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### Media Coverage of the U.S. Presidential Primaries, At Home and Abroad

The current presidential primaries ensuring the American public is bombarded with nearly non-stop media messages at every turn are being watched with great interest in other countries. This paper will analyze and discuss the content, ideology and culture reflected in election coverage in the U.S. compared to that in England and Canada.

According to Art Silverblatt, media coverage of politics in the United States can be broken into five categories:

- 1) The media inform the public about the political life of the nation.
- 2) The media provide public exposure for politicians.
- 3) The media influence public attitudes toward politicians and issues.
- 4) The media serves as an adversary to the government.
- 5) The media depend upon politicians as vital sources of news content and profit (330-331).

These categories are of major importance to any analysis of political news coverage because they show how much influence the media has on politics – and how the same is true for the influence of politicians on the media

The basis of the first category is that the media educates the public about issues and, importantly, can set a political agenda for the country (Silverblatt 330). The best example of this is how the American media basically decided who the “legitimate” candidates were early in the primary process and focused on them almost exclusively to weed out other candidates. This was

very apparent in two debates, one in which John Edwards complained that there were three people in the debate as Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton battled back and forth, and one in which all candidates who didn't win a certain percentage of a primary vote were not allowed to participate in the next debate.

Internationally, a headline for a column by Philip Authier of the Montreal Gazette declares "World is Watching U.S. Race." Authier says "Countries that ignore what is happening in the United States do so at their peril," quoting Louis Balthazar, the president of the Centre for U.S. Studies at the Université du Québec à Montréal as saying, "We are bound to the U.S. forever because of geographical, cultural and economic reasons. So we should be interested in what's going on. Canadians, like many people around the world, are sometimes frustrated that they cannot vote, because this election may affect their lives quite a bit."

Authier's column talks about how the Gazette's website has seen increased traffic from readers expressing their preferences for who would be the better president. He also says that Canadians tend to have Democratic leanings (49 percent to 12 percent for the Republican Party).

Another Canadian politician quoted in the article is Pascal Bérubé of the Parti Québécois, who has declared himself a Clinton supporter "because she is a New York senator and New York is a neighbor of Quebec, so she would have some knowledge of the province. He also sees possible spinoff benefits in the Americans electing their first female president because it would have a positive on current Parti Québécois leader Pauline Marois" (Authier).

The basis of the second category is that politicians need the media to gain access to their constituents and get their message across (Silverblatt 330). This is the reason that there are so many political messages on the airwaves during the primary season. Also, it's the reason Hillary Clinton recently quoted a "Saturday Night Live" skit during a televised debate with Barack

Obama and then appeared on the program the following week to combat negative images about herself.

In international news, freelancer Josh Freed had a column published in the Montreal Gazette that assigned Hollywood character types to presidential hopefuls, not all of which are flattering:

“Warrior Queen Hillary Clinton ... A smart and powerful feminist. The first woman to run for president, she’s also the most macho of the candidates – a tough alpha-male female with so much testosterone she makes the soft-spoken Barack Obama look practically effeminate.”

“Prince Charming Obama, so graceful and articulate he seems like the next president in a future installment of ‘The West Wing’. Unlike his opponent, Obama is a gentle, sensitive consensus builder – a tender soul so delicate his feelings seemed hurt when the Clintons ganged up on him for some vicious but traditional political attacks.”

“John Wayne War Hero John McCain, the slightly loopy, lone, but likable cowboy who resisted torture for eight years as a political prisoner ... at least we know if Al-Qaeda ever captures and tortures the president, he won’t give away the secret nuclear missile code – or his secret e-mail password” (Freed).

Freed offers further commentary, saying “who could make up these characters? Yet watching the recent U.S. TV debates, it’s hard not to be impressed, especially by the two Democrats. Both are remarkably intelligent and articulate leaders, especially compared with the current U.S. president. It’s been said George Bush Sr. proved that anyone can be president and George Bush Jr. proved that nobody can be president. Here in Canada, we’ve gotten smug the last seven years, comparing our leaders with those of our southern neighbors ... Many Canadians are already paying more attention to U.S. politics than we are our own. We know that whoever wins the Democratic primary, it will be riveting.”

In a Feb. 6 poll, readers of the Toronto Sun chose Clinton to be the next U.S. president with nearly 41 percent of the votes in a list of five total candidates from both parties and nearly 46 percent of those choosing between Clinton and Obama (Robertson).

In the article by Ian Robertson in which the poll ran, Nik Nanos, the CEO of Nanos Research-Policy Options Magazine which administered the poll, predicted the outcome of the U.S. presidential election will have a major impact on Canadians, diplomatically, economically and socially: “Any change in the U.S. will have a direct impact on what we do in Canada” (Robertson).

The basis of the fourth category is that the media serves as a watchdog and holds government accountable to the people (Silverblatt 331). In fact, Silverblatt says that media have contributed to the democratic process and led to deposed leaders, policy changes and government reform (331).

In the days leading up to the primaries in Ohio, Texas, Vermont and Rhode Island, a major news story broke about an apparent admission by the Obama campaign that the promises being made to voters in those states that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) would be revisited if Obama becomes president were just political posturing. This caused a ripple across the country because the agreement has been controversial since its beginning. It also caused ripples in Mexico and Canada, the U.S.’s partners in the agreement, because it would have major effects on the countries’ ability to engage in international trade. However, it had its greatest effect in Ohio because that state has seen major unemployment issues and economic downturns related to NAFTA. Obama’s campaign faced a major crisis on the eve of a vote that could have wrapped up his nomination as the Democratic candidate for president and the media coverage slowed his momentum and swung it instead to Clinton, who had been advised to quit

the race if she didn't have a good showing in those votes. Because the media acted as a watchdog, a possibly major policy change was deferred.

The discussion of free trade in general and NAFTA in particular generated much press in England and Canada during the days leading up to those primary votes. On March 3, Financial Times columnist Jagdish Baghwati dedicated a lengthy column to explaining in depth why Obama's free-trade policies are better than Clinton's. Baghwati says that many people in political and economic circles have said that it is nearly impossible to distinguish between the two, but that there are five areas in which they are different. His analysis talks about the differences in staff – Obama employs a top-notch economic adviser while Clinton does not; the differences in attitude of the unions supporting each candidate – Obama is supported by the SEIU and the Teamsters, neither of which is protectionist, and Clinton is supported by the AFL-CIO which is; and, most directly related to the recent NAFTA flap, Baghwati says that Obama has smartly called for tax incentives for those who invest in U.S. business and a removal of tax incentives to invest abroad, knowing that he'll appease the groups he needs to appease to get elected but that his proposed changes cannot realistically be applied because of existing treaties and trade agreements – exactly the type of language that his campaign is accused of using when speaking to Canadian diplomats and reassuring them that NAFTA will remain largely intact once the rhetoric dies down.

A story on the NAFTA issue in the Montreal Gazette on March 4 showed just how much American politics has an effect on Canada. The story reported that Prime Minister Stephen Harper was being taken to task by members of the Canadian Parliament for leaking information contained in the memo with the details of a meeting between Canadian diplomats and Obama aides. The article says “despite Harper's attempts at damage control, the controversy spilled over

into the politics of both countries” (Blanchfield and Alberts). Harper was accused by a rival of trying to harm the campaign of a Democratic front-runner (Harper is known to back the Republican Party). On the U.S. side, the article says Clinton seized on an opportunity to damage her opponent’s campaign.

Interestingly, the article shows how powerful the media can be when acting as a watchdog as well. In it, Canadian trade critic Navdeep Bains says that “given Harper’s tight control on all communications within his government and his fondness for Republicans, the fact that the memo emerged at all raises questions. ‘Things don’t leak from this government. I question the timing of the leak and the impact of the leak,’ Navdeep said” (Blanchfield and Alberts). The appearance of impropriety on part of both the Obama campaign and the Canadian Prime Minister caused the media to jump on the story and the resulting reports will likely lead to greater scrutiny of any future discussions on free trade in general and NAFTA in particular.

Two cultural studies theories are noticeable in the reporting of political news in the U.S. and abroad. Hegemony is fairly widespread and fragmentation also shows itself.

Hegemonic messages play themselves out almost daily in the domestic news reports about both parties’ primaries. This is most apparent in the major affect the media have in shaping platforms and bypassing the political process by anointing the candidates they want most to see. Political candidates pay close attention to the issues raised by media outlets in the months and years leading up to a primary to best judge what the hot topics are. These topics change by state as well – biofuels and ethanol in Iowa, a state that produces tons of corn used for those projects; jobs in downtrodden states like Ohio – and the media reporting the stories leads to complacency by those receiving the message. Instead of asking questions or demanding more issues be debated, most members of society accept the messages they’re receiving through the media and move on, thus creating the unspoken domination referred to by hegemony’s very definition.

Hegemony can be pointed out in international media as well, in that the stories written in the Financial Times, The Guardian, the Montreal Gazette and the Toronto Sun are all extremely similar to those written domestically. In fact, the Times and Gazette both have writers stationed in Washington, D.C., bureaus to better report the news. A March 4, 2008, article leading into the Texas and Ohio primaries that appeared in the U.K.'s Guardian newspaper could easily have been written by an American journalist in the phrasing and focus of the piece. In fact, were it not for the different spellings of certain words, the article could have appeared in any U.S. newspaper and been read over coffee at breakfast.

Fragmentation occurs because of the overwhelming amount of information and sources available to consumers. Gamson et al speak of "a proliferation of fleeting, ephemeral images which have no ability to sustain any coherent organizing frame to provide meaning over time. Advertising is the vanguard of the fleeting image, but news programs lag only slightly behind" (386). This leads to multiple messages and multiple understandings, especially on the international front.

Authier's article shows how this fragmentation can happen in an audience where the issues and people involved in a story are known, but from an outsider's point of view. The article, which ran the day before the "Super Tuesday" primaries quotes several readers' online comments on which candidate they'd vote for and why and also states that many Canadians are posting comments on the candidates' Facebook sites. Words like "flip-flopper" are used to describe Clinton, with that poster writing, "I don't trust someone to run a country when they flip-flop all over the place and would do anything for gain." Another poster writes, "I know Canadians are more liberal, but Hillary? It would be dangerous to have her in power. And Obama, well, I don't trust him either. McCain wouldn't be any better, so the only choice is Mitt" (Authier).

These comments show that the posters are knowledgeable of who the candidates are and probably know – or think they know – something about them, but they are not educated enough about the issues being discussed and the background that makes them issues to substantiate their comments beyond mere rhetoric and empty words – fragmentation at its finest. That’s not to say, however, that the postings of Americans would automatically be any better. Fragmentation also affects those living in this country because it’s very easy to get caught up in emotion and not get the entire message behind the issues. Examples of this abound on the comment sections of newspapers like USA Today, where readers are invited to comment on news stories. Comments invariably are posted that skew a news story based on politics, even when the story is completely apolitical. However, because of fragmentation, readers extrapolate meanings and make assumptions based on their reality and the limited information available to them.

From a media literacy point of view, politics provides an often fascinating window into culture. Silverblatt’s idea of “an awareness of media content as a “text” that provides insight into contemporary culture and ourselves” (5) is fitting in both domestic and international media. Also, “an awareness of the impact of the media on the individual and society” (5) can be applied.

As far as the first idea, reading foreign newspapers in admittedly U.S.-friendly countries is fascinating in that they appear to carry stories on nearly the same topics using very similar language to those written in the U.S. However, despite the similarities, there are noticeable differences. The enthusiasm that comes through in the Montreal Gazette’s reporting of Super Tuesday anticipation from its readers, from participation in polls and mock elections to the comments of the people involved shows just how much the world pays attention to what’s going on in the United States.

Freed's commentary on the peculiarities and personality traits of the presidential candidates was different than that of even the most droll of pundits in the United States, largely because he's looking at them from an outsider's point of view. His viewpoint shows the cultural thoughts and values that led to his commentary and offers insight into how Canadians feel about U.S. politics.

Bhagwati offers a different insight, that of an educated, interested political analyst. His ability to glean from speeches and printed materials the background information necessary to make his analysis (for instance, knowing the nature of the unions backing Obama and Clinton) is an indication that the British culture attaches importance to what happens in the United States on multiple levels, including trade, politics and even the military.

The awareness of the impact of the media on the individual and society is important to anyone choosing to analyze media messages domestically or internationally. When looking at the coverage provided by the Montreal Gazette, the focus is on fun and has an educational bent aimed at providing the reader with key facts without muddying the waters with deep analysis. When looking at Bhagwati, one can see that he is intent on providing all the information necessary for the reader to understand an important issue – trade. He easily explains why Obama and Clinton differ despite most analysts lumping them together on the issue of trade, and then tells why he believes Obama to be the better choice.

Both the Gazette and the Financial Times (for which Bhagwati writes) are respected newspapers in their countries and the world, so they can have an impact on how their readers feel about issues and, in this case, the United States. The knowledge that they have the ability to sway public opinion and create a situation where readers are better educated is not taken lightly and is, in fact, put to good use.

The current primary elections being held in the United States and the ensuing presidential campaign will consume Americans through November. Messages, images and stories will be beamed, printed and downloaded all over the country, with the intent of educating the electorate to the issues and the candidates so they can choose the best person to succeed George Bush as president. However, as several sources have stated in this paper, everything that happens in the United States politically and economically has an effect on the rest of the world. Therefore, media coverage in other countries is often as pervasive as that here in this country. An analysis of the messages in newspapers in England and Canada shows that they are largely the same and also shows how much these countries are aware of their partnership and inextricable ties to the U.S. These messages – and their availability to a worldwide audience – are the key to ensuring that the global village remains connected to all parts of the globe.

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