysis developed a theoretical rationale to integrate two types of framing effects, called applicability effects and accessibility effects, to understand how press frames shape media perceptions.

Regarding applicability effects, results indicated that press frames generally led individuals to perceive frame-relevant topics as being prominent in stories they read. Applicability effects of press frames were also evident in opinions about the quality and negativity of news media. Individuals who read the story containing a strategy press frame believed that the news media acted more negatively in the context of the Clinton/Flowers episode than those who read stories containing a conduit and accountability press frame. Likewise, individuals who read the story containing an accountability press frame believed that the news media were more concerned about news information quality than individuals who read the story with the conduit or strategy press frame.

Regarding accessibility effects, results indicated that media perceptions, conceptualized as prior beliefs about the news media, were differently activated by virtue of exposure to the press frames. Subjects exposed to the accountability press frame were engaged, more so than subjects exposed to the strategy and conduit press frames, to activate media perceptions in the process of forming an opinion about negative aspects of news content. Not only did exposure to the accountability press frame induce subjects to activate more media perceptions, it did so in a productive way. For example, when subjects held that news media exercised greater fairness in covering issues, they opined that the news media were less negative in coverage of the Clinton/Flowers incident. Exposure to the strategy frame did not induce subjects to activate media images to opine about media negativity, and exposure to the conduit frame did so only marginally, with subjects thinking that the more the news media overplayed candidate mistakes, the more negative they were in covering the Clinton/Flowers episode. None of the frame conditions induced subjects to activate media images to evaluate news information quality. Also regarding accessibility effects, results showed that approval of Bill Clinton, the main political

actor in each framed condition, figured prominently in opinion formation, but mainly for those subjects who were exposed to the strategy press frame.

These results have both theoretical and political implications. Theoretically, it seems important to re-consider the notion that applicability and accessibility effects overlap as cognitive processes that generate framing effects. This does not mean we should abandon the view that individuals are deliberative when they use prior knowledge, particularly schemas consisting of knowledge about the attributes of objects, in the process of forming opinions about the topics in stories that carry a frame about a topic. Rather, framing researchers should more seriously consider the position that, embedded within these deliberative processes are more automatic, and presumably functional, sub-routines in which topics are put *into* an individual's short-term memory and in which the activation of prior knowledge is more directed by exposure to frames than by the volition of readers and viewers. These apparently non-deliberative aspects of framing effects do not necessarily make individuals less rational or more susceptible to elite manipulation (Druckman, 2001). Rather, they speak to the power of news frames. As Entman (1993) stated, "whatever its specific uses, the concept of framing consistently offers a way to describe the power of a communicating text" (p. 51).

Politically, these results suggest that the news media have a subtle but powerful role in shaping media perceptions. Whereas content analyses of self-referential news suggest that the news media, by virtue of overwhelmingly negative self-coverage, are a "suicidal messenger" (Fan, Wyatt, & Keltner, 2001), our findings suggest that journalists act more as a self-interpreter, at least in the context of political campaign news, than a uniform self-annihilator. Stories that carry press frames provide subtle yet powerful cues that individuals use to opine about the negativity and quality of the news media. Since the nature of the interpretation depends on the content of the frame, the presence of accountability frames is a good sign, for in the short term at least, individuals exposed to it will think the news media is self-regulating and concerned to live up to professional and democratic norms.

Still, our analysis of accessibility effects leads to disturbing conclusions about the ways individuals are urged to use their prior beliefs about the news media (which, of course, are media perceptions) to form and express opinions about the news media. In particular, it seems that

individuals in our study have internalized the antagonistic relationship between candidates and the press corps. This is evident by the strong associations between the opinion that the press is behaving negatively and the opinions that the President is doing a good job overall, and that he has approvable character. These associations are not only evident in the context of exposure to a strategy press frame, but are also evident to a lesser degree in the context of exposure to the accountability press frame. Our interpretation of these accessibility effects is that an individual's opinion about the news media as being an intrusive and disruptive actor in campaign politics derives from an attitude source that concomitantly holds political actors in *high* esteem. If by virtue of press frames the news media shape individuals' opinions about the news media, then it seems that over time there has been an insidious residual effect of this applicability process.

Although this research produced intriguing findings about the effects of press frames, on media perceptions several limitations need to be considered. Although the stimulus stories had high external validity, they represented only one topic configuration—press topic plus a character issue topic. Thus, without replication, it remains to be seen if these framing effects are unique to this topic configuration, or for that matter, if they are unique to the particular story (the Clinton/Flowers episode) used as the basis for the stimuli. Also, because the prior beliefs about the press and the post-exposure opinions about the negativity and quality of the news media were measured in a context-specific way (i.e., in the context of Campaign 2000), it is unclear whether the framing effects we found are contingent upon this formulation, or if framing effects would also be observed when both measures are phrased in a more generic way. Having knowledge about press framing effects from generic measures would bolster confidence that the framing process we observed in the Campaign 2000 setting exists in other campaign settings as well.

To the chagrin of many observers, campaign journalists routinely tell stories about the press via an overarching narrative about strategy and news management. Yet campaign journalists also at times frame the press as being accountable to democratic and professional norms, and as a conduit of messages from politicians to the public. What news consumers learn from reading these stories influences their opinions about the news media, which, in turn, get stored as beliefs about the news media. In short, media perceptions are both formed in the short term upon exposure to press frames and stored for future use on the basis of short-term opinion-

formation. The news media have the power to shape media perceptions, and because of this, the news media shape how individuals perceive, and participate in, political life.

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Notes

¹ Actually, Pan and Kosicki (1993) called their approach ‘constructivist’ and distinguished it in several ways from the constructionist approach of Gamson and Modigliani (1989). While interesting, these theoretical distinctions are not relevant to our analysis.

² Esser and D’Angelo (2003) did a follow-up content analysis of the three press frames after data for this study were collected. They used the term ‘metacoverage’ to refer for this type of news.

³ We follow Iyengar and Kinder (1987) and Iyengar (1991), who argued that subjects should be unfamiliar with the specific story topics that they used in their stimuli. Thus, they constructed stimuli to ensure that research participants did not have a great deal of familiarity with the actual stories in their stimuli. Likewise, Cappella and Jamieson (1997; see also Rhee, 1997) drew volunteers from various media markets around the country for their framing experiments. They stated that they wanted to present these research participants with news stories about unfamiliar political candidates (e.g., television news stories about a Philadelphia mayoral candidate being presented to people who live in San Francisco) in order to control for previous exposure and familiarity with the topic of their stimulus materials.

⁴ Discussing the Price/Tewksbury model, McLeod et al. (2002) noted, “Although their knowledge activation model is primarily an organizing model rather than a precise set of hypotheses, it does involve both applicability effects and accessibility effects” (p. 230).

⁵ Sample strategy topic: “Bill Clinton thinks that coverage of the allegations of marital infidelity is creating a crisis in his campaign.” Sample accountability topic: “Newspaper editors face difficult decisions when figuring out how to report the allegations.” The conduit topic: “Bill Clinton wants reporters to know that he did not have an affair with Flowers.”

⁶ Seven items measured *news information quality*: (a) “In this story, the news media are trying to report the allegations with a standard of *fairness*”; (b) “In this story, the news media are *giving context* on why the allegations are newsworthy”; (c) “In this story, the news media are *analyzing their own role* in covering the allegations”; (d) “In this story, the news media are trying to cover the allegations in a *responsible* way”; (e) “In this story, the news media are trying to be *impartial* to Clinton (neither friend nor foe)”; (f) “In this story, the news media are trying to cover the allegations with *restraint*”; and (g) “In this story, the news media are trying to act in a

professional manner.” Eight items measured *negative aspects of content*: (a) “In this story, the news media are probing Bill Clinton’s personal life in *unnecessary detail*”; (b) “In this story, the news media are *violating the privacy* of Clinton and his family”; (c) “In this story, the news media are *trivializing* the campaign process”; (d) “In this story, the news media are *distracting* voters’ attention away from Clinton’s policy positions”; (e) “In this story, the news media *do not care* if coverage hurts Bill Clinton’s chances to win the nomination”; (f) “In this story, the news media are *sensationalizing* the details of the Flowers allegations”; (g) “In this story, the news media are *spreading rumors* more than reporting the allegations in an objective way”; and (h) “In this story, the news media are being too *negative*.”

⁷ To explore the orthogonality of these two constructs, factor analysis (principal components analysis, varimax rotation) was conducted on the 15 items composing both constructs. A minimum eigenvalue of 1.0 and at least two loadings (using a 60/40 rule) were the criteria used to retain a factor. A two-factor solution corresponding to the hypothesized constructs was achieved, accounting for roughly 56% of total variance. Each item of *negative aspects of content* loaded together (eigenvalue = 6.05; 40% of variance explained), except “*do not care...*” (see note 6). Each item of *news information quality* loaded together (eigenvalue = 2.4; 16% variance explained), except “*own role...*” (see note 5). Items that did not satisfactorily load on each construct were excluded from the indexes. Inter-item reliability for each index was high (*negative aspects of content*, Cronbach’s alpha = .90; *news information quality*, Cronbach’s alpha = .84).

Table 1

Applicability Effects: Frame-Relevant Topics

Topic ^a	Press Frame			<i>F</i> (2, 135)
	Conduit (n = 46)	Strategy (n = 47)	Accountability (n=45)	
(S1) Bill Clinton thinks that coverage of the allegations of marital infidelity is creating a crisis for his campaign	.41 ^b (.54)	1.0 ^a (.75)	.29 ^b (.55)	17.23**
(S2) Bill Clinton is angry at the news media for covering the allegations.	.30 ^b (.59)	1.77 ^a (.47)	.01 ^b (.35)	163.97**
(S3) Bill Clinton thinks that media coverage will hurt his chances to win the nomination.	.19 ^b (.45)	.45 ^a (.65)	.20 ^a (.45)	3.41*
(S4) Some politicians and activists think that media coverage will hurt Clinton's chances to win the nomination.	.35 ^b (.67)	1.0 ^a (.56)	.91 ^a (.79)	12.39**
(S5) Bill Clinton is fighting back by criticizing the conduct of the press.	.39 ^b (.65)	1.19 ^a (.78)	.18 ^b (.49)	30.37**
(S6) Bill Clinton is trying to put pressure on the press to stop reporting the allegations.	.35 ^b (.53)	1.32 ^a (.69)	.22 ^b (.52)	48.67**
(C) Bill Clinton wants reporters to know he did not have an affair with Flowers.	1.76 ^a (.48)	.64 ^b (.76)	.29 ^c (.63)	67.01**
(A1) Newspaper editors face difficult decisions when figuring out how to report the allegations.	.01 ^b (.23)	.01 ^b (.15)	1.51 ^a (.63)	207.54**
(A2) Newspaper editors think it is important to put the allegations into context.	.67 ^c (.79)	.17 ^b (.38)	1.18 ^a (.72)	27.48**
(A3) Newspaper organizations try to investigate rumors of infidelity before reporting on them.	.46 ^b (.66)	.21 ^b (.51)	1.04 ^a (.64)	22.93**
(A4) Editors had to figure out how to report allegations because they were first published in a tabloid newspaper.	.35 ^b (.57)	.21 ^b (.41)	1.13 ^a (.66)	36.63**
(A5) Editors believe that the public expects the news media to cover stories about the private lives of candidates.	.52 ^b (.69)	.38 ^b (.61)	1.27 ^a (.69)	23.41**

Note. Means in the same row that do not share the same superscripts differ at the $p < .05$ level in the Tukey post-hoc comparisons. Standard deviations are in parentheses. Means calculated from 0 = *not mentioned*; 1 = *explicitly mentioned, minor topic*; 2 = *explicitly mentioned, major topic*.

^a For each topic: (S) = Strategy; (C) = Conduit; (A) = Accountability.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

Table 2

Accessibility Effects: Partial Correlations Between Prior Beliefs about the Press and Media Perceptions

	Press Frame					
	Conduit (n = 46)		Strategy (n = 47)		Accountability (n = 45)	
	Negativity ^a	Quality ^b	Negativity	Quality	Negativity	Quality
Media Image						
Complete Picture	.02	.14	-.14	-.11	.09	.04
Overplay Mistakes	.34*	-.04	.18	.26#	.01	.11
Report Issues Fairly	-.03	.02	-.19	.08	-.27#	.09
Too Aggressive	.25	.06	-.02	.12	.34*	-.22
Oversimplify Issues	.23	-.04	.09	.03	.30*	-.12
Presidential Approval						
Overall Job	.53**	-.21	.57**	-.26#	.18	-.18
Foreign Affairs	.10	-.35*	.30*	-.21	-.07	.01
Economy	.26#	-.06	.47**	-.23	.16	.03
Character	.10	-.19	.59**	-.24	.29*	-.31*

Note. Correlations control for interest in campaign and media reliance.

^aNegativity columns contain partial correlations between *negative aspects of content* (index) and each media image item and each presidential approval item.

^bQuality columns contain partial correlations between news information quality (index) and each media image item and each presidential approval item.

$p < .10$ (two-tailed). * $p < .05$ (two-tailed). ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

Appendix A: Conduit Press Frame

CAMPAIGN '92***Clinton Tells Reporters that Charges of Extramarital Affair are "Not True"***

BEDFORD, N. H., Jan. 24 – Gov. Bill Clinton of Arkansas today denounced as “not true” a second wave of accusations of marital infidelity published by the tabloid newspaper *Star*.

“The story is not accurate,” Mr. Clinton told reporters in Claremont, N.H., earlier in the day. “The story is just not true.”

The *Star* reports that Mr. Clinton, a candidate for the Democratic Presidential nomination, had a 12-year extramarital affair with Gennifer Flowers, identified as a cabaret singer who first met Mr. Clinton when she was working as a television reporter for a television station in Little Rock.

Star quotes Ms. Flowers as saying she broke up with Mr. Clinton in 1989. The tabloid also says it obtained tape recordings of telephone conversations between Mr. Clinton and Ms. Flowers, made by Ms. Flowers from December 1990 to last week. In them, the tabloid says, Mr. Clinton tells Ms. Flowers to deny that an affair took place. Officials at the paper acknowledged paying Ms. Flowers but declined to say how much.

Campaigning at a Claremont, N.H., paintbrush factory today, Mr. Clinton was surrounded by more than 70 news reporters and cameramen. Many of these journalists asked him questions about the allegations.

“I did call her back every time she called me,” Mr. Clinton told the reporters. “She said she was frightened, she felt her life was being ruined by people harassing her . . . and offering her bribes to change her story.”

The Clinton campaign made available to journalists a letter that Flower’s attorney, Robert H. McHenry, sent last January to KBTS, a Little Rock radio station. The letter said a talk-show host had “wrongfully and untruthfully alleged an affair” between Flowers and Clinton and threatened a lawsuit. No suit was ever filed.

Mr. Clinton’s media advisor, Frank Greer, told reporters today that Flowers was a “friend” and “wanted to do some music for the campaign . . . Maybe she got desperate. Maybe she was paid \$100,000 by the *Star*.”

Back in Claremont, reporters asked Mr. Clinton if he expected Flowers’ allegations to become a bigger news story than other allegations, made by a dismissed Arkansas state employee last week and also reported in the *Star*, that Mr. Clinton had engaged in several extramarital affairs two years ago.

Mr. Clinton seemed to take the uproar in stride. He told the journalists, “The irony of this is that my wife and I have been far more open and candid about this thing than anybody else. Do we have something to offer this country? Do we love each other? Are we devoted to our marriage? Are we devoted to our daughter? The answer to all of those questions is yes. I think that’s what the American people want to know.”

Appendix B: Strategy Press Frame

CAMPAIGN '92***Clinton Defends His Privacy and Says the Press Intruded***

MANCHESTER, N.H., Jan. 27 – In an unusual national television interview last night, Gov. Bill Clinton of Arkansas appeared on the CBS News program *60 Minutes*, appealing to voters to preserve his family's private life. He openly criticized the press, saying it had engaged "in a game of gotcha" by reporting allegations that he had been unfaithful to his wife.

During the interview, Clinton denied that he had had an affair with Gennifer Flowers, a former Arkansas state employee and nightclub singer. Her allegations that she had had a 12-year relationship with him, published three days ago in the tabloid *Star*, have plunged Clinton's campaign into turmoil.

During the *60 Minutes* interview, CBS correspondent Steve Kroft asked Clinton if he would deny that he had ever had an extra-marital affair. Mr. Clinton said he had already told the press more about his private life than any other candidate for President.

"I am the only person I am aware of to ever run for president to come before the press and the American people with my wife to say that we were really proud our marriage was still together because it had had problems, I hadn't been perfect, we had difficulties . . . [and] we worked through it."

Mr. Clinton's decision to go on *60 Minutes* to answer charges of marital infidelity represented a high-stakes strategy designed to put the issue of his marriage behind him.

"I think most Americans who are watching this tonight, they'll know what we are saying," Mr. Clinton said. "And I think what the press has to decide is: Are we really going to keep up the feeding frenzy and engage in a game of gotcha."

Reaction among politicians and analysts in both parties to Clinton's appearance was mixed. Some say that Mr. Clinton's rebuttal on national television will "backfire" and hurt his chances to win the February 18 New Hampshire primary, where he is leading in the polls. Others insist that the crisis will subside because voters are angry at the press for reprinting unsubstantiated rumors.

On the campaign trail in Boston last night, Mr. Clinton once again found himself dogged by more than 40 newspaper reporters and TV cameramen. Trying to deflect questions about the *60 Minutes* program, Clinton told the journalists that his goal was to inform voters about his economic reforms, and that that was difficult to do with all of the attention given to the Flowers allegations.

But when a reporter asked again about the accuracy of Ms. Flowers' statements, Mr. Clinton brushed the question aside and angrily vowed to "say no more." He then lashed out at the reporters and cameramen who he said are keeping the story alive.

Appendix C: Accountability Press Frame

CAMPAIGN '92**Media*****Five Days From Tabloid Tattle to Front-Page News***

NEW YORK, Jan. 29 – It took just five days for the allegations about Arkansas Gov. Bill Clinton's private life to spread from a sensationalist tabloid to a news conference today in which 200 journalists shouted questions at Jennifer Flowers while CNN carried it live.

The mainstream media, however, have been wrestling for months with whether rumors about Mr. Clinton's personal life were fit to print.

The *Washington Times* reported last July unsubstantiated rumors that Clinton had "extramarital affairs, illegitimate children and... used drugs." Several news organizations, including the *Washington Post*, sent reporters to Arkansas at the time that Mr. Clinton entered the race last fall but did not find anything about the rumors worth publishing.

The Flowers story did not reach critical mass until Clinton was leading the Democratic pack in the New Hampshire primary and the *Star* tabloid paid an undisclosed sum to Flowers to tell the world about what she claims was a 12-year affair with Clinton. The story then reverberated through the New York City tabloids to the rest of the press.

The media initially treated the *Star* article with unusual restraint. NBC was the only one of the four major networks to broadcast the Flowers allegations last Thursday, and the major papers played the story on the inside pages.

But with Clinton "fighting for his political life," as the *Wall Street Journal* put it today, the story that tabloids have dubbed "SEX, LIES, AND AUDIOTAPE," became front-page news in much of the country.

The consensus among journalists is that Flowers' charges could not be ignored, particularly after Mr. Clinton and his wife, Hillary, discussed them Sunday night in a post-Super Bowl appearance on CBS television.

Albert Hunt, Washington bureau chief of the *Wall Street Journal*, says that it is "incumbent on journalists, when we're forced into running a story that has sleazy origins and can hurt a candidate's chances in the election, to put the whole episode into context, to try to report about why it is a story."

At the same time, the coverage seems to have made the public more unhappy than usual with the press.

Robert G. Kaiser, the managing editor of the *Washington Post*, acknowledges this, but says that if the news media didn't pay attention to the fact that Mr. Clinton's private life had become news, it would "feed the anxiety among readers that we know lots of things we don't share with them."

Many who work in the news business say it has changed since three *Miami Herald* reporters staked out the home of Democratic candidate Gary Hart in 1987. Since then, they say, it has become customary to cover stories about a candidate's personal life, even though journalists acknowledge that it is hard to report rumors with the proper restraint.

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