Revising the Indexing Hypothesis: Officials, Media, and the Libya Crisis

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This study revises the indexing hypothesis by specifying its predictions and testing them on a single event, the U.S.-Libya crisis of 1985–1986. We consider not only whether journalists use “official debate” to guide their coverage of important policy issues, but also how they might construct and interpret this debate. Detailed content analysis of the New York Times demonstrates that, while indexing is a valuable theory in assessing media treatment of foreign policy, it needs further refinement. Different interpretations of indexing, particularly a proportional versus a parametric standard, predict very different results. Journalism norms such as objectivity and event-centered reporting may support or counteract indexing. Journalists appear to seek out foreign sources to provide opinions contrary to the dominant policy position, and they marginalize some U.S. elite voices while overemphasizing others. This may be a sign of media autonomy, or of the relative power of sources over both policy outcomes and public debate. The ability of some elites to introduce policy options and shape debate needs to be considered, as does the effect of the physical placement of arguments in the news text. These findings also suggest the need to reconsider what features constitute an independent press and effective public debate.

Keywords: foreign policy; indexing; journalism norms; Libya bombing, 1986; news bias; news sources; role of media; press–government relations

Most studies of media–government relations arise from a concern with the media’s performance in the democratic process. Most observers want news reports and commentary to help ordinary citizens develop rational preferences and hold officials accountable. They generally assume that carrying out this duty requires that journalists make decisions and supply news as independently as possible from government; however, many empirical studies have shown that this is not what happens (see especially Sigal, 1973). An important advance in this area of
research is Bennett's “indexing” hypothesis (Bennett, 1990, 1995; Bennett & Manheim, 1993), a concise statement of the working relationship between media and government:

Mass media news professionals, from the boardroom to the beat, tend to “index” the range of voices and viewpoints in both news and editorials according to the range of views expressed in mainstream government debate about a given topic. (Bennett, 1990, p. 106)

This article builds upon Bennett's important theoretical, empirical, and normative work on the connections among news media, public policy, and political elites. It explores news surrounding the 1985-1986 crisis in U.S.-Libyan relations to develop a case study that clarifies and extends the insights of the indexing model. In order to do this, we must explore the predictions that the indexing hypothesis makes and clarify the key term mainstream government debate.

The normative worry at the center of the indexing concept is whether media discourse is so constrained by the boundaries and emphases of debate among political elites that the public remains poorly informed, its voice silent or reduced to granting manipulated consent. Thus, the empirical goal of the indexing concept is to chart and explain the closeness of fit between media discourse and debate among political elites. The indexing hypothesis as previously stated can support at least three readings. One is a prediction that official debate sets the parameters of media debate, establishing the boundaries or agenda of public discussion. This would mean that the only problem definitions and policy options appearing in the media are those first expressed by U.S. officials: that the breadth of media policy debate is less than or equal to, but never greater than, the official debate. A second interpretation of indexing is that the proportions of pro- to anti-administration commentary and other positions represented in the news closely reflect the distribution of expressed views among officials. This prediction expects a close correspondence between the policy positions staked out by governing elites and the views that are represented in the news. The third conceivable prediction supported by the indexing model is some combination of the first two.

The terms used to describe the hypothesized central engine of media discourse—mainstream government debate or official debate—require refinement. We should distinguish three ways of segmenting U.S. elites: governing elites as a whole; the executive branch or administration, which typically initiates foreign policy; and oppositional officials, whom the media generally identify among members of the opposition party in Congress. Together the administration and its critics in Congress compose the governing elite. The literature sometimes conflates these elite factions, yet in theory and practice they are distinct. For example, governing elites in aggregate may control discursive parameters where the executive alone cannot; or it may be that the administration can in fact dominate the agenda without much input from opposing officials. Either way, it is possible that the distribution of specific policy positions in the news is governed more by one segment than another, by a weighted average of the views in both groups, or by some other journalistic decision rule. Of course, it is also possible that other elite or nonelite sources shape news discourse in important ways.

These clarifications suggest several questions worthy of further research, and we designed a methodology to provide partial answers:
• Does news of American foreign policy initiatives in fact closely track the views expressed by U.S. government officials?
• What forces help to shape and to change the boundaries of discussion and representation of policies in the news?
• What aspects of news coverage appear most susceptible to control by the administration?
• How much and how accurately are policy positions taken in Congress—the chief institutional locus of elite opposition—reflected in the news?
• Is there evidence of independent media choice in reporting policy discourse?

Methodology

The methods we chose allow a refined understanding of indexing. First, we include an independent measure of elite debate, the Congressional Record. In this way, we can learn about both parametric and proportional representation of elite views. No other single repository of elite opinion is as likely to present such an assortment of official positions, since both pro- and anti-administration members speak out on the floor of Congress. We recognize the limits of the Record as a true measure of the information environment in which journalists work. It does not record the briefings and handouts of key executive branch departments and the White House, nor does it reflect informal discussions among journalists, staffers, and members on the Hill. The Record nonetheless should reflect the range of debate among those Washington elites who have the ability to affect U.S. policy.

Second, the study tracks specific policy prescriptions and specific elite sources over time. By coding in such detail, we can determine when and where ideas originate and how the breadth of debate changes and is managed over time. Not only does this approach allow us to assess the range of viewpoints more precisely, it helps handle a theoretical and methodological problem in studying the government’s effect on media discourse: the administration’s preferred policy often shifts over time. Administration policy toward Libya was in flux throughout the 1985–1986 crisis. Our coding scheme provides a way to monitor what the administration policy was at any given time along with the structures of support and opposition in the media and Congress.

Third, in coding New York Times coverage of the crisis in U.S.–Libya relations, the study taps the media’s use of foreign as well as American sources. This turns out to be vital to understanding the coverage and its dynamics in this case and, we believe, many others (Entman, in preparation).

In both the Congressional Record and the New York Times, we coded all remarks or news stories, respectively, indexed under the heading “Libya” between December 31, 1985, and May 6, 1986. We coded the full text of all such stories in the Times and utterances in the Record, from the onset of the Libya crisis, when the Rome and Vienna airports were attacked by machine-gunning terrorists (allegedly Libyan-sponsored) through a Berlin disco bombing which killed a U.S. serviceman, to the bombing of Tripoli and its aftermath. Four substantive policies and one procedural option were discussed in Times coverage as viable U.S. responses to the tension between Libya and the West during this period. These five positions served as the basis for analyzing the Times and the Record:

Negotiations: Dispute between Libya and other parties should be settled by diplomatic means such as in the World Court or the United Nations.
Sanctions: Economic or political sanctions will force Libya to comply with Western demands.

Espionage: Covert actions, such as assassinating Qaddafi, will force Libya to comply with Western demands.

Force: Military actions will force Libya to comply with Western demands.

Each of these policies advocates some course of action and therefore can be supported or criticized. Support for a policy was labeled “pro”; a criticism was labeled “con.” Unlike previous indexing studies, this one attaches “pro” and “con” dimensions to individual policies, not the administration per se. If a statement advocated sanctions after the administration had moved to advocating force, that statement was still labeled “pro-sanctions.”

What Entman and Page (1994) refer to as a procedural theme was also coded:

War powers: The administration’s actions violate the War Powers Act or some other U.S. law.

In its “pro” form, this procedural theme is a diluted expression of opposition to administration policy. In its “con” form, it supports the administration (cf. Entman & Page, 1994). A third type of code was established to handle congressional ambivalence in the wake of use of force by the United States:

Waffle: Past use of force is acceptable, or “What’s done is done,” but we should not use force in the future.

Policy recommendations not fitting the categories were recorded in the catchall category “Other,” which had both “pro” and “con” dimensions. About 1 percent of all New York Times policy statements and 13 percent of Record statements fell into this category.

We use the term “source” to describe the originator of a policy statement. Sources may be people who are quoted either directly or indirectly, or they may be the unattributed narrative of the story itself (the voice of the journalist). The unit of observation is the paragraph. Like other coding protocols used in content research, this one admittedly simplifies the public debate. Readers should be aware that the policy options we identify carry with them a constellation of related ideas about the nature and cause of the problem, the efficacy of the government’s response, and the desired outcome (Althaus et al., 1993).

Findings

U.S. Officials Did Not Dominate Every Aspect of Media Discussion

We found that, contrary to expectations, in the aggregate American elites were not the Times’s dominant sources. Thirty-three percent of all themes were credited to administration officials, 6 percent to members of Congress, 52 percent to foreign sources, and the remaining 9 percent to experts, U.S. citizens, and anonymous or unattributed sources. Domestic elites (administration, Congress, and experts) made up only 41 percent of sources, whereas foreign elites (excluding attributions to foreign citizens) comprised 48 percent of all sources. These findings reveal that
neither the administration nor U.S. elites as a whole controlled every aspect of the Libya story in the New York Times.

The Administration Controlled the Timing and Focus of Policy Debate

Although it was not the dominant source numerically, the administration nonetheless exerted considerable control over news coverage of the Libya crisis, most importantly over the timing and focus of policy debate. The controlling force in setting the parameters of the media debate over Libya, as exemplified in the Times, was not “mainstream government debate” or elites as a whole, but the executive branch. The major options identified by the administration were sanctions and force; in public, at least, the White House initially favored the first and then shifted to the second only when sanctions failed. The bulk of policy discussion in the Times occurred in response to administration actions against Libya. The average article appearing during the 18 weeks of crisis contained two balanced statements about the use of force or sanctions, but during the weeks of January 7 and 28, March 25, and April 15, the average number of coded statements doubled to four per article. These four weeks of active policy debate were all prompted by administration actions. On January 8, Reagan announced that the United States would sever virtually all economic ties with Libya. On January 28, the administration said for the first time that the United States would consider military action against Libya if sanctions did not achieve their intended goals, and four days later the sanctions officially took effect. On March 25, U.S. warships crossed Qaddafi’s “line of death” and clashed with Libyan forces. Finally, on the evening of April 14, President Reagan appeared on prime-time television to announce U.S. air strikes against Libya in retaliation for the disco bombing in Berlin. The seven days that followed saw the most vigorous policy debate of the entire crisis period.

These four critical weeks contained nearly two-thirds of all policy statements made about sanctions and force during the Libya crisis. Administration actions clearly determined the agenda for the U.S. policy debate. Only 14 percent of the force debate occurred before the Gulf of Sidra incident, fully 10 weeks after U.S. naval forces had been assigned to maneuvers off the Libyan coast. Slightly more than a quarter of the force debate occurred in the three weeks between the Sidra incident and the bombing of Tripoli, but most of the debate over using military force—58 percent—occurred only after the April 14 airstrikes. Debate thus focused more on what should have been done than on what ought to be done; oversight of U.S. policy was conducted mostly through the rearview mirror. This supports Bennett and Manheim’s (1993) contention that policy debate is often too brief and too late to serve the public (cf. Entman, 1989).

Congressional Elites Were Marginalized

Congress was a minor player in media coverage of Libya. Only 6 percent of coded sources were members of Congress. This relative void of domestic elite dissent in the news may be traceable partly to the other important issues occupying Congress during the early months of 1986. The day after the Sidra incident, the Senate defeated the Gramm-Rudman balanced budget amendment. The House had just declined to renew aid to the Nicaraguan Contras and was discussing a Sandinista
incursion into Honduras. The small amount of congressional debate over Libya policy cannot, however, completely explain the marginalization of Congress in the Times. A total of 388 policy statements reflecting member views were made on the floor of Congress during the Libya crisis, but the Times attributed only 75 statements to congressional sources during the entire five-month period.

Several news norms may have indirectly enhanced administration control over public reactions to the crisis by marginalizing congressional debate:

The news production process. The Times assigns far more reporters to administration beats, such as the White House, the State Department, and the Department of Defense, and to foreign bureaus than to Congress. The paper simply produces more news from outside Congress.

The objectivity norm. The objectivity norm requires that journalists present “both” sides of a story (Tuchman, 1972). If Congress offers little strong or clear opposition to the administration—as was especially true of the decision to bomb Tripoli—journalists may seek opposing views elsewhere. For the Times, with its proud tradition of detailed foreign coverage and heavy financial investment in foreign bureaus, that might mean using foreign sources.

The timeliness norm. Journalists seek the “latest” information. As events unfolded, the people with new information were foreign and administration officials, not members of Congress.

Source power. Entman and Page (1994) found that administration sources tended to be more prominent in media coverage of the Gulf War debate than congressional sources, even when the latter were providing novel and surprising information. They interpreted this to mean that the media calibrate the prominence they give to policy views by judging the likely power of the actor to affect policy outcomes. At least in this crisis, foreign nations’ cooperation with the sanctions policy turned out to be crucial to policy implementation, and ultimately controversial as most “allies” failed to assist. As the Libya crisis unfolded, then, NATO allies such as Britain and France had more power to shape actions than Congress. When it came to the force option, the short time frame, crisis atmosphere, and lack of determined and united opposition party leadership meant that the U.S. Congress had no real ability to stop the bombing. They apparently had little inclination to do so either. According to the Congressional Record, only 18 members of Congress made any statement about U.S. policy toward Libya prior to the April 15 bombing.

Entman and Page (1994) suggested that all elites are not equal in the eyes of the media, that those with more power to affect policy also enjoy more power to shape the news. Agreeing, Bennett (1995) asserted that journalists will most heavily index or represent the views of elites with power to affect the policy they are debating. This means that predictions about whose views are indexed may vary from case to case depending on the distribution of power over outcomes. Things become even more complex when we recognize that media coverage itself may help to alter the distribution of power. In this case, for example, aspects of the coverage—such as the inflammatory visuals and rhetoric framing the “madman” Qaddafi (Althaus et al., 1993; Entman, in preparation)—made it politically difficult for American elites to oppose the American bombing of Tripoli. That reduced the power of Congress to affect the policy decision and thus the presence of Congress
in the media debate. All of this suggests a need to make the indexing model more dynamic and interactive.

**Dissent Received Abundant Representation**

Although the administration determined which policy options were discussed most frequently, the positions taken toward them in the Times were surprisingly balanced, despite the inhibition of congressional elites. In fact, coverage in the aggregate slanted against the administration's (shifting) position, so much so that 57 percent of all coded policy statements opposed the administration despite strong support among domestic elites. Such a finding appears to contradict the proportionality version of the indexing hypothesis, which predicts that the media will closely track the distribution of views among U.S. officials. Administration officials, whose dominant policies evolved from pro-Sanctions to pro-Force, seemed to control the topic, but not the valence of discussion.

In total, 56 percent of the statements made about the Force option opposed the use of military power against Libya. The balance of Sanctions coverage was skewed similarly against the administration: only 43 percent of statements on Sanctions favored the White House stance. To get an idea of the overall sentiment expressed by foreign and administration sources, we subtracted the number of “con” statements made by each source about a policy from the number of “pro” statements made about the same policy. The result, displayed in Figure 1, is labeled the “net” support for that policy by that source. Negative signs indicate opposition. Congress was eliminated from the analysis because of the very small number of statements attributed to it; only 4 percent all of Force themes and 1 percent of all Sanctions themes.

Figure 1 shows that whereas administration sources overwhelmingly supported sanctions during the first half of the crisis, foreign sources overwhelmingly opposed them. During the latter half, the same breakdown appeared in positions on the use of force. When the administration and foreign sources agreed on an issue—as they did in the week of January 7, when Reagan ruled out any immediate use of force, favoring sanctions instead—the balance of coverage on that issue tipped to one side (data not shown). When foreign dissent diminished, as it did in the week following the Sidra incident, the balance of coverage more nearly reflected the administration’s position. This suggests that indexing theory may need to specify conditions under which proportional representation will and will not occur. For example, the relationship might be curvilinear: Under conditions of near or total elite consensus or conditions of unusual activity among opposing officials, news may register the distribution of elite opinion accurately. Under more mixed conditions, however, the news may have more leeway to tilt one way or another, and the tilt could vary across different dimensions of the text.

By coding all sources, we discover what appears to be a relatively balanced debate on the news pages, despite the heavy pro-administration skew of public expressions among domestic elites (see the discussion of Figure 2 below). This balancing could be interpreted as evidence for a substantial amount of journalistic autonomy, revealing that news organizations endeavor to uphold the idea of a press that is free from White House control. However, the same evidence could indicate that the Times feels compelled by outside pressures and incentives to enforce a norm of balanced discourse. As this indeterminacy suggests, the concepts and measurement of media autonomy and control require further development.
Figure 1. Net force and sanction themes attributed to administration and foreign sources by week of crisis.
Active Reconstruction of Congressional Debate

Comparing *Times* coverage to an independent source of elite debate such as the *Congressional Record* offers further insights into the question of proportional representation of official views. It also provides some ultimately indeterminate evidence for media independence. We compared the proportion of themes the *Times* attributed to congressional sources with the proportions reported in the *Record*. The *Times*’s coverage both narrowed the range and misrepresented the content of debate as reflected in the *Congressional Record*.

Figure 2 shows that the *Times* failed to represent proportionally the balance of views expressed on the floor of Congress. It portrayed Congress as more opposed to the use of force than the *Record* indicates. While more than half of all themes voiced in the *Record* supported the use of military force, only a third of congressional sources cited in the *Times* advocated pro-Force themes. Likewise, the *Times* coverage downplayed congressional support for sanctions against Libya. Not only did coverage fail to represent the distribution of congressional floor stances on the two main options identified by the administration, but a relatively large amount of media attention was given to a minor policy option (Espionage), which was hardly mentioned on the floor of Congress. And the rather tepid floor debate over whether Reagan’s use of force violated the War Powers Act was magnified in the *Times*, expanding from 4 percent of themes expressed in the *Record* to 29 percent of congressional themes appearing in the *Times*. This is congruent with Entman and Page’s (1994) finding that media often emphasize procedure over substance. While such procedural debate can provide acceptable ways for elites to voice opposition to popular policies, the emphasis on legal procedure does not provide the public

![Figure 2. Proportions of themes attributed to congressional sources in the New York Times and Congressional Record.](image)
with substantive means for evaluating the potential benefits and risks of a policy and developing its own informed preferences.

In each case, congressional support for the administration’s stance was minimized and conflict between the executive and legislative branches emphasized. Whereas 76 percent of the statements appearing in the Record supported administration policy toward Libya, only 49 percent of congressional sources appearing in the Times did so. It is possible that legislators were more willing to express opposition in off-the-record interviews or other venues than on the floor. The 49 percent figure could reflect the distribution of private congressional sentiment more than the often politically motivated public posturing in floor debate. That possibility points to the difficulty of measuring elite “voices and viewpoints” and thus of modeling the power flow between political elites and media, as indexing theory seeks to do.

Not only were the proportions of congressional support and opposition for the administration’s policies misrepresented in the Times, the parameters of congressional debate were as well. Figure 2 shows that several themes present in the congressional debate were left out of the Times coverage altogether. The actual congressional debate was much richer than it appeared in the Times. Only 8 percent of themes uttered by congressional sources in the Times dealt with policy options other than Force or Sanctions, compared with 20 percent in the Record.

It appears that the Times simplifies congressional debate, either feeding “usable” themes into the preexisting frame that was strongly shaped by the administration’s rhetorical emphases, or weighting some congressional themes and sources more heavily than others. These findings also suggest that the media’s tendency to present conflict as a dichotomy may eliminate policy options that U.S. officials are actively discussing from the media debate. Our results could suggest that the media are exercising some degree of independent choice within the parameters of official discourse—or that they are passively reflecting power relationships among elites. These data cannot determine which; it is not clear that any data could, and most likely there is truth to both.

Taken as a whole, these data suggest that elite debate can be richer and more substantive than media debate. In this sense, indexing fails to live up to its admittedly limited democratizing promise. Had the Times indexed proportionately to Congress during the Libya crisis, public debate on the policy options for handling Libya might have been more diverse. On the other hand, the Times’s disproportionate attention (by the standard of Congressional Record remarks) to congressional opposition and its publicizing of foreign criticism could in theory have contributed to general public skepticism toward the Libya venture. In practice, however, survey results indicate overwhelming public approval (Althaus & Edy, 1995).

Making Page One

Although the Times highlighted opposition by overrepresenting congressional dissent and citing foreign sources more often than administration officials, the executive branch was nonetheless privileged in the Times’s narrative. Even though 1.6 foreign sources were cited for every administration official, administration sources were more likely to appear on the front page. Of all the sources appearing on page one during the crisis period, 47 percent were administration officials and 39 percent were foreign sources. This presents a strikingly different picture from the breakdown of sources appearing on the inside pages: 26 percent administration and 47
percent foreign sources. All other sources were represented about equally on the front and inside pages. Yet while administration voices saturated the front page, in absolute numerical terms, its views received somewhat less page one exposure than those of opponents in the aggregate. When all the policy themes are considered together, the balance tips slightly against the administration: 45 percent of front page themes were pro-administration and 55 percent were anti-administration. Our data on headlines tell a similar story: Nearly half of all headline themes opposed using force, whereas only one-fifth favored it; 70 percent of all policy statements appearing in headlines were anti-administration.

According to this cut through our data, then, *Times* coverage was proportionally indexed neither to debate among U.S. officials nor to public opinion polls, both of which heavily supported the administration. The administration’s control over the policy agenda and “enemy” framing probably helped to limit congress members’ rhetorical options: Few would risk charges of appeasing a mad terrorist stalking Americans around the globe. Their reticence left most of the opposition space to foreign sources with little ability to sway Americans’ responses to survey questions. The overwhelming survey approval suggests that all the foreign criticism failed to penetrate the list of considerations at the top of most Americans’ minds (Zaller, 1992) when they answered poll questions.

Conclusions

Like all studies, this one has limitations. It explores just a single case, albeit in unusual detail. It probes a single media outlet, albeit an influential one. Different ways of studying different media or different cases might have yielded divergent findings. But other data support the results presented here (Entman, in preparation), and in any case we make no pretense to definitiveness. Our main purpose has been to build upon the promising start of the indexing model and advance understanding of the relationships among government, the media, and the public. In this spirit we offer some concluding observations.

Arguably, indexing, as previously explained, bears striking resemblance to the norm of objectivity. The objectivity norm permits mass media to appeal to the widest possible audience, a major commercial concern. It has been a part of the journalistic routine for generations, part of professionalization, and thus a skill valued by individual practitioners. Although journalists know they cannot serve as a mirror and must report selectively, consulting elites who are representatives of the public about what issues and ideas are important may give journalists confidence about the correct proportions to allot to each side in any given debate. Many complaints against journalists by elites protest the relative prominence given to each side in a debate. In another sense, however, indexing resurrects the “mirror” metaphor that has been rejected by most theorists and practitioners. Indexing seems to predict that the media hold a mirror to elite discourse and reflect that discourse to the public.

Another aspect of objectivity is problematic for the indexing hypothesis. According to Tuchman (1972, p. 665), one of the strategies journalists use to demonstrate objectivity is to “present conflicting possibilities.” This point suggests that journalists seek out sources of opposing opinion, that every news story has at least two sides. That tendency may produce at least two outcomes. First, if reporters can find no one to contradict the administration line, they may decide that there is only
one side to the story—so that "objective" coverage can actually be quite imbalanced, as discussed by Entman (1991) in a comparison of the coverage of the Korean Air Line and Iran crises. These cases support the indexing hypothesis, the notion of official control over the public debate, and the revised mirror metaphor. In other cases, however, reporters following professional norms and routines may create a more diverse and oppositional discourse in the news than has arisen among U.S. elites. This second outcome suggests that the American media may in some circumstances exert a greater degree of control over their texts than predicted by the indexing hypothesis. Reporters may do more than merely hold a mirror up to official discussion.

Regardless of how the indexing hypothesis is revised, it is clear that the concept of "official debate" must be expanded to include foreign elites. This case suggests that journalists can use foreign sources, not just domestic elites, to satisfy the norms of conflict and balance. We can expect foreign elites to play an increasing role in American policy discourse, for the reciprocal relationships among U.S. elites, U.S. media, and the American public are increasingly likely to be inflected by the decentered, destabilized international political system. The United Nations, regional alliances and powers, and U.S. allies will often have a significant say over policy outcomes. The Libya case suggests that the American media may include these players' views, sometimes more than they represent an often passive U.S. Congress.

We also believe the indexing hypothesis must be revised to take into account other means by which officials manage debate, including the management of events and their interpretation and the manipulation of existing news norms. The journalistic norm of event-centered coverage seems to modify the form that indexing takes. The administration does not dominate the discourse about Libya if we measure the number of administration officials quoted in the Times, or the number of supportive statements about its policies, but it does retain some advantage in obtaining high-visibility, front-page attention. The media, seeking a "news peg" on which to hang information, privilege actors over reactors. When it comes to foreign policy, the administration is the chief actor, and the media may allow it to determine what gets discussed (force, sanctions, or occasionally nothing). The Times's news columns do not introduce alternative policies. Instead, they tend to depict merits and risks of a single policy at any one time as if that policy were the only possible course of action. Ultimately, the choice tends to be presented as "do something"—the thing named by the administration—or "don't do it," rarely as "do something else." The conflict and balance aspects of the objectivity practice may compound this tendency. Media-constructed conflicts need to be two-sided, not multifaceted, so the Times simplified the richer debate that occurred too briefly and too late in the Congress.  

Whatever their relative representation in the text, the timing of the themes' appearance can be more important to the political process and policy outcomes than their sheer number. The administration's ability to frame the problem, set the agenda of options, and define criteria for success during critical moments as the policy unfolds seems to be more politically significant than its inability to dominate the aggregate total of assertions. To be sure, in other foreign interventions, the administration's influence over timing may not overcome opponents' numerical advantage in news coverage, but the theoretical lesson is that research should not treat each media assertion as if it were equivalent no matter when it appears, an idea also supported by Bennett (1990) and Bennett and Manheim (1993).

In any case, we should not interpret a low correlation between the distribution
of views within U.S. officials' public discourse and the distribution of views presented in the news as support for media autonomy. One common reason the news of U.S. national security poorly represents the thematic emphases of opposing elites' pronouncements is that the administration's framing voice dominates that of other officials—hardly a basis for proclaiming media independence. Selective presentation of elite debate could also reveal journalists following some fixed decision rule that leads them passively to adjust their coverage of ideas depending on precisely which members of the elite are voicing them. Thus what may appear on first blush as evidence against indexing—a mismatch between the pattern of views in the news and the pattern expressed by elites—could turn out instead to be evidence for a more refined understanding of the rules that govern indexing. And consider a more subtle example of the problems in judging autonomy and indexing. The Times's choice to underplay legislators' public support of sanctions and overlay their concern with the War Powers Act (Figure 2) is unlikely to have emerged from a self-conscious attempt to shape public deliberation in a particular way. Rather, it was, in all likelihood, an unmindful result of habitual decision rules and standard operating procedures.

Even if we assume that news coverage incongruent with U.S. elite debate offers evidence for journalistic autonomy, the normative contribution of such material is debatable. Journalists' own emphases may be no more informative or rational than those of American leaders. Perhaps a more slavish indexing of congressional sentiment for sanctions and negotiations might have tempered the administration's ability to build public support for an aggressive U.S. posture. The seeming independence the Times exhibited in paying disproportionate attention to the War Powers issue arguably directed the public's attention away from the substantive core of the policy choice. Even closely indexed media could help citizens develop their own preferences, if debate among officials as reflected in the news offers citizens the required information. Moreover, autonomous media coverage that moves outside elite discursive bounds could in theory confuse or distract the public rather than enhance rational deliberation.

For all these reasons, our normative prescriptions for journalistic behavior merit considerably more reflection. In his early indexing work, Bennett (1990) suggested the public would be served if stable majority opinion became a basis for the news index. It is not clear, however, how desirable it would be to grant news attention in proportion to measured public sentiment. Surveys showed overwhelming support for the attack on Libya despite its uncertain results and rationale. If journalists had shaped coverage in accord with survey results, news content would have favored the administration more lopsidedly, making careful deliberation even more difficult for the average citizen. Being herded along by an ill-informed (and problematically measured) majority opinion may be no more desirable than being stampeded by a manipulative president. And while news organizations may enjoy more leeway to influence aspects of the news narrative than is generally recognized, researchers should resist the temptation to equate independence with a contribution to a rational, informed public or a well-functioning democratic process.

Notes

1. Picture captions were excluded. Editorials and "op-ed" pieces were also excluded, because we found that they could not meet our standards for coding reliability. Media
articles that were read into the Record by members of Congress were not coded because we were seeking a measure of elite discourse. One volume of the Congressional Record was missing from the Northwestern University library, and the three “Libya” entries it contained were not coded. In addition, a debate about U.S. policy in Nicaragua, which covers over 100 pages in the Record and refers to Libya in fewer than five paragraphs, was not coded. We do not believe these omissions affect the conclusions presented here.

2. The Libya crisis is here broken into 18 weeks running Tuesdays to Mondays, except for the final period which includes one extra day.

3. Headlines were coded for policy statements and treated as paragraphs. The prominence of various sources and themes was determined by the paragraph in which they appeared and the page number on which the paragraph appeared. Themes were coded only once per source per paragraph. However, if the same theme was articulated by two different sources in the same paragraph, each source and theme was recorded. For example, in the paragraph, “Military experts say Qaddafi’s training camps have been destroyed. ‘We won,’ they observed, the source, experts, and the theme, pro-Force, would be coded only once. In a paragraph such as “Experts observe that Qaddafi’s ability to train terrorists has been hard hit by the attack. State Department officials confirm this,” the first source and theme (experts, pro-Force) and the second source and theme (administration, pro-Force) are both coded. Intercoder reliability was measured by both agreement and by Brennan and Prediger’s (1981) kappa, which subtracts a chance agreement term from the initial agreement. In order to count as “agreement,” coders had to code the same theme in the same story rather than simply reach equivalent totals in the aggregate. Intercoder agreement for the Times was .847 (Brennan & Prediger’s kappa: .829) and for the Congressional Record, .871 (.858 kappa).

4. We decided to code all statements advocating a stronger sanctions policy in the Congressional Record as pro-Sanctions, even if they were made in the context of an anti-administration assertion (e.g., criticism for failing to give sanctions a fair chance).

5. Foreign elites encompass European or other U.S. allies (55 percent), the Soviet Union or nations aligned with it (10 percent), Arab or Israeli leaders (11 percent), Qaddafi or other Libyan leaders (7 percent), foreign citizens (10 percent), and other foreign sources, countries, or organizations (9 percent). The total does not equal 100 because of rounding.

6. Throughout the crisis, the administration opposed a negotiated settlement, favored covert action against the Libyan regime, advocated economic and diplomatic sanctions, and (at least publicly) favored force only as a last resort. Although Reagan initially spoke out against the use of force, arguing that military strikes would endanger the lives of Americans working in Libya, throughout the crisis period his administration publicly endorsed the use of airstrikes if sanctions failed to sway Qaddafi.

7. There is some evidence that editorial page content is more diverse and sometimes much more critical and analytical than news. (Entman, in preparation; Hallin, 1986). In this case, however, data (not reported) showed that the Times was editorially supportive of the raid on Tripoli.

References


