

Assessing Network TV *Ad Watches* in the 2012 Presidential Election

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Abstract

In today's election atmosphere, Americans are inundated with campaign advertisements during the election cycle. Much research has been done on campaign advertisements, but not much about ad watches. Ad watches are critiques or commentary of political campaign ads, often performed by mass media organizations. This study sought to determine the factors that best explain why media outlets picked up certain political advertisements during the 2012 presidential election. To make this assessment the ad watches of CNN, ABC and FOX News were analyzed. Results revealed that the ad watches by these major networks often involve a specific type of campaign advertisement, feature analyst and anchor critiques, often fact check the campaign advertisements, and use advertisements that do not feature war imagery.

I. Introduction

Everywhere voters turn, it seems they see political advertisements during an election year. The American electorate are constantly plagued by messages from candidates causing voters to tire of the election long before they go to the polls to cast their ballot. The 24-hour news cycle has also played a significant role in contributing to campaign and election news long before election season takes place. With this influx in campaign messages and the 24-hour news cycle have come *ad watches*. Print or broadcast news outlets typically perform ad watches, in which they fact check and analyze campaign commercials.

Ad watches provide an outlet for the media to discuss key campaign advertisements and provide a check on the factual information presented to voters. In recent elections ad watches have been gaining ground and are more prevalent in the media. There are key ethical practices that many news outlets use when conducting ad watches, such as placing a running announcement along the bottom of the ad to alert viewers that it is being used for an *ad watch* segment. Ethical practices such as this provide more credibility to the news sources performing the ad watches, and also provides clarity for voters who may be interested in learning about a particular advertisement.

Much research has been done in the effectiveness of campaign advertisements in general, and there is a growing area of research into the analysis of ad watches. This paper highlights some of the key research studies already performed on this area of study as well as adds to this discussion by providing additional research. Prior studies have not provided much attention on the evaluation of the advertisements themselves that major media outlets choose to cover. Therefore, this study analyzed and provided a discussion of similarities found between the ads. Performing this study during an election year provided a perfect environment for this study. The study should be beneficial to media outlets as a critique of the advertisements that they chose

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to spotlight. Overall, the goal of this study was to provide further insight and encourage future research into this area of study.

II. Literature Review

Ever since the first presidential election, advertising has been an integral part of the campaign process. As media technologies have advanced, the number and importance of advertisements has also grown. In today's presidential elections, voters are plagued by a plethora of advertisements for each candidate. Over the years scholars have debated the impact these promotions have on voters, and many studies have been done to assess this question. More recently, scholars have examined the role that ad watches play in elections. In this paper, ad watches were limited to assessments of political advertisements performed by media organizations.

After much debate, current scholars agreed that presidential campaign advertisements have a significant impact on voter turnout and political mobilization. Scholars have also come to the conclusion that negative campaign advertisements are more effective than positive advertisements (Brooks, 2006; Cho et al., 2009; Cho, Gottlieb, Hwang, Nam-Jin, & McLeod, 2007; Clinton & Lapinski, 2004; Freedman & Goldstein, 1999, 2002; Lau, Rovner, & Sigelman, 2007; Ridout & Smith, 2008). This research has set the foundation for other scholars to study the effectiveness of ad watches.

The following sections analyzed the evolution of this debate and provided clarity about scholars' current conclusions on the topic of ad watches. Throughout the sections the author also defined key terms, introduced the theory needed for this research, and reviewed the prior literature.

The Theory of Agenda Setting

Agenda setting theory commonly grounds several studies in communications research. The theory of agenda setting deals with the examination of the role media outlets play in shaping the public's views and/or opinions about a situation. McCombs and Shaw were some of the first scholars to study this and paved the path for other scholars to further study agenda setting. This study found that the media play a critical and independent role in determining the political issues people think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). As a result of further studies three categories of agenda setting have developed; public agenda setting, media agenda setting, and institutional agenda setting. In this study the author focused on media agenda setting, which examines why and how the public receives the coverage that it does. It deals with everything that affects news coverage, taking into account profit considerations, professional values of reporters, and organization routines. While this study analyzed the media outlets' choice of campaign advertisements to use for *ad watch* segments and the characteristics of the ads chosen, the theory of agenda setting was a driving force.

Role of Ad Watches in Agenda Setting

Several scholars have studied the role *ad watches* play in agenda setting (Bennett, 1997; Fowler & Ridout, 2009; Kaid, McKinney, Tedesco, & Gaddie, 1999; O'Sullivan & Geiger, 1995; Ridout & Smith, 2008; Sweetser, Golan, & Wanta, 2008; Tedesco, Kaid, & Melton McKinnon, 2000). Bennett's study revealed that "the media's examination of candidate advertising is selective and strategy focused," (Bennett, 1997, 1181). Results showed that as ad-related coverage decreased, the cynicism strategy increased; as the format of *ad watches* changed to include more ads highlighting the campaign process, the types of ads using this strategy decreased; and as ads condemning an opponent increased, the ad watches were increasingly used to counteract false claims (Bennett, 1997). Simply put, ad watches were strategically selected and used to shape the campaign and voters' attitudes towards candidates. Building on Bennett's study, Geiger and O'Sullivan found that voters evaluated candidates more positively when an ad watch confirmed their attack ad, and when an ad watch disconfirmed their opponents ad (O'Sullivan & Geiger, 1995). This further proves the effectiveness of media agenda setting through the use of ad watches. In another study researchers found evidence that "media continue to drive the agenda by telling the public and campaigns what to think about," (Sweetser et al., 2008, 210). Lastly, several studies have discovered that specific components of ad watches impact agenda setting. Common results across these studies include the following: Negative ads were used more frequently than positive ads; general election ad watches appeared within the first ten minutes of the news; if ads were

mentioned in a print article, the ads were the sole focus of the article; the more ads aired, the more likely the media was to have an ad watch on them; a larger market size led to more coverage; and Republicans were more likely than Democrats to get ad watch coverage (Fowler & Ridout, 2009; Kaid et al., 1999; Ridout & Smith, 2008; Tedesco et al., 2000). Clearly, ad watches are important and vital to media agenda setting.

Biases Presented in Ad Watches

Since the media are using ad watches to set the agenda, scholars decided to test if there are any biases presented in coverage of presidential election campaigns, including ad watches (D'Alessio & Allen, 2000). Overall, D'Alessio and Allen found no statistically significant correlation between media coverage of presidential elections and gatekeeping bias, coverage bias, or statement bias. However, there were two interesting patterns that emerged. First, there appears to be some difference in coverage of Republicans versus Democrats in news magazines and on TV news, but not statistically significant. Second, newsmagazines are often pro-Republican and TV news is often pro-Democrat (D'Alessio & Allen, 2000). These patterns are worth examining more closely in future studies, and this study's results would aid this discussion by charting the common characteristics of ad watch coverage.

Content of Ad Watches

Lastly, many scholars have examined the various content of ad watches, and these studies helped guide the author's study (D'Alessio & Allen, 2000; Fowler & Ridout, 2009; Kaid et al., 1999; O'Sullivan & Geiger, 1995; Ridout & Smith, 2008; Tedesco et al., 2000). Scholars have examined several aspects of ad watches including time it was aired in relation to Election Day, ad tone, the competitiveness of the race, gender of the candidate, presentation of the candidates, and ideological orientation of the ad watch. Results revealed that the closer it was to Election Day, the more ad watches there were, but the number only increased mainly because there was an increase in election coverage overall (Ridout & Smith, 2008). Overall, negative and contrast ads appeared the most frequently in ad watches (Fowler & Ridout, 2009; Kaid et al., 1999; Ridout & Smith, 2008; Tedesco et al., 2000). When campaigns became more competitive there were more ad watches (Fowler & Ridout, 2009; Ridout & Smith, 2008). In regards to the gender of the candidate, a study showed that male candidates received more ad watches than women (Kaid et al., 1999). When it came to presentation of candidates, several studies reveal that Republicans received more ad watch coverage; candidates presented first in the ad watch were more likeable; the focus was more on campaigns during primaries and on candidates during the general election; and challengers received more ad watches than incumbents (Kaid et al., 1999; O'Sullivan & Geiger, 1995; Tedesco et al., 2000). The results of this study would add to this discussion by either further supporting previous studies or adding a nuanced insight if results differ.

Putting it All Together

In conclusion, all of the studies examined set out to explore the role that ad watches play in election cycles and the agenda media outlets set. Together, all the prior studies build on each other, creating a dynamic discussion about the influence and role of ad watches. The replication of these studies would prove vital to this field of study by further supporting prior research or introducing new findings. As ad watches and communication technology have evolved, the agenda setting of media outlets through these ad watches may have also evolved. Base on the review of previous research, one research question was asked in this study: What factors best explain why media outlets picked up certain political advertisements in the 2012 presidential election campaign?

In this study the dependent variable is political advertisements in the 2012 presidential election campaign. The independent variables examined are content of the advertisements chosen by the media outlets, the content of the media outlets' discussions of the advertisements, and political affiliation of the media outlets (if provided). To perform the study this research analyzed the advertisements themselves as well as of the news outlets' coverage of the advertisements.

III. Research Method

To best analyze the ad watches from the presidential election of 2012, this research relied on content analysis. Content analysis is often used when researchers are trying to analyze framing techniques. Since this study is based on the political communications technique of framing, content analysis is one of the best methods for analysis. Bernard Berelson, a researcher who is often cited for the classic definition of this method, defines a content analysis as “a research technique for objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (as cited in Stempel, 2003). To develop an effective content analysis Neuendorf has defined a nine-step process that takes the researcher through different steps, such as developing a research question to tabulating and reporting the results (Neuendorf, 50-51). To develop an effective quantitative content analysis, the researcher must have a topic, a unit of analysis, a sample, a method of operationalization, and a findings and/or analysis section (Rosenberry & Vicker, 74-75).

Sample

To systematically analyze and compare political advertisements in ad watches this study coded and analyzed a variety of ad watches. This study compared candidates’ advertisements and developed a deeper analysis for certain ad watches in the 2012 presidential election. Ad watches typically occur on broadcast news networks, so this study focused on three major news networks’ ad watches, CNN, ABC and FOX News (see Appendix B). These three networks were chosen for their distinctive news styles. These news outlets also have the most up to date databases of ad watches from the 2012 presidential election.

Steps of Analysis

Each ad watch was systematically coded to analyze the content of the ad watches and the advertisements critiqued by the ad watches. Both the ad watches and the advertisements themselves were coded for the following: tone (positive or negative), patriotic imagery, family images, war images, attacks at opposing candidate, policy, and sponsor of advertisement. In order to code the ad watches and advertisements used in them, this study employed a code sheet to track the specific characteristics of the ads. The researcher simply marked a “yes” or “no” on the code sheet (see Appendix A) for each characteristic. Once ad watches and associated ads in it were coded, the researcher compiled and evaluated all the coding together to identify trends and divergences in the data set. Taken together the coding of this data revealed new insights into this field of study.

IV. Findings

Coding ad watches of the 2012 presidential campaign advertisements from CNN, ABC, and FOX News resulted in several findings. *Figure 1* shows how these three networks compare in terms of the number of ad watches they performed. Each ad watch was analyzed for different variables and the advertisements used in each ad watch were also coded for different variables.

The major components of ads emerged through content analysis: attacks on the opposition, sponsor

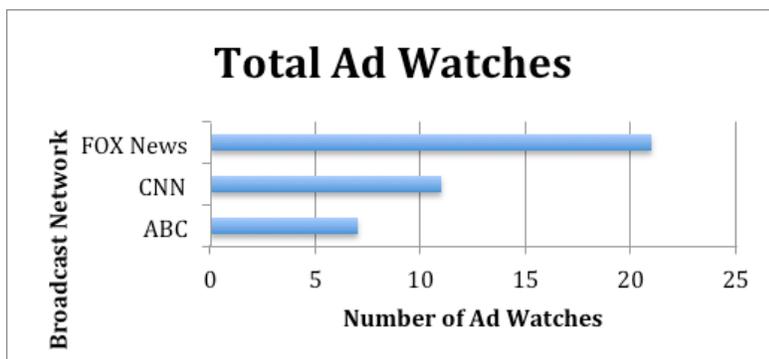


Figure 1: The total number of Ad Watches on each broadcast news network

of the advertisement, focus of the advertisement, tone of the advertisement, and the presentation of war, patriotic or family imagery. The ad watches also revealed the following variables of importance: fact checking, an identifier of the campaign advertisement presented on the screen during the ad watch, the role the anchor and analysts played in ad watches. *Figure 2* shows all the variables selected in analyzing the advertisements that were used in the

ad watches across the three networks.

Figure 3 shows all the variables analyzed to study the ad watches across the three networks. Each variable will be discussed individually later on. Below is a discussion of the findings for each of these variables and trends that emerged.

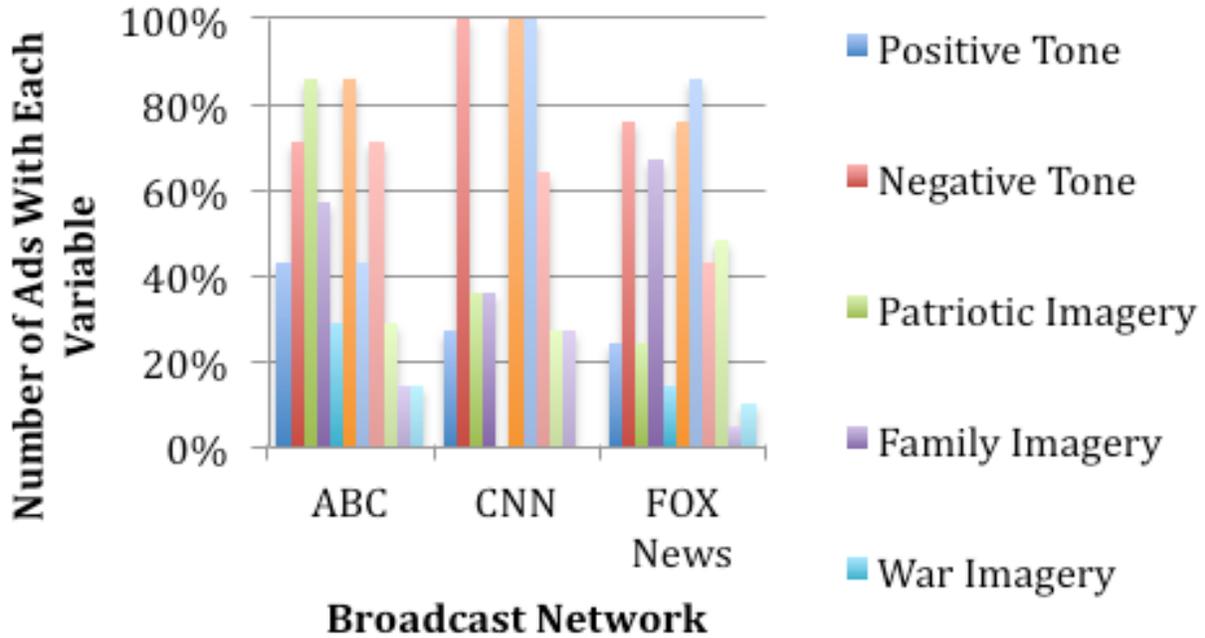


Figure 2: Variables selected when Ad Watches were analyzed

Variable 1: Attacks on the Opposition

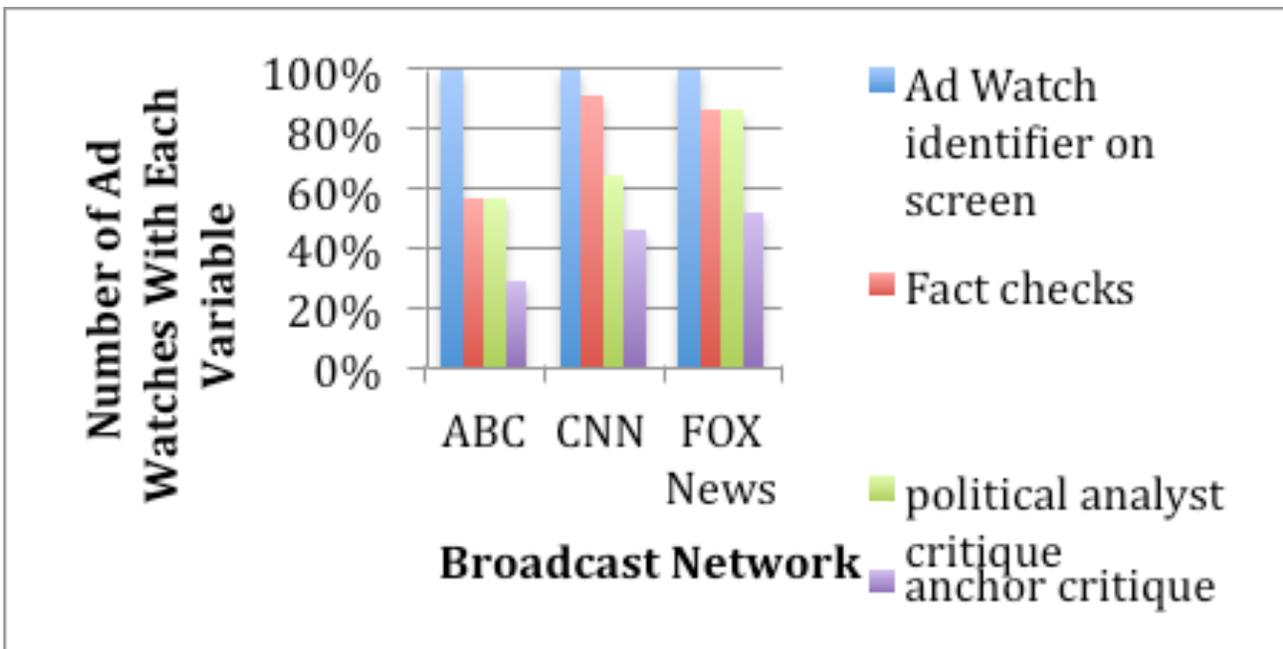


Figure 3: Variables used when Ad Watches were critiqued

The first trend showed that the campaign advertisement used in ad watches attacked the opponent. When coding this characteristic, the campaign advertisement was classified as an attack on the opposition if it mentioned the opponent’s name, referenced the policy or characteristic of the opponent, or if it contrasted the candidate with his opponent. All but one of the ad watches aired on ABC used campaign advertisements where the candidate in the ad attacked the opposition. One ad watch used a non-campaign advertisement that attacked the opposition, “Chrysler Superbowl ad pro-Obama?” This ad watch was an anomaly because it was an analysis of a Superbowl ad that the Obama campaign latched onto. However, Chrysler released a statement that the advertisement was not an endorsement for Obama and had nothing to do with the Obama campaign. All ads that CNN chose for the ad watches were those that attacked the opposition. FOX News ad watches used 16 ads that attacked the opposition out of a total of 21 the network aired.

Variable 2: Advertisement Sponsor

This variable covered the sponsor of the campaign advertisement used in the ad watches. An advertisement used in an ad watch was coded based on its sponsor: the candidate, PAC, interest group, or others. The majority of the ABC and CNN ad watches used campaign advertisements that the candidate sponsored. The only CNN ad watch that did not use candidate-sponsored advertisements was “Truth about Romney welfare attack ad.” This ad watch used campaign advertisements that PACs sponsored. The majority of FOX News ad watches used campaign advertisements the candidate or PACs sponsored. Refer to *Figure 4* for more details.

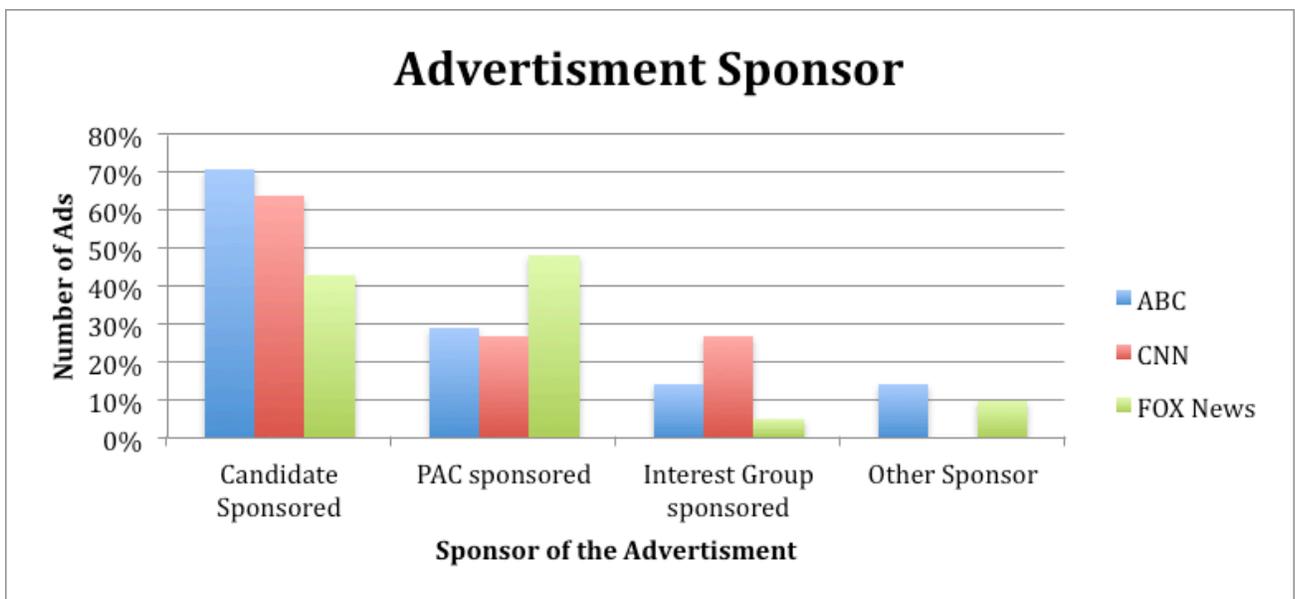


Figure 4. Advertisement sponsors

Variable 3: Focus of the Advertisement

This variable covered whether the campaign advertisement used in ad watches was policy centered. A campaign advertisement was coded as policy centered if the advertisement presented the opponent’s policy. ABC ad watches were more likely to use campaign advertisements that were not policy centered. On the other hand, all of the CNN ad watches used campaign advertisements that were policy centered. FOX News was also more likely than ABC to use advertisements in ad watches that were policy centered. Out of 21 advertisements, only three were not policy centered.

Variable 4: Tone of the Advertisement

The tone of the campaign advertisement used in ad watches was also examined. A campaign advertisement was coded for a positive or negative tone. A campaign advertisement was coded as having a posi-

tive tone if the rhetoric in the advertisement was uplifting, hopeful or overall upbeat. It was coded as having a negative tone if the rhetoric in the advertisement was accusatory, downtrodden or overall disconsolate. ABC ad watches used a mix of positive and negative toned campaign advertisements. Four of the ABC ad watches used campaign advertisements with a negative tone, and three of them used campaign advertisements with a positive tone. Overall ABC used almost an equal number of advertisements with each tone. All of the CNN ad watches used campaign advertisements with a negative tone, but some of those ads had positive tones as well. The majority of FOX News ad watches used campaign advertisements with a negative tone, 16 of the 21 ads. Based on this information, FOX News and CNN were more likely to use advertisements with a negative tone. Please refer to *Figure 5* for more details.

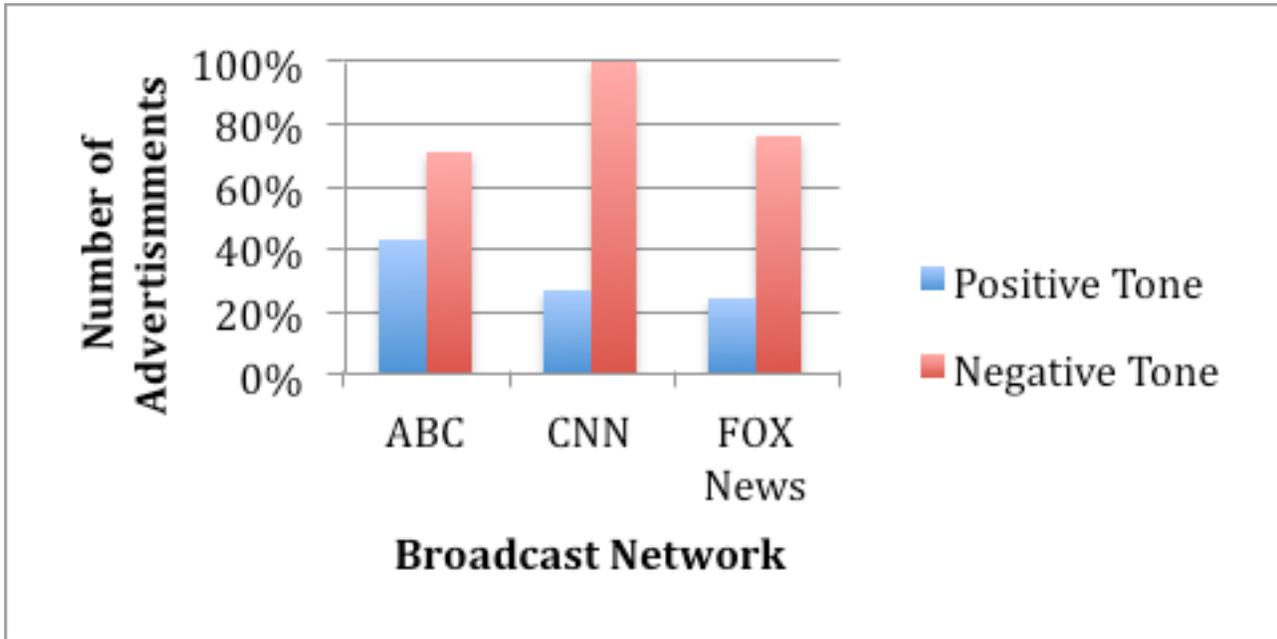


Figure 5. Tones of the advertisements

Variable 5: Types of Imagery Utilized in the Advertisements

The last variable examined for the advertisements used in ad watches was what was presented: the presentation of war, patriotism or family imagery. ABC ad watches had campaign advertisements that featured all three types of imagery with patriotic imagery being the most prevalent in ads. Very few campaign advertisements selected in the ad watches featured war imagery, and CNN ads never featured war imagery. The majority of CNN ad watches featured campaign advertisements with patriotic or family imagery, both of which were about evenly used. FOX News overwhelmingly used ads that featured family imagery. (Please refer to *Figure 6* for more details.)

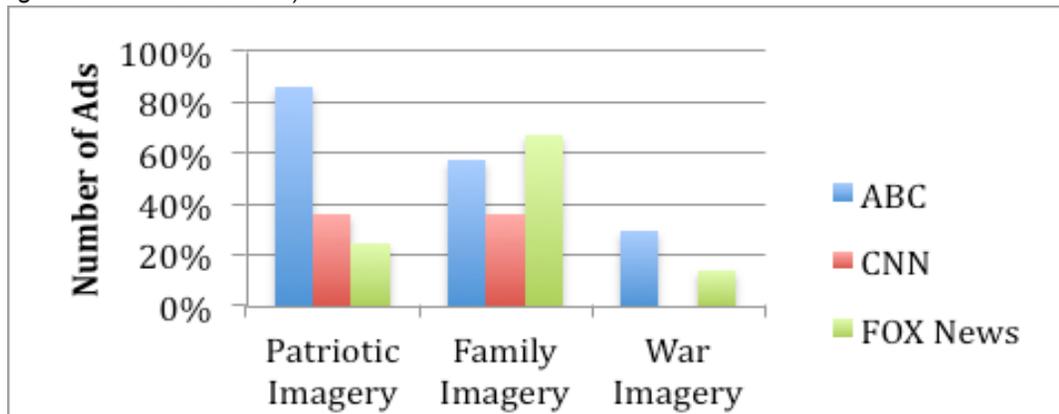


Figure 6. Types of imagery utilized in the advertisements

Variable 6: Fact Checking in Ad Watches

Based on three variables, the ad watches were examined. The first variable is fact checking of the ad watches. An ad watch was coded as performing a fact check if the ad watch pointed out inaccurate facts, presented the actual facts that were mentioned in the campaign advertisement or presented fact checking results from other media outlets. Results showed that ABC’s ad watches did fact checking in four ad watches, not in three remaining ad watches. CNN ad watches performed fact checking in all but one. FOX News performed fact checks in all but three ad watches. Overall, this shows that most ad watches feature some sort of fact checking component. (See Figure 7)

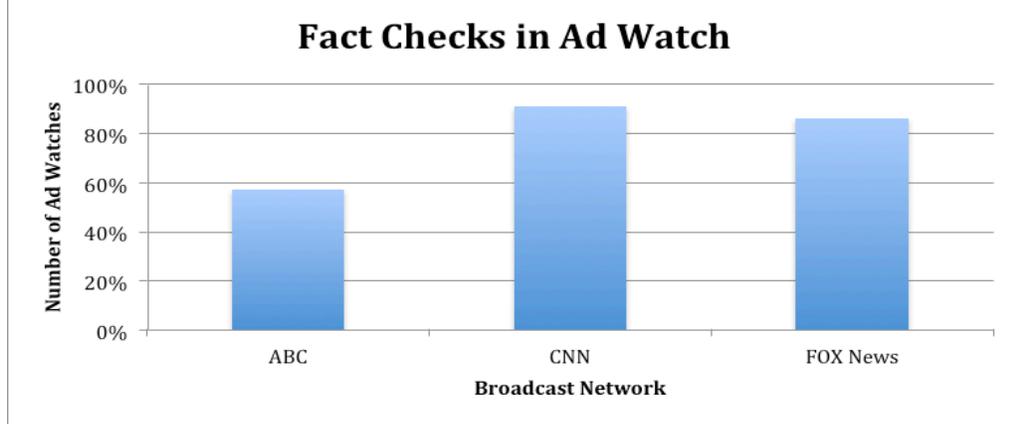


Figure 7. Fact checking in Ad Watches

Variable 7: Presentation of Campaign Advertisement Identifier on Screen

The next variable examined was an identifier of the campaign advertisement that was presented on the screen during the ad watch. An ad watch was coded as having an identifier if the anchor introduced the campaign advertisement or the campaign advertisement was clearly identified as such when it was shown on the screen. All the ad watches across the three networks had identifiers on the screen or the anchor introduced the campaign advertisement during the ad watch.

Variable 8: Role of the Anchor and Political Analysts in Ad Watches

The final variable covered who critiqued each campaign advertisement: the anchor or political analysts. If the anchor or analyst simply stated the facts of the campaign advertisement or presented a response from either candidate, the ad watch was not coded as having an anchor or analyst critique. ABC ad watches had either analyst or anchor critique comments of the campaign advertisements. All CNN ad watches had either analyst or anchor critiques of the campaign advertisements shown in the ad watches, and most had both anchor and analyst critiques in one ad watch. FOX News was the only network that had both anchor and political analyst critiques during each ad watch.

Overall, these results show that the ad watches by these major networks often involve a specific type of campaign advertisement, feature analyst and anchor critiques, often fact check the campaign advertisements, and use advertisements that do not feature war imagery. (See Figure 8 for more details)

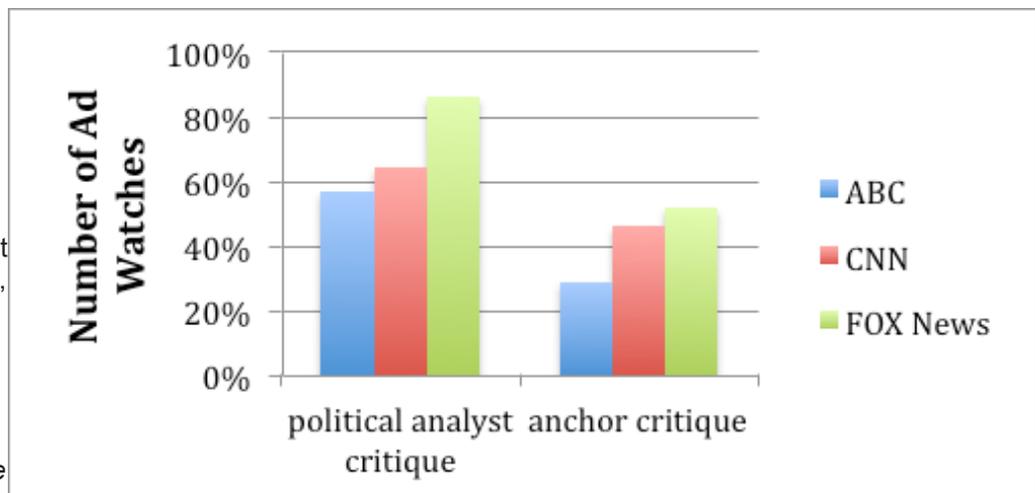


Figure 8. Who critiqued ads in Ad Watches

V. Conclusions

This study sought to learn about how major broadcast media outlets use presidential campaign and ad watches during the 2012 presidential election.

Based on the analysis of the ad watches of the 2012 presidential campaign advertisements, the following conclusions were drawn. All ad watches featured campaign advertisements that attacked the opposing party, most ad watches contained fact checking, and most ad watches featured candidate sponsored ads. Overall, these results show that the ad watches by CNN, ABC and FOX News often involve negative or popular campaign advertisements, feature political analyst and anchor critiques, often involve fact checking the campaign advertisements, and use advertisements that do not feature war imagery.

These results are significant for the theory of media agenda setting because they reveal how the media shape public perception of political events. Watching ad watches on a major news network drastically influences how an individual might perceive certain candidates and even an election. Based on the results researchers can see that media outlets are more likely to use campaign advertisements with certain characteristics in their ad watches. This leads the viewers of these ad watches to receive specifically crafted messages and thus form a biased view of a candidate or election. The media, through these ad watches, are setting a specific political agenda that may ultimately influence the way the American electorate perceive a candidate when they see ad watches. Simply, the results show that the broadcast networks are analyzing and filtering campaign advertisements at their own discretion, and the audience is receiving a new, filtered message about these advertisements. The original campaign advertisement message would not be the same as the message the audience would finally get through an ad watch.

Additionally, this study tried to provide insight into why media outlets picked up certain political advertisements in the 2012 presidential election campaign. The majority of the ad watches in this study were for campaign advertisements that a candidate sponsored, attacked the opponent, and used patriotic and family imagery. Most ad watches typically occurred in the beginning months of an election cycle and very few, if any, occurred as the months progressed closer to Election Day. In the beginning of the campaign season, media outlets may have been struggling to find campaign news to report, whereas closer to Election Day, the plethora of campaign news may crowd out ad watches. Also, as Election Day approached, the networks may focus more on fact checking campaign debates and speeches instead of the campaign advertisements.

Overall, this study contributed to the field of ad watches by finding the typical variables that may change the meaning of advertisements used in ad watches. However, this study only examined a small group of media outlets and ad watches, so the results cannot be generalized. Further research should be done on the media outlets' political leanings, the analysts they chose to use for the ad watches, and how the ad watches of the 2012 presidential election compare to past presidential election ad watches. Perhaps, with this further research some general conclusions can be made about the reasoning behind why media outlets chose specific campaign advertisements. However, even without this additional research, this study contributed to the current research on ad watches in the 2012 presidential election. All in all, there is still a need for future research on this topic, but this study has added to the discussion of ad watches and political communication.

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Appendix A: Coding Sheet

Positive tone	Yes	No
Negative tone	Yes	No
Patriotic imagery	Yes	No
Family imagery	Yes	No
War imagery	Yes	No
Attacks on opposition	Yes	No
Policy centered	Yes	No
Candidate sponsored	Yes	No
PAC sponsored	Yes	No
Interest Group sponsored	Yes	No
Other sponsor	Yes	No
<i>Specific for Ad Watches</i>		
Ad Watch identifier on screen	Yes	No
Fact checks	Yes	No
Analyst critique	Yes	No
Anchor critique	Yes	No

Appendix B: List of Links for the Ad Watches Analyzed

CNN (search term campaign ad)

1. <http://www.cnn.com/video/#/video/bestoftv/2012/10/09/exp-early-hamby-obama-big-bird-ad.cnn>
2. <http://www.cnn.com/video/#/video/bestoftv/2012/10/16/tsr-moos-naked-politics.cnn>
3. <http://www.cnn.com/video/#/video/politics/2012/09/19/tsr-dnt-yellin-obama-redistribution.cnn>
4. <http://www.cnn.com/video/#/video/politics/2012/10/15/erin-intv-reiner-moveon-org-ad-johanson-longoria-washington.cnn>
5. <http://www.cnn.com/video/#/video/bestoftv/2012/08/20/exp-early-lothian-romney-attack-ad.cnn>
6. <http://www.cnn.com/video/#/video/bestoftv/2012/10/19/ac-kth-romney-obama-abortion-stance.cnn>
7. <http://www.cnn.com/video/#/video/bestoftv/2012/08/08/exp-point-andrea-saul-one.cnn>
8. <http://www.cnn.com/video/#/video/bestoftv/2011/11/22/tsr-johns-romney-obama-attack-ad.cnn>
9. <http://www.cnn.com/video/#/video/bestoftv/2012/08/08/exp-point-steph-cutter-two.cnn>
10. <http://www.cnn.com/video/#/video/bestoftv/2012/08/09/ac-kth-romney-welfare-ad.cnn>
11. <http://www.cnn.com/video/#/video/bestoftv/2012/05/15/nr-ben-labolt.cnn>

ABC (search term campaign ad)

1. <http://abcnews.go.com/WNT/video/obama-ad-super-pac-back-16974192>
2. <http://abcnews.go.com/WNT/video/obama-romney-aim-early-voters-debate-17343494>
3. <http://gma.yahoo.com/video/gma-foulest-ads-campaign-season-080000372.html>
4. <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/video/president-obamas-abortion-attack-ad-17036500>
5. <http://abcnews.go.com/WNT/video/fact-checking-obama-romney-campaign-ads-16744194>
6. <http://abcnews.go.com/WNT/video/obamas-osama-bin-laden-ad-attacks-romney-16231795>
7. <http://abcnews.go.com/WNT/video/chrysler-super-bowl-ad-pro-obama-15526038>

FOX News (search term ad watch)

1. <http://video.foxnews.com/v/1642688653001/2012-ad-wars/>
 2. <http://video.foxnews.com/v/1617989208001/then-and-now-bush-2004-ad-vs-obama-2012-ad/>
 3. <http://video.foxnews.com/v/1367630205001/watch-gingrich-no-longer-playing-nice-in-new-ad-targeting-romney/>
 4. <http://video.foxnews.com/v/1780360620001/carney-we-do-not-control-the-ad/>
 5. <http://video.foxnews.com/v/1781717281001/super-pac-pack-of-lies-ad/>
 6. <http://video.foxnews.com/v/1777328300001/coulter-this-is-a-repulsive-despicable-ad/>
 7. <http://video.foxnews.com/v/1777146099001/controversy-over-obama-super-pac-ad/>
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