

THE ROLE OF PSEUDO-NEWS IN THE 2016 PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

by

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ABSTRACT

The presidential debates have become an election year staple. Ostensibly the debates and the coverage around them is supposed to educate voters about the differences between candidates. But the explosion of cable television and the 24-hour news cycle through the decades has created an almost insatiable appetite for content – including political debates. In his 1962 book *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, historian Daniel J. Boorstin argued that because of the demand for content, much of the news, including press conferences and press releases, is “pseudo-news” created for the purpose of being reported, rather than an occurring event. This examines coverage of the 2016 presidential debates to consider how much of it reflects the policy differences expressed by the two candidates compared to how much of it is merely filling airtime with inconsequential information. About 100 transcripts of the news program CNN Newsroom broadcast pre- and post-debate were audited for content related to the debate. This analysis considered what topics were discussed in each show, as well as which stories were considered the most important in each show. The audit suggests that topics discussed in coverage more often revolved around prediction, hypothesis or irrelevant information—pseudo-news—rather than issues raised during the debate that could help voters understand policy differences between the two candidates.

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INTRODUCTION

The presidential debates were first televised in 1960, a trend that continues to this day. In every election since then, the Republican and Democratic nominees for the nation's highest office have met on a stage, in front of the live audience and the viewing public. Usually held near the end of the campaigns, the debates serve, as Greenberg wrote, "to inform viewers, who watch them with open minds to learn about the candidates and decide how to vote" (6). Television provides an entirely new way to experience the event. Rather than just being heard, the candidates can now be seen. Everything from facial expressions, signs of stress, fatigue, confusion or anger, body movements and even something as simple as a handshake are on view. In addition to the content of the participants' speech, body language and appearance can be judged. The role of the moderator took on new importance, as viewers can determine how effectively moderators control the conversation. And as technology advanced, visuals such as the split-screen format and on-screen text became more common. Televised debates changed the way people made decisions about candidates.

With the launch of CNN in June 1980, a 24-hour news cycle with a seemingly endless appetite for content was born. Debates have always been regarded as valuable components of the presidential election and democracy as a whole. But with the 24-hour news cycle, they took on new importance.

In his 1961 novel *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, historian Daniel J. Boorstin coined the term "pseudo-event" to describe events that are planned and created to be reported, and oftentimes are self-fulfilling prophecies (11-12). Boorstin was writing about pseudo-events that generated content made to fill news holes in newspapers, as this was before the birth of 24-hour cable news channels on television. However, in the digital age, coverage

driven by pseudo-events took on even more prominence. Events are scheduled in advance and can be repeated, interpreted and analyzed. Pseudo-events are related to pseudo-news, which includes commentary, analysis, prediction and other talk disguised as news. It has come to take a more prominent role in news coverage in general and debate coverage more specifically. Pseudo-news may be dramatic, planned or unrelated to a specific event. Boorstin also acknowledges that pseudo-events can overshadow unplanned, spontaneous events because pseudo-events often are more dramatic, easier to disseminate and make vivid, and are advertised extensively. They also can be repeated to strengthen their impact, are conveniently scheduled for viewing or witnessing, and lead to additional pseudo-events (Boorstin 39). Though Boorstin wrote about pseudo-events and pseudo-news decades before 24-hour news networks came into existence, his ideas are still relevant.

Pseudo-news is important to consider when analyzing presidential debates. Changes in media coverage of debates and candidates' dialogue detract from the debates' purpose. If too much of this is included in reporting on the debates, it could garner more attention than the debates themselves. During the 2016 general election, Republican nominee Donald Trump debated Hillary Clinton, the Democratic nominee. While Clinton had been a familiar figure in politics for decades, Trump was new to the scene. The debates were touted as giving viewers the opportunity to learn more about how the well-known businessman planned to govern the country as its leader, as he had never before held public office. In coverage of the debates, journalists either could focus on substantive issues, or they could center their content around topics that would not help voters understand the candidates' stances or decide how to cast their votes. Depending on the content of the coverage, news broadcasters could have made irrelevant topics stand out in comparison to the debates.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Considering Boorstin's argument that events are created for news coverage, in examining pre- and post-debate coverage of the 2016 presidential debates, it appears that the debates have evolved into pseudo-events. This study seeks to answer the question: Did pseudo-news overshadow the 2016 presidential debates?

LITERATURE REVIEW/THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Academic research published since 2000 regarding the presidential debates revolves around three main points of inquiry: the format and role of debates, media coverage of debates and the audience's perception of debates. These topics are important to understand to be able to determine how pseudo-news relates to them.

The format of the debates has changed over time and even within election years, and this affects the content of the debates. Turcotte found that questions asked during town hall debates often resemble hard news more than those brought up in more traditional debate formats, which include more soft news or infotainment (252). Comparing the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon debates to the 2012 Obama-Romney debates, Rzepecka noticed that the 2012 candidates had access to the questions before the debate, whereas the 1960 candidates did not, which supports the notion that debates have become more scripted (198). Greenberg furthers this idea, arguing that debates emphasize appearance and speaking style, with participants giving rehearsed statements and performances meant to affect the opinions of voters (9). In one town hall debate during the 2008 election, Kirk and Schill found that questions generated from audience members online forced the candidates to be more personal, interactive and candid in their responses (333). This research on the format of the debates provides context to their overall effect on the election. Several of the

authors found that when questions are not revealed to debate participants beforehand and when the debates occur in a town hall setting, the candidates are more likely to provide candid answers to issues important to the voters. Conversely, when participants know the topics or questions before starting debates controlled by a moderator, the discussion tends to look more like a press conference, with less substantive and more rehearsed statements. This has implications for the media coverage of debates, as the dialogue within the debates is contained in the reporting.

Scholars have also researched the media coverage of debates, especially coverage found in newspapers. In one 2004 study, Benoit et al. compared reporting on the debates from 1980 to 1992 and 1996 to 2000 and found that the newspapers disproportionately focused on certain topics. Specifically, the authors noted that the reporting under-represented the amount of favorable statements of the candidates and over-represented statements candidates made to attack each other or statements made to defend themselves from those attacks (22). This suggests that coverage of the debates is skewed to generate certain emotions among viewers or serve as a form of entertainment, rather than to accurately report on the events.

Other studies focus on the on-screen visuals shown during debates. Landreville et al. found that the visuals include more “horserace” coverage, such as poll numbers, explanations of why a candidate is ahead or behind, or discussing the motives and consequences of campaign strategies, rather than discussion of issues or policies (150-156). This shows that the media cherry picks the information it focuses on, perhaps in an effort to keep the viewers entertained, a strategy that can detract from the role of journalists to inform voters of the candidates and their policies. These findings were gathered from the debate itself, not from coverage of the debate before or after it happened. They show that pseudo-news appears during the debate.

Some scholars have specifically looked at post-debate coverage and how it relates to watching the actual debate. In a 2003 article, Tsfati analyzed a Clinton-Dole debate from the 1996 election, finding in a study that viewers who watched more of the debate itself were less affected by coverage of the debate, and specifically in terms of whom the viewers thought won the debate (79). His conclusion supports the notion that pre- and post-debate coverage overshadows the actual debate. Even the content of the coverage appears to be more influential on people who have less exposure to the live broadcasts. Tsfati's finding is related to that of Winneg and Jamieson, who studied people who watched the 2016 debates and post-debate coverage; in the article, they wrote that those who watched the debates had greater correct knowledge of what was discussed in the events, and those who watched post-debate coverage also had increased knowledge (368-375). Their conclusion supports Tsfati's argument that watching the debate enhances viewers' knowledge of certain issues, and it presents the idea that post-debate coverage can teach the public about those issues, perhaps through analysis and discussion. Winneg and Jamieson's study, however, does not take into consideration those who did not watch the debates, suggesting that whether and how significantly pseudo-news affects the debates remains to be answered.

A third topic related to research on presidential debates and the media's coverage of them is how viewers perceive the debates. One article written by Benoit et al. in 2010 shows that general campaign debates increase the viewers' knowledge of certain topics, which supports the idea that some content of the debates is substantive, but the study does not give insight into the significance of pseudo-news or how it affects viewers ("Meta-analysis" 354). Other scholars have analyzed how viewers are affected by the way the debates are shown on television. In a study published in 2004 in which participants were shown the same clip of a 2004 Bush-Kerry

debate either on a single-screen or split-screen format, Cho found that people who watched the split-screen clip were more likely to base their evaluation of the issue being discussed on their perception of the candidate's character and more likely to depend on partisan attachment in their assessment of the issue being discussed (391). Similarly, Cho noted that those who watched the split-screen segment were less likely to rely on their already-existing ideas in forming judgments about issues than were those who watched the single-screen segment (392). More broadly, he found that the way media present politics can have its own political impact (Cho 394). The results of Cho's study suggest that a similar split-screen format of reporters shown next to images or clips of the debate during coverage after the debate can affect the audience's stances.

METHODOLOGY

Television broadcasts rather than newspaper articles were reviewed for this content analysis. A 2016 Pew Research Center study found that 57% of Americans prefer to get their news from television, compared to 38% for online, including social media and websites or apps. In addition, the presidential debates are native to television, and news programs often include clips from the debate in their broadcasts.

According to an article by Bauder published in U.S. News & World Report, CNN, Fox News and MSNBC are the three most-watched cable news networks in America. The Mary Couts Burnett Library did not have access to the transcripts of standard news programs on Fox News or MSNBC, so these channels were excluded from the research. CNN Newsroom was chosen as the source to study because it is CNN's standard news program. Unlike the more well-known programs such as Anderson Cooper 360° or CNN Tonight with Don Lemon, there are several hosts who rotate. CNN Newsroom also lacks the analysis or commentary other programs

like Cooper's have. This program airs on weekdays from 9-11 a.m. and from 2-4 p.m. It airs on weekends from 11 a.m.-2 p.m. and from 4-6 p.m. About 100 transcripts of CNN Newsroom found on the Nexis Uni and Newspaper Source Plus databases were analyzed. Of those 100, fifteen did not include any discussion of the debates. The date range considered for each of the debates included programs broadcast three days before each debate, the day of each debate and the day following each debate. In 2016, the debates were held Sept. 26, Oct. 9 and Oct. 19. This time span provided enough space to be able to compare how and when debates were discussed in pre- and post-debate coverage.

Several factors were considered in analyzing the transcripts. For all broadcast times, the opening and closing topics were noted, as well as whether polls were discussed. For shows broadcast before the debate, auditing topics included what candidates should do in the debate to win; what would be discussed in the debate; the candidates' expected body language or physical movements during the debate; the importance of the debate to the candidates' campaign; and how candidates were preparing for the debate. The quantity or prevalence of each topic discussed within each program was not recorded. For shows broadcast after the debate, auditing topics included discussion of points raised in the debate; viewers/ratings; discussion of who won; fact checking the candidates; talk about the moderator; the optics during the debate (including facial expressions and how the candidates looked); whether the candidates accomplished what they needed to do; and focus on the squabbles between the candidates. Again, the quantity or prevalence of each of the auditing topics within programs was not recorded.

There are several limitations to this study. Analyzing programs from other news channels would have provided a more accurate picture of how the news media report on the debates, including what is focused on in coverage, how frequently the debate is discussed and how the

content of the coverage differs. In addition, only one election year was analyzed in this study. Examining coverage from previous years would have resulted in a more complete view of news on the debates, and it also would have served as a buffer against any atypical debate seasons. This is true for the 2016 election in particular, as the Republican nominee had a background in business, not politics, setting him apart from many other presidential nominees in previous election cycles. Another limitation regards the way data was collected; auditing topics were identified to be present or not in coverage, but the quantity of the topics discussed or how long each auditing topic was discussed in each show was not recorded. Doing so may have provided additional clarity about how prevalent certain ideas were in coverage of the debates.

RESULTS

Which topic opened the broadcast varied by day and debate. As shown in Figure 1, the debate was the top story in coverage of the first debate three days before the debate. For the second debate, the debate was the top story in programs two days before the debate, the day of the debate and the day after the debate. The debate was the top story in programs broadcast the day of the third debate, the day before it and the day after it.

Debate Coverage as Top Story Each Day

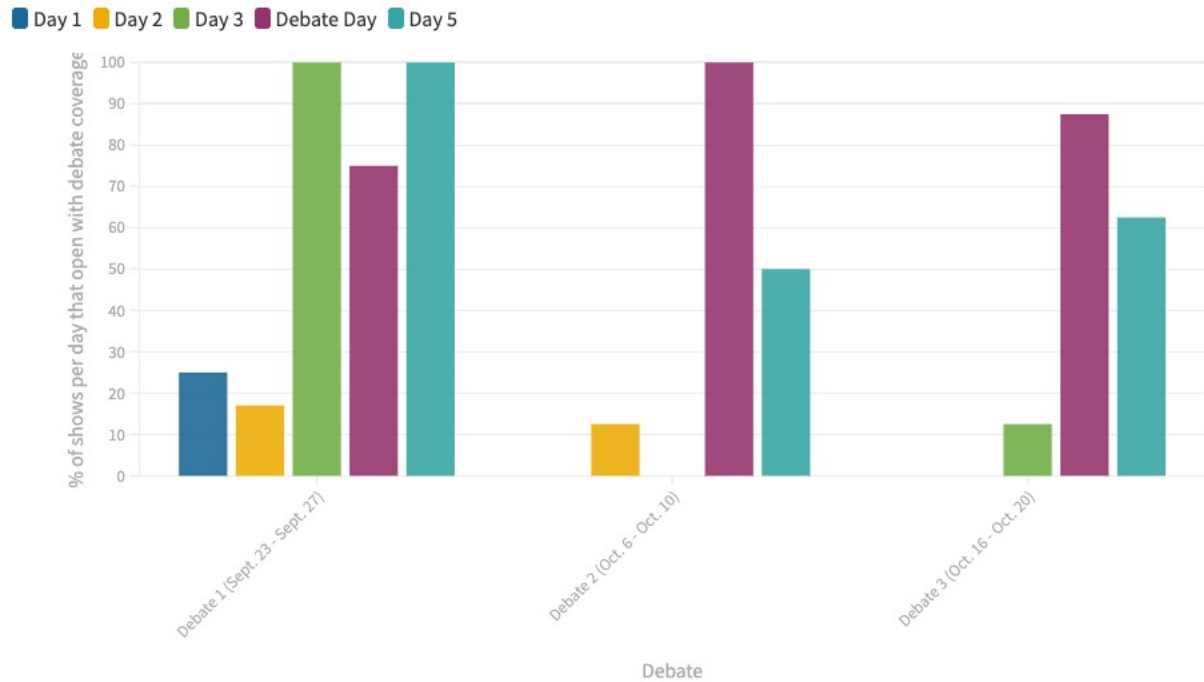


Figure 1.

Figure 2 shows how much each topic was discussed at the beginning of broadcasts.

- Of the 33 programs broadcast around the first debate:
 - More than half (60.6 %) opened with talk of the debate.
- Of the 31 programs broadcast around the second debate:
 - 42% of the programs included weather events as the top story;
 - 19% opened with talk of the debate.
- Of the 34 programs broadcast around the third debate:
 - 53% opened with discussion of politics;
 - 35% opened with conversations about the debate.

Opening Topics of Pre- and Post-Debate Coverage

This chart shows how much each topic was discussed at the beginning of broadcasts.

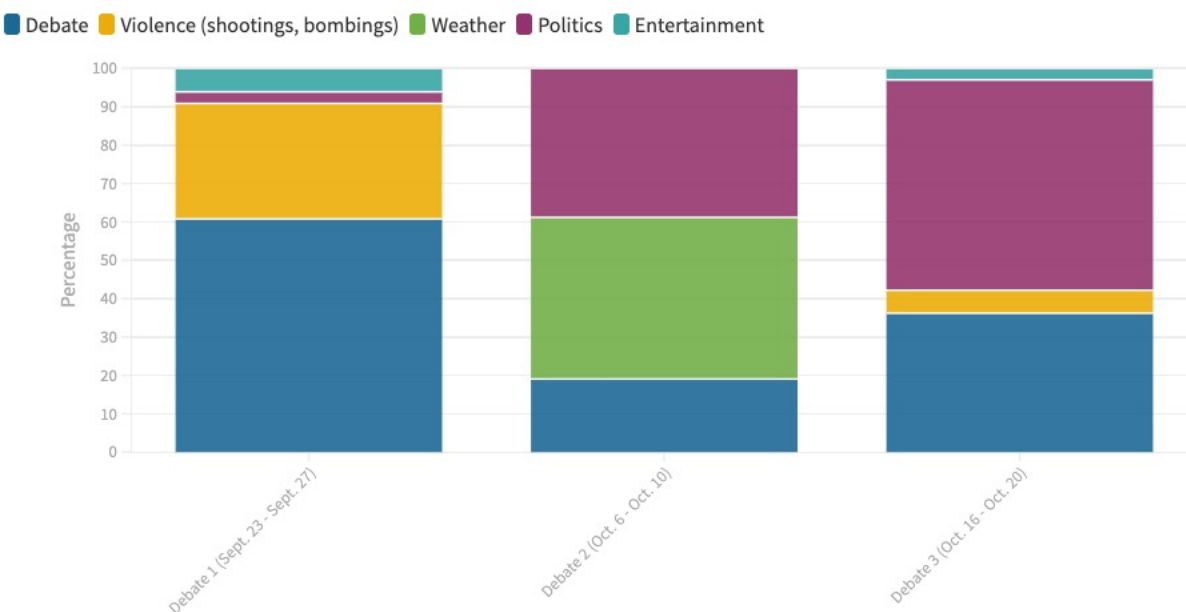


Figure 2.

Discussions about the debate were more likely to occur in coverage before the first debate when compared to the third debate (Figure 3). For example, 14 of 20 programs analyzed in relation to the first debate included talk about how the candidates were preparing, whereas six of 21 in relation to the third debate included talk about that topic. For other auditing topics, including what Trump and Clinton should do to “win,” what would be discussed, body language and the visual elements of the debate, and the importance of the debate, the same trend applies. These topics were more likely to occur in coverage before the first debate than before the third debate. Similarly, auditing topics used in this study were found in more pre-debate coverage of the first debate than in pre-debate coverage of the Oct. 9 event, with the exception of how the candidates were preparing. Talk of what would be discussed in the debate was found to be the most prevalent auditing topic in pre-debate coverage of the first and third debates.

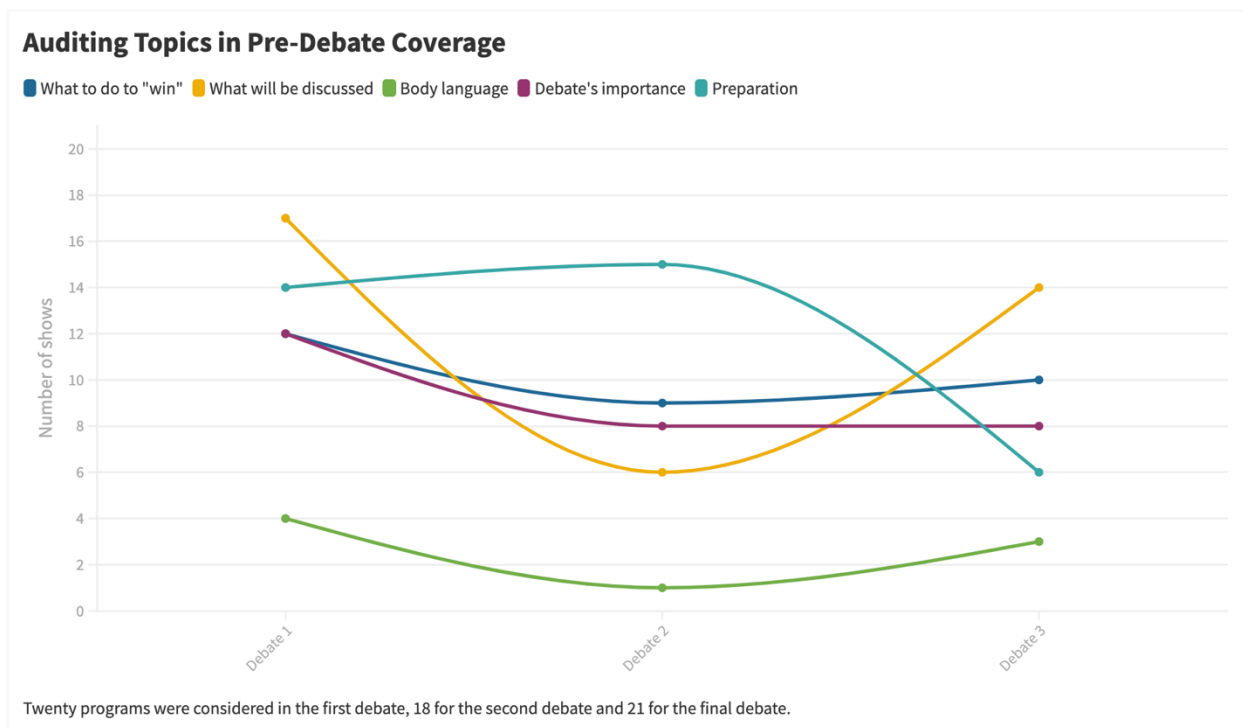


Figure 3.

Figures 4 and 5 analyze post-debate coverage. Similar auditing topics were grouped together and split between the two graphs to make the visuals easier to read. Figure 4 contains auditing topics related to the candidates, and Figure 5 includes those related to the audience and moderator.

The day after each debate, eight programs were broadcast. Squabbles between the candidates was a dominant theme after each debate. After the first debate, all eight of those programs included discussion of squabbles between the candidates. After the second debate, five of the eight programs contained that topic, and after the third debate, six programs mentioned fights between Trump and Clinton. This topic appeared in the most programs shown after the first and last debates. The dominant topic after the second debate whether the candidates did what each needed to do. In contrast, discussion of points raised in the debate occurred in only

one of the programs that was audited. There was also no fact checking of the candidates' points or arguments. For the final debate, talk of who won the debate was found in two of the eight programs, making it the least discussed auditing topic.

Post-Debate Coverage: Candidates

This graph shows how many out of the eight shows broadcast the day after the debate included discussion about certain topics.

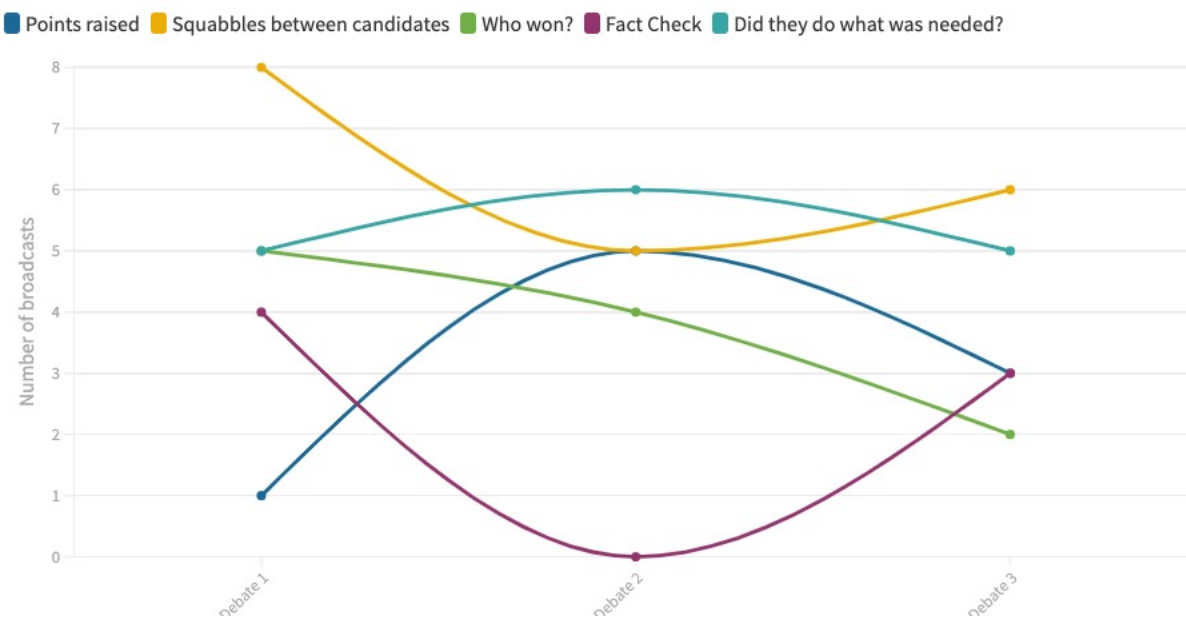


Figure 4.

The other set of auditing topics analyzed in post-debate coverage relates to the audience and moderator. Horse race coverage, or who was leading in the polls, as well as who won the debate, dominated discussion after the Sept. 26 and Oct. 9 debates. Five of eight programs for both days included polls. The dominant topic after the Oct. 19 debate was ratings, or how many people watched the debate. Two programs included this topic. Talk of the moderator, polls and the appearance and body language of the candidates were each discussed in one program after the third debate. The moderator was discussed most after the first debate, and the optics of the debate was discussed most after the second debate.

Post-Debate Coverage: Audience

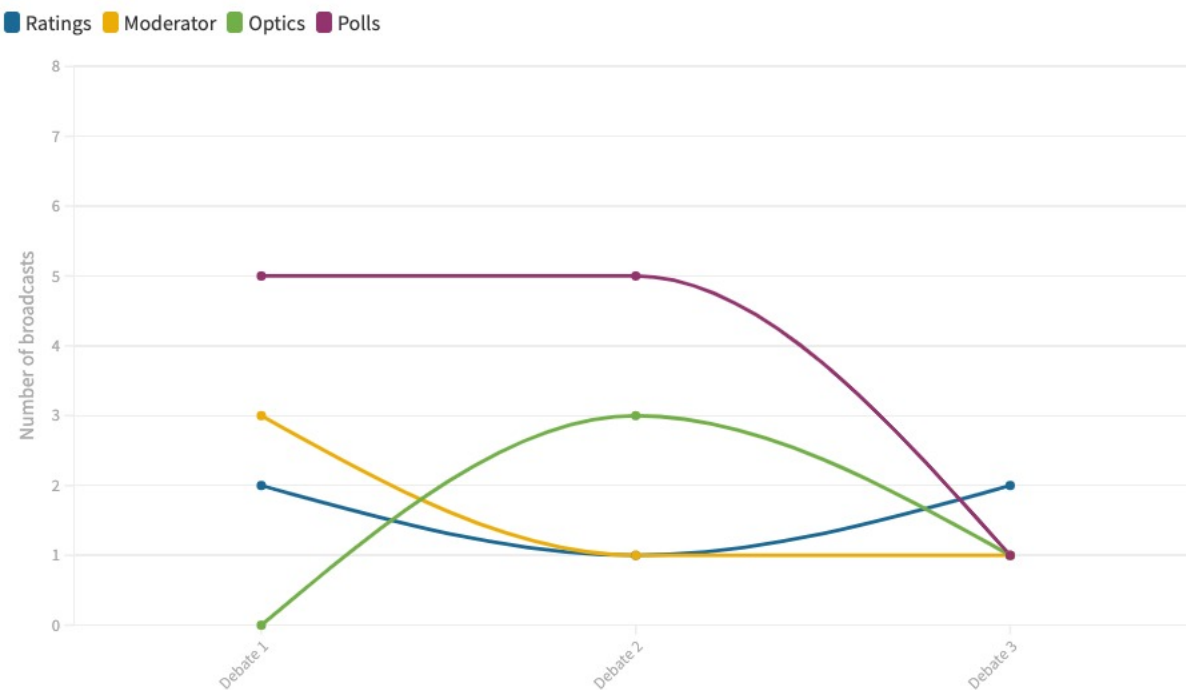


Figure 5.

DISCUSSION

The first debate seemed to be the most prominent of the three in terms of how it was covered. More CNN Newsroom programs broadcast before the debate and the day after the debate opened with discussion of the debate than programs broadcast those same days respective to the second and third debates. Novelty has been identified as one of the factors of newsworthiness. It is likely the first debate would receive more coverage since it was the first time Trump and Clinton appeared together. Events such as hurricanes and other political developments overtook talk of the second and third debates, reinforcing the novelty factor of the first debate. In addition, these situations were often evolving, so news programs provided updates to those events instead of repeating information about the debate.

When post-debate coverage was considered along with the pre-debate coverage, a similar pattern emerged. Coverage of the first debate again included the highest percentage of broadcasts that opened with talk of the debate (60.6%), falling to 19% in coverage of the second debate before rebounding to 35% for the final debate before the election. Related to this, politics was the opening topic in the highest percentage of shows covering the third debate. While only 3% of programs related to coverage of the Sept. 26 debate opened with discussion of politics, 53% of programs covering the final debate started with this auditing topic. This signals that news organizations were moving their focus to the upcoming election, rather than just the debates.

Top stories, the stories that lead broadcasts, are typically selected because they are deemed particularly important, relevant or timely. CNN presented the first debate as the biggest story of the week, as it was the top story for most of the broadcasts during that time. As previously noted, the second debate was overshadowed by news of the hurricane and other political news. The release of the Access Hollywood tape in which Trump used offensive language to describe women was the top story for most of the programs.

The frequency of pre-debate auditing topics varied by debate. For the first and third debates, the most-discussed topic was what Trump and Clinton would discuss. This is related to the debate, but this topic is pseudo-news because rather than reporting about a news development, the coverage was merely speculation on what might occur. This reinforces the priming theory, in which media coverage can set an expectation that may or may not be realized. This practice could take away from any substantive discussion that happens in the debate, because rather than focusing on the merits and drawbacks of the candidates' points, the broadcasters might center their discussion around what the candidates did and did not do during the debate. In effect, this constitutes overshadowing the debate.

Another topic analyzed in pre-debate coverage was the appearance of the candidates and their expected movements during the debate. This topic is pseudo-news because it lacks elements of newsworthiness but is presented as news, surrounded by discourse that emphasizes it as important and substantial. In coverage, this specifically included an examination of such aspects as the height of the podiums behind which Clinton and Trump would stand, even though it had no bearing on the candidates' ideas or policies. This topic was most dominant in the walk up to the first debate as four programs included talk of these issues. Considering this auditing topic, pseudo-news would overshadow the debate, because time that could have been spent discussing more substantive issues was occupied with talk of a frivolous matter.

Program hosts and guests also discussed how the candidates were preparing for the debates. This was the only auditing topic included in more programs in pre-debate coverage for the second debate than in those for the first debate. Included in descriptions of the candidates' preparation was how much preparation each candidate was doing, who was assisting with the preparation, where the preparation was occurring and what comments members of each campaign had to say about the preparation. Related to this was interviews of debate experts who provided information about how to prepare effectively. This topic is an example of pseudo-news. It was common in pre-debate coverage and was presented as news, though much of the discussion related to preparation had no bearing on any substantive points that could be made in the debate. In addition, the program hosts used this issue to compare Clinton and Trump, setting up another way to judge the candidates. Preparation was used to overshadow the debate itself, at least for the first two debates, because it shifted the focus from serious issues voters need to know about to irrelevant information that would have no bearing on policies or how each candidate would govern as president.

Though it was not as prevalent among pre-debate coverage as other topics, the auditing topic of what the candidates would need to do to “win” the debates was still present in coverage. Segments that fell into this topic centered on opinion, prediction and speculation on what a candidate would have to say or do during one of the events to perform better than the other. For example, in a broadcast aired the morning of the first debate, one journalist for *The Daily Beast* said, “But these two do need to kind of pack away some of their dislike for each other because Donald Trump can’t look like he’s bullying Hillary Clinton. He can’t be mean to her. And Hillary can’t look like, why am I on stage with this guy?” (“Clinton and Trump Face Off on CNN Tonight”). This priming set the candidates up to either meet or fall short of a standard that might have nothing to do with issues that could influence the public’s opinions about each candidate. Talk of what each candidate needed to do to “win” shifted attention away from substantive issues and created a topic to be discussed after the debate, as program hosts and guests evaluated who won and why. This topic helps support the idea that the debates are sources of entertainment rather than a forum for lively political discussion and a way to explain important stances and policies to voters.

The importance of the debates was discussed in slightly fewer programs than was what the candidates needed to do to “win.” Importance sometimes coincided with the mention of the expected audience for the debate, poll results or in relation to how the campaign was progressing more broadly, particularly in terms of other news related to the election. For example, in a program broadcast the morning of the first debate, the anchor said the debate could be “the single most important moment yet in the race” and “the stakes could not be higher” (“Clinton and Trump Face Off on CNN Tonight”). When program hosts and guests commented on how

important each debate was, they drew attention to the events and encouraged the audience to tune in to the debates.

Post-Debate Coverage

Several auditing topics were considered when analyzing post-debate coverage, and many of them were related to the candidates and their performance. The most discussed auditing topic in this category for the first and third debates was squabbles between candidates, while the topic that appeared in the most programs in post-debate coverage of the second debate was talk of whether the candidates did what the broadcasters suggested they needed to do. Focusing on arguments between Clinton and Trump—not necessarily policy-related disagreements but attacks on the other’s zingy character insults—places emphasis on issues that are irrelevant to policies or substantive issues. For example, after the first debate, CNN Newsroom played a clip of Clinton from the debate, in which she said, “The kind of plan that Donald has put forth would be trickle-down economics all over again. I call it ‘Trumped up trickle down’” (Clinton, Trump Clash At First Debate”). In that same broadcast, the reporters also include a clip of Trump from the debate, in which he said, “You’ve been doing this for 30 years. Why are you just thinking about these solutions right now?” (Clinton, Trump Clash At First Debate”). More than half of all eight broadcasts shown after each debate contained discussion of squabbles between the candidates, which highlights how this topic dominated coverage.

Another auditing topic in post-debate coverage that concerned the candidates was talk of whether Trump and Clinton did what they “needed” to do. Like squabbles between candidates, this topic was included in more than half of each of the eight programs shown after each debate, highlighting the prevalence of this topic in coverage. When the news hosts and their guests discussed this topic, they commented on whether the candidates made the most of their time and

how they handled opportunities to mention certain issues. These evaluations were based on what broadcasters thought was important for the candidates to address during each debate. For example, after the second debate, one political commentator said Trump needed to be more strategic and scripted. When he used teleprompters in public addresses and wasn't tweeting whatever he wanted, he moved closer to Clinton in the polls. According to that commentator, Trump should have kept that behavior during the debate ("Hillary Clinton Holds Rally; Trump-Ryan Split"). This example shows news reporters placed the focus more on checking off boxes or meeting certain standards than on what Trump and Clinton actually said.

An auditing topic included in post-debate coverage that corresponded with what the candidates needed to do to win the debates was discussion of who won the debates. This topic was less common in coverage of the October debates than in the September debate. It included discussion of which candidate the program host or the guests thought performed better than the other. This subjective assessment was based on opinion, and it sometimes connected to what the news analysts had suggested in programs before the debate. This allowed them to continue discussions they started before each debate until after the debates had occurred.

Two topics analyzed in post-debate coverage relating to candidates were not examples of pseudo-news. These were points raised in the debate and fact-checking. Discussing the merits of topics and policies brought up by Trump and Clinton does not move attention away from the debates. For example, in the Oct. 9 debate, Trump admitted he avoids paying personal federal income taxes. In a CNN Newsroom program the next day, the commentators discuss his statement. One guest said, "The idea of not paying taxes, no civic responsibility to contribute to education or the military or the roads, I think reinforces a core Clinton argument that you can't really trust him to fight for you, and I think that's where it hurts him more than on the specifics

of how much taxes he pays” (“Trump, Clinton Trade Personal Attacks”). Though it could be interpreted as analysis, and thereby opinion, the focus of the conversation remains on the candidates and the debate. Fact-checking helps viewers make sense of the statements made by debate participants and supports the debates in their main purpose of informing viewers about important issues. Included in these conversations were either broad statements about which candidate gave accurate information about certain topics or which candidate was correct when making statements about specific issues. This auditing topic was more common in the first and third debates than in the second debate.

A second set of auditing topics concerned matters other than the candidates and their performance. These topics were overall less common in debate coverage than topics having to do with the candidates. Of these, polls were included in more post-debate coverage for the first and second debates than the other topics, contained in five programs following the September and Oct. 9 debates and one program after the third debate. When news hosts and their guests talked about polls, they mentioned the results of recent polls.

Several topics included in post-debate coverage were present in only a few programs. In discussion of optics, for example, news hosts explained how Trump and Clinton moved around the stage, how they stood and how their facial expressions looked. These aspects of the debate had nothing to do with any substantive political issues, but they provided fodder for discussion in news programs. This auditing topic was discussed in three programs following the second debate and one program following the third debate, but in no programs after the first debate. Though optics were not present in as many programs as other topics, they still had a place in the coverage. Another auditing topic included was talk about the moderator of the debate. News programs discussed how the moderators questioned the candidates and how involved they were

in the debate, such as through fact-checking. This topic was included infrequently in coverage, in only three programs related to the first debate and one program each for the second and third debates.

The final topic analyzed in post-debate coverage was ratings, which refers to the number of people who watched the debate. This topic was included in a couple programs after each debate, meaning it was not as prevalent as other items. In programs broadcast after each debate, journalists reported the number of viewers, often while discussing the importance of the debate or its effect on the campaign.

CONCLUSION

This study has sought to determine whether pseudo-news overshadowed the 2016 presidential debates. Some of these topics, such as discussions about squabbles between candidates, were examples of pseudo-news, which are dramatic statements able to be repeated and presented as news, often involving commentary, analysis or prediction. But other auditing topics, such as discussions of points raised in the debate, did not count as pseudo-news. In some instances, the media used priming to set up candidates for evaluation or judgment, which shifted attention away from the debate. In addition, some top stories may have contributed to overshadowing the debates.

Topics identified as pseudo-news overshadowed the debate, though the frequency of the topics differed. Pseudo-news auditing topics were more numerous than auditing topics not considered to be pseudo-news, and the prevalence of pseudo-news highlighted how specific coverage overshadowed the debates. Rather than focusing on substantive topics, media hosts and

contributors prioritized dramatic, irrelevant issues that moved focus away from the debate and placed it on the coverage itself.

Instead of discussing differences in policies, reporters talked about insults and zingy sound bites the candidates expressed. Squabbles between candidates were common in post-debate coverage of each debate. This topic is an example of pseudo-news because it lacks newsworthiness and yet is presented as significant and dramatic. The focus on arguments seems to make the debate, where the disagreements were had, unimportant, and instead makes insulting quips and one-liners the center of discussion.

Instead of discussing the merits or failures of ideas brought up in the debates, often reporters evaluated candidates' performance based on the journalists' opinions about what each of the candidates would have needed to do to be successful. In addition, news coverage around the time of the first debate that discussed the debate was more prevalent than reporting about the debate in programming broadcast close to the final debate, suggesting that the debates themselves may be pseudo-events. Talk of whether Trump and Clinton did what they "needed" to do is one way CNN overshadowed the debate in its coverage. Through this pseudo-news, which was based on predictions and opinions, the broadcasters made evaluations the focal point of their reporting. Along with the pre-debate discussions of what candidates should discuss in the debates to "win" them, this topic shifted the bulk of the content for analysis to what the program hosts and their contributors said on the shows and away from what Trump and Clinton talked about in the debates.

When program hosts and guests talked about how important each debate was, including by acknowledging that the debates would influence the candidates' standings or popularity, they were validating their focus on the debates. However, these discussions were taking place before

each debate occurred. The emphasis placed on the debates worked to overshadow the debates themselves. Rather than waiting until after the debates to evaluate their importance, the news media insisted beforehand that regardless of what would be said, the debates were significant and warranted attention.

Discussion of who won the debates, a kind of pseudo-news, worked to overshadow the debate. If the main purpose of the debates is to inform viewers about candidates' stances and policies, then news coverage that shifts focus away from those issues and instead to discussions about the performance of each participant would make talk about the debate more important than the debate itself. It depicts the debate as a competition rather than an open forum for leading candidates to discuss their ideas and make their case to the voters.

In post-debate coverage, reporters also chose to talk about the optics of the debates and ratings. By highlighting body movements and facial expressions, news hosts and their contributors took focus away from the debate and the candidates' efforts to inform voters of their plans and ideas. In other words, discussion of optics helped to overshadow the debate. Noting the ratings does not add anything to the substantive dialogue that may have been included in the debate, but it is meant to grab the viewer's attention, as it could emphasize the significance of the debates. Though this topic appears in fewer programs than other pseudo-news topics do, it is included nonetheless, serving as an additional way the news media shift focus away from substantive issues.

Polls were also included in post-debate coverage. They may be accurate in representing public opinion about a specific issue during a certain amount of time, but they can change quickly and lack relevance soon after they are released. Polls are often conducted after presidential debates, and though it may be useful to include results of polls in post-debate

coverage, just as relevant as the results is information about how the polls were conducted and who the respondents were. Yet this information is not often included in the reporting.

Some of the coverage contained auditing topics not considered to be pseudo-news. For example, it included discussions about the points candidates brought up in the debates, but that was not as common in coverage as other topics. It appeared in only one of the programs broadcast after the first debate and in three after the second debate. This is in contrast to topics that overshadow the debate, such as discussions of who won and of squabbles between Trump and Clinton. Like discussions of points raised in the debate, fact-checking was not as prevalent as auditing topics considered to be pseudo-news, never appearing in more than half of the programs shown after each debate. Similarly, discussing the moderator of the debates should not be considered pseudo-news because it is not dramatic or planned. Instead, it helps the viewers understand more about how the debate played out and how the candidates' responses might have been affected. It does not overshadow the debates but rather illuminates them. However, the frequency of these topics suggests that the news media focused more on issues that had little relevance to the debates or helped to inform voters than on issues that could affect the public's opinion.

To more accurately cover debates, journalists need to change their practices, specifically by altering which topics they choose to discuss. Alternatively, they may report on the debate less, which would eliminate some pseudo-news by reducing how often it is included in coverage. When voters or the public watch news coverage of the debates, they should be aware of the relative significance of issues being discussed on the programs. Part of this recognition involves understanding the power media has as well as the need for the media, and especially television media, to entertain and keep viewers watching. Future research should be done to determine

whether other cable news networks or different media formats, such as newspapers and radio, include the same amount of pseudo-news as CNN Newsroom, as well as what the effect of that is. In addition, the role of social media in news coverage of presidential debates should also be considered, as these platforms often reach a younger demographic—the voters whose voices will become ever more significant in future elections.

News coverage gains significance because of its connection to the debates. If the debates are glorified press conferences in which participants selectively choose to answer questions and tailor responses to statements that will make effective sound bites in the inevitable media coverage the following day, then perhaps the debates are not as important as they are described to be. Taking into account Boorstin's argument in *The Image*, that events are created to be reported, in examining pre- and post-debate coverage of the 2016 presidential debates, it seems as though the debates themselves have become pseudo-events. A combination of candidates' failure to discuss issues voters need to know and the tendency of the news media to highlight pseudo-news in coverage may make the debates irrelevant to the presidential elections. The media may be hindering the political process through their coverage of the debates, a much more serious issue than the act of including pseudo-news in reporting.

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