

Journal's Health Care Plan Coverage Free of Murdock's Conservative Bias

by Sid Bedingfield

This study investigates the relative news slant in the Wall Street Journal's coverage of health care reform in view of the owner's conservative bias and finds Rupert Murdoch's newspaper was no more negative toward Obama's plan than was The New York Times' coverage.

Rupert Murdoch's purchase of the Dow Jones Company in 2007 drew mixed emotions from supporters of the company's flagship property, the *Wall Street Journal*. Murdoch's investment served as a vote of confidence in the future of the newspaper business in general, and his vow to pump money into the *Journal* heartened those who feared the prestigious business publication would be allowed to atrophy in the age of new media.¹ But with that good news came a nagging question: How would Murdoch's ownership affect the paper's political news reporting? The *Journal*'s famously conservative editorial page appeared to fit well with Murdoch's political views. But the *Journal*'s news reporting had always remained separate from the editorial page and had earned a stellar reputation for fairness, accuracy and high quality. Facing budget cuts, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Tribune* and *The Washington Post* have turned away from national distribution and refocused on their local markets, leaving the *Journal* and *The New York Times* as the dominant national outlets for in-depth news in the United States.² Under ownership of the Bancroft family, the *Wall Street Journal*'s news editors carried out that responsibility with close adherence to the standards of modern U.S. journalism—*independence, detachment and impartiality*. Murdoch, on the other hand, has been accused of using the news pages of his publications to support political allies.³ News Corporation's recent

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phone-hacking scandal in Britain has only increased concern about its ownership of the *Journal*. Would Murdoch slant the paper's political news? This study explores that question by looking at how the *Wall Street Journal* covered one of the most divisive political stories of the past two decades: the Democratic Party's effort to overhaul the nation's health care system.

Theoretical Framework

Shoemaker and Reese argue that the "ultimate power in the media organization comes from the owner."⁴ But they believe even the owner's ability to influence content can be mitigated by forces inside and outside the company. In their five-level hierarchy of influences on media content, ideological forces occupy the top level. These are societal norms—such as support for democracy and a market-driven economy—that serve as unstated assumptions in helping shape news media content. The second level of influences involves extramedia forces such as news sources, special interest groups, audience reaction and public relations campaigns. The third level, the organizational influences, includes ownership of the media company. The routines of mass media work and the traits of the individual media workers themselves comprise the final two levels. Shoemaker and Reese believe these levels of influence interact and often serve to constrain each other. But that interaction can vary, with some levels exerting more influence than others depending on the media outlet in question. Critics of Rupert Murdoch's News Corp., for example, claim his ownership overrides all other influences in shaping political content at the company's news outlets.

Murdoch's reputation for political slant developed primarily in Britain in the 1980s. After purchasing the prestigious *Times of London* and *Sunday Times of London*, Murdoch moved his newspapers from Fleet Street and managed to break the union grip on press jobs in the United Kingdom.⁵ At the same time, the publisher used his popular tabloid, *The Sun*, and the upscale *Times* properties to support the conservative policies of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Murdoch's handpicked editor at the *Sunday Times of London*, Andrew Neil, later wrote a memoir detailing his role in helping to frame the "populist conservatism" of Thatcher and her Tory Party. Neil called Murdoch a "political animal" who managed the news by hiring editors who shared his political worldview.⁶ Critics charge that in return for Murdoch's media support, Thatcher's government helped News Corp. in its battle with the unions and in its efforts to expand into the satellite television market.⁷

Murdoch entered the United States media market in the 1970s with the purchase of properties in Texas and New York, including the tabloid *New York Post*.⁸ With its splashy and often humorous front pages, Murdoch's *Post* has displayed the same sort of frothy populist conservatism as his British newspapers. But as a tabloid, the *Post* shows more interest in celebrities than politics, and its political influence is considered marginal. However, News Corp.'s cable news channel, Fox News, has become a political powerhouse in support of Re-

publican and conservative causes.⁹ The Obama White House took the unusual step of declaring political war on Fox News, claiming it operated less as a news channel than as a political arm of the Republican Party.¹⁰

When Murdoch made an offer to purchase the Dow Jones Co. and its prestigious *Wall Street Journal*, critics howled.¹¹ They feared Murdoch would destroy the editorial integrity of the *Journal's* news coverage. To allay those fears, the *Journal's* owners, the Bancroft family, demanded that Murdoch create a committee of outside advisers to approve staff changes and protect the newspaper's editorial independence. For his part, Murdoch dismissed claims that he would tamper with the *Journal's* news credibility, and he promised to retain the current top editor, Marcus Brauchli.¹²

Less than five months after closing the deal to purchase Dow Jones, Murdoch dismissed Brauchli and installed a new editorial team from his *Times of London* newspaper. Robert Thompson took over as managing editor—the top newsroom job—and he selected conservative Gerard Baker, a former *Times of London* political columnist, to oversee Washington coverage.¹³ Critics assumed the worst, and within a year, they received evidence that appeared to justify those fears. David Carr, media columnist for *The New York Times*, quoted anonymous sources in the *Journal's* newsroom who claimed the new editors were demanding "a more conservative tone" in the paper's political stories.¹⁴ Specifically, the sources said Thompson and Baker had inserted quotes and had rewritten headlines to emphasize a negative tone toward the Democrats. Carr's sources said Obama's health care received especially close scrutiny.

Carr's column offered evidence to suggest Murdoch's ownership of the *Wall Street Journal* dominated all other levels in Shoemaker and Reese's model of media influences. One common way owners exert influence on content is by installing editors whose political views mirror their own. Newsroom workers who want to get ahead know they must please their immediate bosses, who in turn know the sort of news slant the owner wants.¹⁵ Perhaps the anonymous sources in Carr's column were whistle-blowers eager to call attention to this form of slant in the *Journal*. On the other hand, they could just as easily have been disgruntled employees eager to discredit the new management.

Under the Shoemaker and Reese model, all levels of influence interact to constrain the impact of any one of them. In the case of the *Journal*, the routines of the media workers, the traits of the individual media workers themselves, even other aspects of the organizational level influence could play significant roles in shaping the content, despite Murdoch's ownership. Tuchman argued that media routines in newsgathering and story format tend to mitigate political ideology in shaping news content.¹⁶ News reporters in the United States have been trained to follow a professional ethic that celebrates balance and frowns on advocacy. News workers are not immune to peer pressure or pack journalism; they are often concerned about their reputations within the larger news industry. Reporters at Murdoch's *Wall Street Journal* realize their news reports will be closely scrutinized for slant. Yes, they must please their current editors,

but they know they could be looking for work at another newspaper some day, and, therefore, must protect their reputations outside the *Journal* as well.

As the newspaper's owner, Murdoch has reasons to avoid obvious news slant as well. His British newspapers operated in an environment that accepted partisan journalism from even its most prestigious outlets; ideologically driven journalism is part of the culture in British newspapering.¹⁷ But as Murdoch well knows, that is not the case in the United States. Murdoch has said he wants the *Journal* to overtake *The New York Times* as the dominant source of in-depth national news.¹⁸ Blatant slant in news coverage could damage the reputation and revenue potential of his new prestige property. For these reasons, Murdoch's ownership may not necessarily move the *Wall Street Journal's* political news coverage to the right. The Shoemaker and Reese model of media influences includes plausible theoretical arguments to suggest the opposite outcome: A more fastidious adherence to the U.S. standard of balance and impartiality. This study addresses this question by examining how Murdoch's *Journal* handled the hot-button issue of health care reform.

Researching Bias and News Slant

The charge of media bias has become a routine and expected component of political discourse in the United States. Yet the issue of bias and news slant has received relatively modest theoretical attention from academics. One leading political communications scholar has called news bias "curiously under-theorized."¹⁹

Much of the empirical research into bias has also been hampered by confusion over the definition of biased news. A meta-analysis of bias research in presidential elections found most studies compared media coverage against the ideal of perfect 50/50 balance. Researchers measured negative and positive mentions of a candidate or party, and if one side received more positive mentions than the other, the researchers declared the coverage slanted or biased.²⁰ This failed to take into account what Schiffer called "non-partisan, non-ideological" reasons for news coverage to deviate from ideal balance.²¹ When one candidate is demonstrably weaker than the other—i.e., demonstrates limited knowledge of key issues, faces numerous ethical questions, fails to attract public support—coverage that is perfectly balanced in tone would be journalistically flawed.²²

Several recent studies of bias have moved the focus beyond the 50/50 ideal and instead have measured slant by comparing news coverage from two or more media outlets. Druckman and Parkin looked at how competing newspapers covered a U.S. Senate race in Minnesota and measured "relative slant."²³ Niven created a baseline for relative comparison by looking at newspaper coverage of the economy under President Clinton and the first President Bush only during months when the unemployment rate was exactly the same.²⁴ This study follows in that stream of comparative research by exploring the relative slant of the *Wall Street Journal's* coverage of health care reform. Through content

analysis, this research first compares the coverage of President Obama's health care plan by Murdoch's *Journal* with coverage during the same time period by the *Journal's* chief national competitor, *The New York Times*. The study then compares the coverage of the Obama plan in Murdoch's *Journal* with the same newspaper's coverage of President Clinton's health care reform plan in 1994, when the Bancroft family owned the *Wall Street Journal*.

Framing and Bias

Entman has challenged researchers to reconsider the way bias and news slant are defined and operationalized. He argues that studies of bias and news slant often downplay the impact of frame contests between political elites.²⁵ To help readers and viewers make sense of complicated policy debates, journalists often place the debate in a familiar narrative or frame of reference. Savvy political actors understand the need to manage and control the shape of these narratives. The frequent cry of "media bias" is part of the effort to exert that control.

In the health care reform debate, actors on both sides presented sweeping frames of reference to try to sway public opinion. Conservatives branded President Obama's health care plan as the work of an old-school "tax-and-spend" liberal. They tried to frame it as an effort to expand the reach of big government. Supporters of health care reform struggled to frame the proposal as a long-overdue push to make health-care coverage universally available in the world's richest nation.

As Entman points out, journalists often claim to treat competing frames equally. In reality, reporters routinely make subjective choices about the frames and narratives they select. A range of issues can influence these choices. One side in a political debate may be more competent communicators. Or polling data may show public opinion pointing strongly in one direction. Bias comes into play when journalists purposefully stack the deck in favor of one frame because it fits their ideological views. This is the premeditated bias of which Murdoch is accused. Entman distinguishes this sort of bias from news slant.²⁶ Bias is premeditated, he argues, but news slant may not be. News slant is often the product of journalists making subjective choices in their effort to report political reality. Using these definitions, premeditated bias becomes difficult to detect, but relative slant can be measured in empirical studies that seek to identify use of dominant frames. The current study builds upon Entman's research by trying to compare the use of dominant frames in the health care reform coverage in Murdoch's *Wall Street Journal*.

Research Questions

The dream of expanding health insurance coverage to almost all Americans—so-called universal health care—has been a part of liberal Democratic

Party liturgy since the Truman administration. With his wife leading the charge, President Clinton famously tried and failed to push through health care reform in 1994. Obama's new effort in 2009-2010 would trigger a similar political donnybrook.

To investigate relative news slant at Murdoch's *Wall Street Journal*, this study posed the following research questions:

RQ1:

When compared with *The New York Times*, did Murdoch's *Wall Street Journal* present news coverage that was more negative toward Obama's health care reform plan?

RQ2:

Was news coverage of Obama's health care plan by Murdoch's *Wall Street Journal* more negative than the newspaper's coverage of Clinton's 1994 health care reform plans, when the *Journal* was owned by the Bancroft family?

Entman defines framing as the selection of certain components of a perceived reality and presenting them in a way that suggests causal interpretation.²⁷ To examine the use of dominant frames in reporting the health care debate, this study posed the following four questions:

RQ3a:

When compared with *The New York Times*, were news stories in Murdoch's *Wall Street Journal* more likely to frame coverage of Obama's health care reform plan as a debate over the expansion of government into the domain of private industry?

RQ3b:

When compared with *The New York Times*, were news stories in Murdoch's *Wall Street Journal* less likely to frame the coverage of Obama's health care reform plan as a debate over the effort to provide universal health insurance coverage?

The Journal displayed a positive tone in more headlines and lead paragraphs than did The Times, and it granted more time to supporters of health care reform more frequently than did Times stories. But those differences were not statistically significant.

RQ4a:

When compared with the *Wall Street Journal*'s coverage of the Clinton health care reform plan in 1994, was news coverage in Murdoch's *Wall Street Journal* more likely to frame the Obama health care reform plan as a debate over expansion of government into the domain of private industry?

RQ4b:

When compared with the *Wall Street Journal*'s coverage of the Clinton health care reform plan in 1994, was news coverage in Murdoch's *Wall Street Journal* less likely to frame the Obama health care reform plan as a debate over the effort to provide universal health insurance coverage?

Method

This study analyzed news stories covering health care reform that appeared in the first, or A, sections of the *Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*. The first stage of comparison concerned coverage of the Obama administration's health care reform plan, which was approved by Congress and signed by the president in March 2010. The author used the keywords "health care" and "Obama" to search for stories between the dates of Aug. 1, 2009 and March 31, 2010. For the *Wall Street Journal*, a search of the database ProQuest Newspapers: *Wall Street Journal* revealed 1,044 stories. After removing all duplicates, opinion pieces and news stories that did not focus directly on health care reform or did not run in the A section, the researcher found 60 articles that fit the criteria for analysis. For *The New York Times*, a search of the database Lexis-Nexis Academic revealed 1,691 articles. Because *The Times* ran many more news stories than did the *Journal*, the author selected 60 for analysis by choosing 10 stories at random for each month during the time period.²⁸

The second stage of comparison concerned the *Wall Street Journal*'s coverage of the Obama reform push with the *Journal*'s coverage of the Clinton administration's 1994 reform effort. The Clinton and Obama reform plans were not identical, but the two proposals were broadly similar and strived to achieve the same larger Democratic Party goal: universal health care. They both triggered political fights of similar scale and intensity. To collect stories from the *Journal*'s 1994 coverage, ProQuest database: *Wall Street Journal* was searched using the keywords "health care" and "Clinton" between the dates of Jan. 1 and Aug. 31, 1994. (The Clinton plan failed to come out of Senate committee and was pronounced dead in August 1994.) The search revealed 640 stories. After stripping away duplicates and non-news pieces, 56 relevant news stories met the criteria for analysis.

To compare news coverage, each story was analyzed using four measurements: tone of headline, tone of lead paragraph, order of assertion and space granted for assertions. This study follows Kahn and Kenney, Niven, Druckman and Parkin in exploring tone as a variable in the study of news coverage.²⁹ Re-

searchers have considered headlines and lead paragraphs critical as the point of entry for readers and in establishing the overall tone of newspaper coverage.³⁰ Additionally, headlines and, to a lesser extent, lead paragraphs are aspects of news coverage that newsroom managers can easily influence. Editors usually control the headlines entirely, and they work closely with reporters on the focus of a news story and thus influence its lead or opening paragraph. The anonymous sources in Carr's *New York Times* column specifically accused *Wall Street Journal* editors of slanting headlines.

In measuring tone of headlines and lead paragraphs, coders identified the content as having one of the following: a negative tone toward efforts to pass health care reform, a neutral tone toward health care reform or a positive tone toward health care reform.

Following the earlier studies, negative tone in headlines was defined as emphasizing a critic's view of the health care plan and/or emphasizing lack of congressional and/or public support for the plan (Example: "Health Care Second Opinion: Americans Are Worried Congress Will Make a Bad Health-Care System Even Worse"—Jan., 20, 2010, *WSJ*).

Neutral tone was identified as offering no emphasis either way about the plan or its chances of passing Congress (Example: "Obama Presses Parties on Health—Feb. 20, 2010, *WSJ*).

Positive tone was defined as emphasizing ways the plan would improve access to health care or emphasizing support for the plan in Congress and/or among the public (Example: "Young Back Health Proposals"—Sept. 29, 2009, *WSJ*). The same criteria were used to code lead paragraphs. A lead that emphasized a critic's view of health care reform or raised doubts about its passage was coded as negative. A lead that presented a balanced view or was purely informational, without a negative or positive tone, was coded neutral. A lead that emphasized a supporter's point of view or suggested progress toward passage was rated positive.

Fico, Zeldes, Diddi, Fico and Freedman have used order of assertion and time allotted for assertion as key measurements of bias or lack of balance in news coverage.³¹ Haugvedt and Weigener have argued in their consumer behavior research that messages delivered first have more persuasive power than those that come after.³² Messages that receive more time or space for their assertions clearly have an advantage as well. In this study, coders measured order of assertions and space for assertions and counted stories in the following categories: ones that quoted opponents of health care reform first or allotted more time for their assertions, ones where order of assertion was not applicable or space for assertions was equal or ones that quoted supporters of the health care reform plan first or are allotted more space for their arguments.

In the final stage of story comparison, coders searched for dominant frames in the news stories. Coders searched for the presence of two dominant frames—expansion of big government and universal availability of health care. A dominant frame was identified as the central organizing theme of the story.

For example, if supporters and critics were debating whether the current plan gave too much power to government or was too complex for government to execute properly, this was considered a "big government" dominant frame. If the debate centered on how best to spread the availability of health care insurance, it was coded a "universal health care" dominant frame. Of course, many stories would include neither of these dominant frames or would present a balanced view of competing frames. Therefore, coders were urged to be cautious in identifying a dominant frame. For each story, coders were asked in separate questions if the "big government" or "universal health care" frames prevailed (0 = no, and 1 = yes).

In all, 176 news stories were coded and compared—60 articles from the *Wall*

Table 1
Comparison of *Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*
Coverage of Obama's Health Care Plan, Aug. 1, 2009, to March 31, 2010

<i>Tone of Headline</i>	<i>WSJ (09-10)</i>	<i>NYT (09-10)</i>	<i>Total</i>
Negative	35% (21)	32% (19)	33% (40)
Neutral	38% (23)	50% (30)	44% (53)
Positive	27% (16)	18% (11)	23% (27)
Total	100% (60)	100% (60)	100% (120)

$\chi^2=1.950, df=2, p\text{-value}=.38$

<i>Tone of Lead Paragraph</i>	<i>WSJ (09-10)</i>	<i>NYT (09-10)</i>	<i>Total</i>
Negative	32% (19)	40% (24)	36% (43)
Neutral	35% (21)	32% (19)	33% (40)
Positive	33% (20)	28% (17)	31% (37)
Total	100% (60)	100% (60)	100% (120)

$\chi^2=.925, df=2, p\text{-value}=.63$

<i>Order of Assertion</i>	<i>WSJ (09-10)</i>	<i>NYT (09-10)</i>	<i>Total</i>
Opponents First	35% (21)	27% (16)	31% (37)
Not Applicable	15% (9)	20% (12)	17% (21)
Supporters First	50% (30)	53% (32)	52% (62)
Total	100% (60)	100% (60)	100% (120)

$\chi^2=1.169, df=2, p\text{-value}=.56$

<i>Space for Assertion</i>	<i>WSJ (09-10)</i>	<i>NYT (09-10)</i>	<i>Total</i>
Opponents	22% (13)	22% (13)	22% (26)
Not Applicable	48% (29)	51% (31)	50% (60)
Supporters	30% (18)	27% (16)	28% (34)
Total	100% (60)	60 (100%)	100% (120)

$\chi^2=.184, df=2, p\text{-value}=.91$
 $(n=60 \text{ for each newspaper})$

Street Journal's 2009-2010 coverage of the Obama health care plan, 60 from *The New York Times* 2009-2010 coverage and 56 from the *Wall Street Journal's* coverage of Clinton's 1994 health care overhaul proposal. Descriptive statistics were generated and chi-square measures of association were conducted using SPSS version 18. Inter-rater reliability for coding was calculated for slightly more than 10 percent (n= 18) of the articles. Two coders achieved Cohen's kappa scores ranging from good to excellent agreement³³ when analyzing tone- and frame-related variables, including .90 for tone of headline, .73 for tone of lead, .92 for order of assertion, and .82 for space given for assertions. For the more

Table 2

Comparison of *Wall Street Journal* Coverage of Obama Health Care Plan in 2009-2010 with *The Wall Street Journal's* Coverage of Clinton Health Care Plan in 1994

Tone of Headline	WSJ (09-10)	WSJ (94)	Total
Negative	35% (21)	48% (27)	41% (48)
Neutral	38% (23)	27% (15)	33% (38)
Positive	27% (16)	25% (14)	26% (30)
Total	100% (60)	100% (56)	100% (116)

X2=2.432, df=2, p-value=.30

Tone of Lead

Paragraph	WSJ (09-10)	WSJ (94)	Total
Negative	32% (19)	57% (32)	44% (51)
Neutral	35% (21)	20% (11)	28% (32)
Positive	33% (20)	23% (13)	28% (33)
Total	100% (60)	100% (56)	100% (116)

X2=7.795, df=2, p-value=.02 Cramer's V=.259

Order of

Assertion	WSJ (09-10)	WSJ (94)	Total
Opponents First	35% (21)	52% (29)	43% (50)
Not Applicable	15% (9)	11% (6)	13% (15)
Supporters First	50% (30)	37% (21)	44% (51)
Total	100% (60)	100% (56)	100% (116)

X2=3.334, df=2, p-value=.19

Space for

Assertion	WSJ (09-10)	WSJ (94)	Total
Opponents	22% (13)	41% (23)	31% (36)
Not Applicable	48% (29)	43% (24)	46% (53)
Supporters	30% (18)	16% (9)	23% (27)
Total	100% (60)	100% (56)	100% (116)

X2=6.119, df=2, p-value=.05 Cramer's V=.230

(n=60 for each WSJ 09-10; n=56 for WSJ 1994)

Table 3
Comparison of Dominant Frames Used in *Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times* Coverage Of Obama's Health Care Plan, Aug. 1, 2009, to March 31, 2010

<i>Big Government</i>				
<i>Dominant Frame</i>		<i>WSJ (09-10)</i>	<i>NYT (09-10)</i>	<i>Total</i>
No		92% (55)	98% (59)	95% (114)
Yes		8% (5)	2% (1)	5% (6)
Total		100% (60)	100% (60)	100% (120)

$\chi^2=2.807$, $df=2$, $p\text{-value}=.09$

<i>Universal Health Care</i>				
<i>Dominant Frame</i>		<i>WSJ (09-10)</i>	<i>NYT (09-10)</i>	<i>Total</i>
No		87% (52)	98% (59)	93% (111)
Yes		13% (8)	2% (1)	7% (9)
Total		100% (60)	100% (60)	100% (120)

$\chi^2=5.886$, $df=2$, $p\text{-value}=.02$ Cramer's $V=.221$
 $(n=60$ for each newspaper $)$

Table 4
Comparison of Dominant Frames Used in *Wall Street Journal* Coverage of Obama Health Care Plan in 2009-2010 with Dominant Frames Used in *Wall Street Journal* Coverage of Clinton Health Care Plan in 1994

<i>Big Government</i>				
<i>Dominant Frame</i>		<i>WSJ (09-10)</i>	<i>WSJ (94)</i>	<i>Total</i>
No		92% (55)	79% (44)	85% (99)
Yes		8% (5)	21% (12)	15% (17)
Total		100% (60)	100% (56)	100% (116)

$\chi^2=3.971$, $df=1$, $p\text{-value}=.05$ Cramer's $V=.185$

<i>Universal Health Care</i>				
<i>Dominant Frame</i>		<i>WSJ (09-10)</i>	<i>WSJ (94)</i>	<i>Total</i>
No		87% (52)	75% (42)	81% (94)
Yes		13% (8)	25% (14)	19% (22)
Total		60 (100%)	100% (56)	100% (116)

$\chi^2=2.565$, $df=1$, $p\text{-value}=.11$
 $(n=60$ for *WSJ* 09-10; $n=56$ for *WSJ* 1994 $)$

subjective dominant frame identification, the “big government” question had a kappa of .77; “universal health care” had .85.

Findings

Comparison of Wall Street Journal and New York Times, 2009-2010

Findings for RQ1 showed the *Wall Street Journal*’s news coverage of Obama’s health care plan was no more negative than *The New York Times*. As shown in Table 1, there is no statistical difference between the tone of news coverage in Murdoch’s *Wall Street Journal* and the coverage in *The New York Times*. The *Journal* displayed a positive tone in more headlines and lead paragraphs than did *The Times*, and it granted more time to supporters of health care reform more frequently than did *Times* stories. But those differences were not statistically significant.

Comparison of Wall Street Journal, 2009-2010, and Wall Street Journal, 1994

RQ2 asked if Murdoch’s newspaper would display a more negative tone toward Obama’s health care plan than the Bancroft family’s *Journal* did toward Clinton’s plan. The findings reported in Table 2 show just the opposite. Results show the Bancroft family’s paper was significantly more negative in the tone of its leads ($\chi^2=7.795$, $df=2$, p -value=.02), and the 1994 *Journal* was also more likely to give opponents more time to make their assertions ($\chi^2=6.119$, $df=2$, p -value=.05). In relative terms, the evidence suggests the Bancroft family *Journal* provided a more negative view of health care reform than did Murdoch’s newspaper.

Comparison of Dominant Frames

The findings for research questions RQ3a and RQ3b show Murdoch’s *Wall Street Journal* was no more likely to frame the health care debate as a battle over the expansion of big government than the *New York Times*. In fact, as shown in Table 3, there is statistical evidence showing that Murdoch’s *Journal* was more likely to use the “universal care” dominant frame than was *The Times* ($\chi^2=5.886$, $df=2$, p -value=.01).

No Dominant Frame in Depicting Health Care Reform

Results for questions RQ4a and RQ4b also showed no statistical evidence that Murdoch’s newspaper embraced a “big government” dominant frame in depicting health care reform. As shown in Table 4, the results suggest the Bancroft family’s *Wall Street Journal* organized more stories about the Clinton health care plan around the theme of expansion of big government than Murdoch’s *Journal* did in covering the Obama plan, although the level of statistical significance is measuring this difference is borderline ($\chi^2=3.971$, $df=1$, p -value=.05).

Conclusion and Discussion

This study compares relative news slant in coverage of a policy initiative that has been central to the liberal wing of the Democratic Party for the past half century. Despite accusations from media critics, this study finds no evidence that Murdoch is slanting the *Wall Street Journal's* political coverage. The news coverage in the *Journal* was no more negative toward Democratic Party efforts than was the coverage in *The Times* or the 1994 *Journal*. In fact, the results suggest the opposite. Coverage of the Clinton health care plan in the Bancroft family's 1994 *Wall Street Journal* was significantly more negative than coverage of the Obama health care plan in Murdoch's *Journal*. The 1994 *Journal* was also more likely to frame the Clinton plan as a debate over the expansion of federal government authority.³⁴

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings suggest both higher and lower levels in Shoemaker and Reese's hierachal model of media influences could have had an impact on Murdoch's *Wall Street Journal*. Their model suggests the owner has ultimate power to shape content. But at the *Journal*, that power could be mitigated by the norms of the U.S. newspaper market. In Britain, newspapers often display an ideological slant in their news pages, but quality papers in the U.S. claim a strict separation between the news and editorial pages. Exerting their influence from below, rank and file news workers at the *Journal* could be resisting any obvious efforts by upper management to break with that standard. At the top of the organization, the *Journal's* new leadership team could be adapting its management style to the U.S. market. Since taking over the *Journal*, Murdoch has nearly doubled the space allotted for editorials and columns in the newspaper's printed edition. Perhaps Murdoch sees the *Journal's* expanded editorial pages – not the news section – as a more promising outlet for exerting political influence.

The study also provides evidence supporting the use of comparison as a productive tool for measuring bias and news slant. In the past, researchers have often measured slant against the ideal of political coverage balanced perfectly between positive and negative references. Findings here suggest the search for relative or comparative slant can serve as a more realistic measurement of political journalism. Experienced media critics claimed to see bias in the *Journal's* health care coverage. But a systematic comparison suggested the *Journal's* reporting was no more negative in tone than was the coverage in *The New York Times*. If the *Journal* was slanted against Obama's reform plan, then so was the *Times*.

This study is merely a first step in investigating news slant at Murdoch's *Journal* and is far from definitive. The research is limited in both size and scope. It focused on one politically contentious issue, studied news coverage only during a six-month period and compared the *Journal's* news coverage with only two other newspapers. Additionally, coders searched for a limited number of variables measuring news slant and frame selection. Future research could identify more complex variables to measure slant and to analyze the use of

frames. Rupert Murdoch is an enormously ambitious and influential figure. Much more research is required to begin to assess his impact on the nation's political journalism.

Notes

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5. McKnight, "Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation," 303-326; Shawcross, *Murdoch*, 161-174, 427-427.
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the *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times*, as reporters focused on the Obama's team perseverance and political skills in pushing the measure through both houses of Congress." The death of the Clinton plan sparked the opposite reaction from reporters at 1994 *Wall Street Journal*; they wrote stories suggesting the Clinton team lacked political competence.

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