

What's a Dog Story Worth?

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ABSTRACT

Journalists consider the importance of events and the audience's interest in them when deciding on which events to report. Events most likely to be reported are those that are both important and can capture the audience's interest. In turn, the public is most likely to become aware of important news when some aspect of the story piques their interest. We suggest an efficacious means of drawing public attention to important news stories: dogs. Examining the national news agenda of 10 regional newspapers relative to that of the *New York Times*, we evaluated the effect of having a dog in a news event on the likelihood that the event is reported in regional newspapers. The “dog effect” is approximately equivalent to the effect of whether a story warrants front- or back-page national news coverage in the *New York Times*. Thus, we conclude that dogs are an important factor in news decisions.

Joan, everybody loves a dog story. The [Supreme] Court ruled on another case this week—a search and sniff case...

—Doyle McManus, *Los Angeles Times*

Yes, you're right, everybody loves a dog story...

—Joan Biskupic, Reuters¹

An old journalistic adage holds that “everybody loves a dog story. Slap one on the front page of your newspaper and sell a few thousand extra copies.”² News audiences seem to have an endless appetite for dog stories and, as a consequence, news outlets have a strong incentive to highlight man's best friend. Dog stories can entertain audiences, provide humorous storylines, and occasionally pull at heartstrings. What can be more dramatic than an Oklahoman who loses everything in a tornado but finds her lost dog on camera?³ What could warm the hearts of an audience more than a dog who dials 911 to save its owner?⁴ Beyond simple frivolity, dog stories also can be reported by traditional news outlets and involve important substantive political information. How many Americans learned of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib because dogs were involved? How many learned about what President Obama was doing in April 2009 as a result of the arrival of Bo, his Portuguese water dog? In this article, we seek to determine just how prominent dog stories are relative to other news stories. This is an important question because when America's newspapers go to the dogs, it could be a good thing for democracy.

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NEWS SELECTION

One overarching theme in the study of political communication addresses how journalists, editors, and news outlets choose which events to report and, likewise, which to ignore (Gans 2005, Graber 2007, Entman 2012, Lippman 1922). One concern has been with the tendency of news outlets to favor “infotainment,” or stories selected to grasp the audience's interest with entertaining content over stories that are more substantively important (Baum 2002, Zaller 1999).

Although infotainment-style reporting has increased (Slattery, Doremus and Marcus 2001), scholars struggle to understand how much news decisions are driven by the entertainment value of stories as opposed to their importance. First, it is generally difficult to convince news outlets to admit how much their news decisions are based on entertainment value. Second, however, because an unlimited and a not clearly measurable number of events that journalists could report exists, researchers lack a baseline measure to represent the stories available to be reported on any given day. This makes a comparison between stories that *are reported* to stories that *could be reported* difficult. In this article, we attempt to overcome this problem by first creating a baseline of events that could be reported each day and then by comparing how often the entertaining stories in that baseline are reported to the less entertaining stories in our baseline. We define a news story as “entertaining” if it includes a dog as a major actor.

Are events reported because they feature a dog? If a dog is a prominent part of an event, how much more news attention will that event receive compared to events that do not feature dogs? We attempt to shed light on these questions because the answers are of prime importance in understanding political communication (and not because a journal article featuring dogs will be found entertaining by our colleagues and therefore be more widely read, circulated, and cited). First, traditional models of journalism

(e.g. Entman 2005) suggest that dogs are not inherently important to democratic citizenship and that a dog's involvement should not make journalists more likely to report that event. If we find that events featuring dogs are reported more often than those without dogs, this would reflect the role of entertainment value relative to the value of societal importance in news decision making. Our results, therefore, provide leverage for understanding the entertainment preferences of audiences.

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Second, scholars suggest that entertainment-oriented news segments appeal to audiences that otherwise might be inattentive (Baum 2003). Drawing in wide audiences with entertainment (e.g., cuddly dogs) may increase citizen knowledge and understanding of important contemporary issues and therefore be good for democracy (Baum 2002).

Third, some scholars argue that dogs bestow political advantages (Mutz 2010, cf. Jacobsmeier and Lewis 2013), whereas others suggest that dogs are used strategically by politicians to garner public attention (Maltzman et al. 2012). Therefore, our results also may suggest strategies for political actors seeking news attention.

RESEARCH DESIGN

We identified a baseline of events that represents the potential news stories that could be reported on any given day. To establish the baseline, we used stories from the US “paper of record,” the *New York Times* (NYT) National News Desk section. Because stories in this section are national in nature, they all could be reported by other news organizations regardless of geography. We do not claim that stories in the NYT National News Desk section are the only stories available for reporting or that they represent the “correct” news agenda. Instead, we used the NYT national stories as a sample baseline of events that could be reported on each day by other newspapers.

To select comparison papers for the purpose of measuring how widely different events are dispersed among the nation's newspapers, we began with the top 100 US newspapers by circulation in 2012, and we included all of those archived by Lexis-Nexis Academic for the years spanning from 2000 to 2012.⁵ Table 1 lists the 10 newspapers meeting these criteria. Each paper is a major outlet and has access to the events covered in the NYT National News Desk section.

Stories in the NYT National News Desk section provide a reasonable sample of reportable events each day, and our goal was to measure how many of these 10 other papers cover the same events. If an event in the NYT was reported in all 10 papers in our sample, we considered that event to be more widely dispersed among the nation's newspapers than an event reported by the NYT but by only one other paper. Our design did not intend to measure the agenda-setting influence of the NYT over other papers (e.g. Shaw and Sparrow 1999) but rather the independent influence of a baseline set of events over the news decisions of our sample of 10 papers. With this said, our design did allow for the possibility that a story was introduced to other papers by the NYT because we included the day-after contents of the non-NYT papers.⁶

This design relied on a simple model of the news process. First, an event happens. The likelihood of that event being reported in any given newspaper is a function of how important and interesting

reporters and editors at that newspaper perceive it to be. If events in our NYT baseline featuring dogs were reported more in our sample of 10 papers than events in the baseline without dogs, this indicated that dogs lead events to receive more coverage.

DATA

To identify the stories in the *New York Times*, we performed a Lexis-Nexis Academic search of all NYT National News Desk sto-

ries containing the word “dog” or “dogs” between January 1, 2000, and December 12, 2012. This produced 2,590 results. Within these 2,590 national news stories, we identified those that involved a dog as an important actor in the story. For example, we retained stories about drug-sniffing dogs and seizure-alert dogs. We omitted stories in which dogs were incidental to the reporting of the story—for example, when a subject of the report was observed as having a dog. From this initial sample of 2,590 National News Desk articles, we identified 18 in which a dog was an important actor (table 2). To serve as a comparison, we used the other articles appearing in the NYT National News Desk section on the same day as each of the 18 dog stories.⁷ This provided 334 non-dog stories.⁸

Some stories appearing in the NYT National News Desk section cover historic or otherwise important events, whereas other stories focus on seemingly less newsworthy occurrences. We assumed that more newsworthy events will be published more prominently and with more page space. To control for the relative newsworthiness of the events covered in our NYT baseline, we accounted for both the prominence and the length of the NYT articles. Our measure of prominence was 1 minus the quotient of the page that the article appeared on and the highest number of pages among all NYT national news articles published that day. To account for page space, we used the word count of the story. The median word count for NYT articles was 560 and the word-count variable used in our analysis

Table 1
Newspapers in the Study

NEWSPAPERS

Buffalo News
Daily News (New York)
Palm Beach Post
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette
Richmond Times Dispatch
Sarasota Herald-Tribune
St. Louis Post-Dispatch
Star Tribune
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
USA TODAY

Table 2

Articles about Dogs in the *New York Times* National News Desk Section, 2000–2012

ARTICLE TITLE	PUBLICATION DATE
Postal Work Unfairly Maligned, Study Says	9/1/2000
No. 1 Killer Among Dogs Is Rottweiler, Study Says	9/16/2000
Supreme Court Bars Roadblocks Set Up to Search for Drugs	11/29/2000
Driver Who Tossed Dog Is Convicted of Cruelty	6/20/2001
Seizure-Alert Dogs May Get Seeing-Eye Status in Florida	3/29/2002
Justices Uphold Use of Drug-Sniffing Dogs in Traffic Stops	1/25/2005
Justices Decline to Rule on Limits for Drug-Sniffing Dogs	4/5/2005
Shelters for Pets Fill with Furry Survivors	9/8/2005
Airlift Transports 80 Dogs to Safety	9/12/2005
New Dog Flu Virus, Deadly and Contagious, Is Detected in 7 States	9/22/2005
Study Identifies Heart Patient’s Best Friend	11/16/2005
Dog’s Genome Could Provide Clues to Disorders in Humans	12/8/2005
Few Rules in Use of Abu Ghraib Dogs, An Officer Testifies	3/16/2006
Dogs May Help Find Genes That Cause Cancer	11/24/2006
Biotech Company to Auction Chances to Clone a Dog	5/21/2008
First Dog Makes His Debut	4/15/2009
For Law Students with Everything, Dog Therapy for Stress	3/22/2011
Drug-Sniffing Dogs Have Their Day in Court as Justices Hear 2 Arguments	11/1/2012

was raw word count as a share of the median word count. A word-count score of 2, for example, indicated an article that was twice as long as the median NYT article.

For our 10 comparison newspapers, we compiled all national news stories published in these papers on the date that each of the dog stories appeared in the NYT as well as on the date following its publication. We then determined how many of the other 10 newspapers in which the same story of each of the NYT national news articles appeared.⁹ The possible range of this measure was [0, 10] and we observed scores ranging from 0 to 9. About 25% of the stories received a score of 1 or more. This seemingly low number was not surprising; whereas we expected some overlap across newspapers, there also was an expectation that local coverage would vary because

involving dogs disperse across newspapers relative to other national news events. The measure we used for this was the incident-rate ratio estimated using a Poisson regression.¹⁰ Each story reported in the NYT National News Desk section (including and not including a dog) comprised one case. The analysis contained 352 cases (i.e., 18 dog and 334 non-dog stories).

Our dependent variable was the number of times a story was reported by the 10 newspapers in our sample. Our independent variable of interest was a dichotomous variable indicating whether the story prominently featured a dog (i.e., coded 1 for yes). If dog stories were reported more often than non-dog stories, the coefficient should be positive. We included our controls for prominence (i.e., Prominence in NYT) and page space (i.e., NYT Article Word Count). We also included a fixed effect for the date to account for broader over-time variation (e.g., number of events available to reporters and temporal location in the news cycle) and for possible idiosyncrasies in the Lexis-Nexis indexing of newspapers in the study.

Table 3 shows that dogs lead events to be reported more widely. The positive and significant coefficient for our dog-story indicator suggested that events featuring dogs were more likely to be reported by other newspapers in our study than the non-dog events. These findings came after controlling for prominence and length. Our estimates suggested that a dog story on the last page of the NYT national news report proliferated at 2.6 times the rate of a non-dog NYT article on the same page. By comparison, a story that made the front page of the NYT also was covered by other papers at 3.1 times the rate of a story published on the last page of the NYT national news report. In other words, having a canine subject in a national news event produced coverage of the story that was 80% as large as the effect of the difference between being NYT front-page and back-page worthy.

Another way to interpret the effect of dogs is to consider page space—that is, more important news stories have more space (i.e., more words) in the paper. A NYT national news story of median length (i.e., 560 words) was covered by other papers at 1.1 times the rate of

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different audiences have different demands for information (Branton and Dunaway 2009). As such, there was significant variation across newspapers, even in the area of national news. This finding should assuage the concerns of media critics who believe that news outlets have become too homogeneous in recent decades.

ANALYSIS

Using the NYT as a baseline representing the events available for reporters to cover, we wanted to know how much events

coverage of a very short NYT news item. A dog story was covered at 2.6 times the rate of coverage of a non-dog very short NYT news item. Thus, other factors being equal, a dog story of median length will be covered by the nation’s newspapers at the same rate as a non-dog story that warrants about three times the median word count in the NYT.

CONCLUSION AND EXTENSIONS

Politics often is discussed in canine terminology: “Blue Dog Democrats” and “dog-whistle politics” come immediately to

Table 3

Poisson Regression Analysis of Proliferation of New York Times National News Desk Stories

	NUMBER OF PAPERS IN WHICH STORY APPEARS	
	POISSON COEFFICIENTS	INCIDENT RATE RATIO
Intercept	-0.905 (0.293)	0.405 (0.178)
Dog Story Indicator	0.968 (0.231)	2.633 (0.736)
Prominence in NYT	1.122 (0.280)	3.072 (2.195)
NYT Article Word Count (as share of median count)	0.075 (0.087)	1.078 (0.199)
Date Fixed Effects	Yes	
N	352	

mind. In addition, media critics have long categorized models of journalism as “watch dog,” “lap dog,” “guard dog,” “attack dog,” “junkyard dog,” “guide dog,” and “sled dog”—not to mention the “man-bites-dog” style of reporting. Given the propensity of journalists to report on dogs, these monikers for journalism seem quite apt.

As media scholar Timothy Cook (2005, 89) argued, “The search for newsworthy stories and newsworthy events does not equally favor all political actors and all issues.” Our results suggest that journalists favor dogs and events featuring dogs. Because dogs are inherently entertaining, and because “soft” entertainment-style news brings in audiences (Baum 2003), the sizable dog effect that we identified is indicative of the degree to which journalists are driven to report events based on entertainment value. Thus, our findings provide support for profit-driven or economic models of news media (Hamilton 2004, Uscinski 2014).

Although we stand by our quantitative results, an example might be illustrative. Following Hurricane Katrina, there were numerous events about which news outlets could have reported: widespread destruction, human suffering, displacement of an entire city, effects of massive social and racial inequality, government incompetence, and so forth. When the NYT reported on New Orleans dog shelters (September 8, 2005), the National News Desk section also reported 17 other Katrina-related stories. Among those stories, the dog story was tied for seventh in terms of its prominence. Two of the six more prominent articles dispersed (i.e., one to two papers, the other to one paper). However, four articles with greater prominence and greater word count than the dog-shelter story did not disperse to any of our other 10 papers. It is interesting that one of the stories that did not disperse was a report on human survivors moving from temporary shelters to newly available apartments; another was a report about the Democrats in Congress criticizing the Bush administration. Some observers may believe that one or both of those articles was more newsworthy than the dog story, which apparently was the judgment of the NYT editorial team because it allocated them better placement and more space. This case is anecdotal and potentially idio-

syncratic, but our point is that the NYT and one other news outlet had potentially more compelling stories to cover regarding Katrina but instead chose to report about dogs. This raises the question of whether coverage of the shelter story is simply an idiosyncratic quirk or whether it is consistent with a general pattern on the part of the news media to cover dog stories (instead of other worthy events) when they are available.

It may seem rather crass of journalists to report events simply because a dog is an actor in the story; however, there may be value in such a practice. “Softening” news to make it more interesting and palatable (in this case, with a dog) may make audiences more likely to read and have an interest in the news (Baum 2002). Thus, dogs may attract audiences to news stories that they otherwise would have ignored. A suburban housewife in Upstate New York might not care much about a hurricane 1,000 miles away; however, when the plight of dogs trapped in an abandoned shelter attracts her attention, she learns about other aspects of the hurricane aftermath as well.

Even the academy may not be immune to the “dog effect.” Just as flagship academic journals experience crazes during which a bumper crop of articles on subjects such as social capital and field experiments are published, there will may be a dog craze afoot in political science. For example, since 2010, *PS: Political Science and Politics* has published three articles that prominently feature dogs: “The Dog That Didn’t Bark: The Role of Canines in the 2008 Campaign” (Mutz 2010); “Unleashing Presidential Power: The Politics of Pets in the White House” (Maltzman et al. 2012); and “Barking Up the Wrong Tree: Why Bo Didn’t Fetch Many Votes for Barack Obama in 2012” (Jacobsmeier and Lewis 2013). Furthermore, the one article among these three that was in print long enough to garner citations received more than all of the issue’s other featured articles, and it was the subject of a response.¹¹ We agree with Maltzman et al. (2012, 399) that dogs are likely to become a valuable research program within political science. And why not? With their fuzzy ears and uncanny ability to foster high citation counts, political scientists may well be learning to do what journalists have done for years: dog it. ■

NOTES

1. Available at <http://www.pbs.org/weta/washingtonweek/watch/webcast%20extra/38245>.
2. Available at <http://www.accessmylibrary.com/article-1G1-142341590/philadelphia-inquirer-jonathan-storm.html>.
3. Available at <http://nation.foxnews.com/oklahoma-tornado/2013/05/21/amazing-video-okla-tornado-survivor-finds-her-dog-buried-alive-under-rubble>.
4. Available at <http://abclocal.go.com/wabc/story?section=news/lifestyle&id=8861123>; http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/offbeat/2008-09-14-dog-911_N.htm; and http://www.nbcnews.com/id/13439261/ns/health-pet_health/t/dog-makes-cell-phone-call-save-owners-life/#.UaY4i6LqkWQ.
5. An additional criterion was that newspapers included in the study needed to have their articles indexed by whether or not they were published in the paper’s national news section.
6. Because this process was allowed for both dog and non-dog stories, it should not bias our results.
7. Of the articles indexed as National News Desk articles in Lexis-Nexis, we omitted four types of articles that would have a low likelihood of appearing in other newspapers or could not be easily tracked: primarily local interest, obituaries, coverage of the presidential campaigns, and special-report-type stories.
8. The median number of National News Desk articles included as comparisons to our 18 dog stories was 19.
9. This was accomplished by finding all national news articles appearing in the non-NYT papers on the NYT article’s publication date or day after that shared at least one word in common with the title of the NYT article. The exceptions

included the 100 most common words in the English language. We then manually reviewed the resulting list of non-NYT article titles to determine how many (if any) covered subject matter similar to that covered in the NYT article. We validated this process using Wordscores (Laver, Benoit and Garry 2003), and we discuss this replication in our online replication materials.

10. We also ran the analysis using a negative binomial regression model that yielded similar results, and it is included in the replication materials.
11. We included the research articles but not the election-projection features.

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