Modeling the Negotiation of Newsworthiness

Abstract

The political stories citizens read in newspapers, magazines, on the Internet, and view on television are rarely the function of a single political actor. Instead, the news product we view each day is formed through negotiations and relationships between members of the press and elected and governmental officials. This negotiation of newsworthiness is inherently a bargaining process. Yet, since the process is often hidden and sometimes implicit, it is near impossible for researchers to precisely observe and empirically model how the political news product is created. In this paper, I propose a series of bargaining models to gain understanding of the negotiation of newsworthiness between the news media and the government. I establish that even though the government and politicians often have advantages in creating the news, informational control can be mitigated by increasing news outlets’ resources within a dense political news environment. The results provide a formal rationale for when we should and should not expect accountability reporting.
1 Introduction and Motivation

The political news stories citizens observe each day are rarely formed through the work of one individual or institution. The press needs information sources, typically elected and government officials, to gather the pertinent material to develop and create news stories. The government and its members need the press to convey their viewpoints, plans, and actions to the citizenry. This informational exchange is never one-sided and is mutually reinforcing. Timothy Cook (1989, 1998) coined this political news creation process the ‘negotiation of newsworthiness’ - “the constant if implicit negotiations between political sources and journalists.” This process is a bargaining situation, yet, to date little effort has been exerted in formalizing the incentives, structure, and outcomes of this aspect of news creation.

As Cook (1998) argues, one of the compelling reasons for understanding the negotiation of newsworthiness is that the news media in the U.S. are a partially-independent political institution who have different incentives, preferences, and resources than the institutions they are covering; namely, the three branches of the federal and state governments. The news media act as secondary political institutions like interest groups, and thus operate both inside and outside of government. In the U.S., the inherent conflict between political actors in government presents unique opportunities to an independent news media to create informative stories for both those in government and the general citizenry.

This paper adds to the growing scholarship formalizing the political news media. The past decade has seen scholars focusing on political news bias (Baron 2006, Gentzkow & Shapiro 2006), political campaign reporting (Stromberg 2004), legislator and media newsmaking incentives (Fogarty 2009), media capture (Besley & Prat 2006, Petrova 2008), and the marketplace for news (Mullainathan & Schleifer 2005). Besley and Prat (2006), Fogarty (2009), and Petrova (2008) are the most relevant for this paper. All three utilize an ultimatum bargaining game in whether and how the media report on the government to voters. Besley and Prat (2006) and Petrova (2008) frame this interaction as media capture, like regulatory agency capture by
industry, while Fogarty (2009) frames it as a legislator buying silence.

Yet, relying on a one-sided bargaining model hinders our understanding of the process of news creation. While a one-side bargaining model may be appropriate in some circumstances, modeling the negotiations allowing alternating offers and with multiple news outlets increases the applicability to numerous media environments. For example, Besley and Prat (2006) and Fogarty (2009) allow the government to buy silence from the media and thus the media do not write any stories. In some circumstances, such a model is warranted. However, it is more commonly the case that a journalist must write a story and needs to decide what does and does not go in the article. I model this situation by allowing each actor to have their own version of a story. By establishing and then moving past the one-sided model, the models in this paper enhance the theoretical grounding of the negotiation of newsworthiness. I show that the government and elected officials often can control the news product, but that this ability becomes increasingly difficult as journalists’ resources and the number of news outlets engaged in covering government grows. Simply increasing the number of outlets in a news environment will not necessarily shift bargaining power to the news media. Indeed, it has been empirically observed that even though more news outlets exist today, the lack of resources and insider knowledge has decreased the quality of local accountability reporting; more commonly referred to as watchdog journalism (Waldman 2011). This paper provides a formal rationale for when and where we should expect to find watchdog journalism.

2 Incentives in the ‘Negotiation of Newsworthiness’

Cook (1998) treats the negotiation between the press and government with a broad consideration allowing for both overt bargaining and implicit information sharing. Cook (1989, 1998) was not the first or only scholar to assess the negotiations and relationships between the press and government; though he may have been the most persuasive and succinct. The relationship between the press and government tends to be uneasy and difficult, yet it is necessary for both
Reporters and officials who play the newsmaking game get rewarded - journalists through their professional careers and officials through their career and policy goals. Making news is a key way to promote policies that are being debated in the legislature as well as a means to shape public opinion throughout and after the legislative process (Bennett 2007, Cook 1989, Zaller 1992). In the political news bargaining process, elected and government officials have specialized information and insider access. Officials can control the volume and detail of information flowing to the news media and can provide incentives for preferential treatment by the media. These incentives include direct privileged information and access to the official in office and on the campaign trail (i.e., for media covering members of Congress) (Cook 1998).

Some have argued this is where negotiations end and the media become lapdogs of propaganda for the government (Bagdikian 1974, Fallows 1997, Herman & Chomsky 2002). Bennett (2007) argues that the adversarial political coverage that does appear in the national media is often ritualistic and minimally illuminating for the public. This argument is based on how the edicts of routine journalism - norms, standard operating procedures, newsholes, newsbeats - lead to highly predictable and scripted press coverage of government (Bennett 2007). Journalists heavily rely on authoritative sources, namely government sources, in covering political events and policies, while shunning non-governmental and unorganized sources (Gans 1979, Goldenberg 1975, Sigal 1973). The norms of objectivity and balanced coverage in journalism leads to squaring off official sides on stories (Cook 1998, Gans 1979). For example, Democrats are positioned against Republicans and the interests of Congress are balanced against the President’s preferences. Beyond this scholarship, idiosyncratic polemics appear frequently arguing both for and against the strength of the political news media.

However, recent literature on news coverage of members of Congress have dispelled the generalization of a weak political news media (Arnold 2004, Dunaway 2008, Fogarty 2008, Schaffner & Sellers 2003, Vinson 2003). Not necessarily fulfilling the watchdog role of the
media (Ansolabehere, Behr & Iyengar 1993, Bennett & Serin 2005), this research shows the political press as possessing strategic incentives to cover politicians in both accommodating and adversarial manners.

While officials offer information and access to the media, the news media offer news content to officials. There are a variety of flavors this can take. The press can discuss certain topics and not others, mention certain sources while ignoring others, prime and frame certain angles they desire. The press can also offer preferential treatment in the tone of coverage. For example, Bob Woodward is known to positively portray sources who provide access and talk with him, while those who shun him are displayed in less flattering terms (Fallows 1997). Bennett (2007) notes that when the Clinton administration became more open and collegial with the White House press pool, the coverage became more accommodating and respectful. Officials may have control over information and access, but the media controls the content (Cook 1998). No official wants negative coverage and thus pushes for positive and accommodating treatment by the media. These efforts may include tying insider information and access to positive treatment in the media.

Underlying any political communication study, whether explicitly or implicitly, is the effect on the citizenry and more specifically voters. Examining the process through which news is created is critical for understanding how citizens come to view politics and process political information. We know the news product is not a mirror reflecting reality. Instead, it is an event or series of events viewed through a variety of lenses. Ideally, we would want to observe the negotiation of newsworthiness in the aggregate and be able to make empirical generalizations about the political news product. Yet, bargaining over the news product is typically hidden. To date, we have case studies and examples of the bargaining process, though usually not couched in those terms, and why certain political stories are printed or aired (Chadwick 2011, Crouse 1973, Fallows 1997).

One clear example of the negotiation of newsworthiness is reporting in a war zone. The
news media and the government have different incentives and strategies for producing the news product. The news media desire close access to the action, intense images and sound, and compelling storylines. Meanwhile, the government prefers to have strict control of the material appearing in newspapers and on television. As learned during the Vietnam war, letting reporters have unfettered access to the conflict often negatively effects public opinion (Ansolabehere, Behr & Iyengar 1993, Hallin 1986). The military and government want to satisfy the wishes of the news media while controlling the information flow. The emergence of the ‘embedded’ reporter during the Iraq War was a product of bargaining between the media and the government. Journalists who wanted to be close to the action and be protected by the military had to agree to a series of restrictions on reporting (Bennett 2007, Prochnau 2005). This agreement benefited both the news media and the government; though possibly to the detriment of unbiased information for American citizens (Kirtley 2005). For example, Washington Post journalist David Ignatius, writing about being an embedded reporter in Iraq and Afghanistan, states “embedding comes at a price. We are observing these wars from just one perspective, not seeing them whole” (Ignatius 2010).

In an effort to provide a traceable and tractable understanding of the political newsmaking process, I present a series of bargaining models involving the press and government officials. I begin with a basic ultimatum bargaining model and then consider both finite and infinitely repeated versions of the negotiation of newsworthiness. In an extension, I consider the role of multiple journalists on the news creation process. This theoretical treatment of the process provides a foundation for understanding the negotiation of newsworthiness and sets the stage for empirical hypotheses to be tested in the future.

3 The Baseline Model

The baseline model examines a simple ultimatum bargaining game between a journalist and a politician. This baseline provides the structure and initial result to compare against later
models. This bargaining situation, though limited, can be applied to understanding several different political newsmaking operations. An increasing number of local news outlets have shed their news gathering resources and investigative journalism departments during the past decade. Meanwhile, these outlets have become increasingly reliant on press releases and information directly from the government (Waldman 2011). Public relations executive Amy Mengel makes this point succinctly, “newsrooms have been gutted and, particularly at the local level, journalists rely on press releases...to fill their ever increasing news hole” (quoted in Waldman (2011)). A Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism study found that Baltimore news outlets frequently printed government press releases verbatim or with little alteration (Pew 2010). A study by the Center for Media and Democracy found that over a 10-month period, 77 local broadcast and cable news outlets aired video press releases without telling viewers that the segments were not developed by the station’s reporting teams (Farsetta & Price 2006). These examples suggest that an ultimatum bargaining model may be most appropriate for understanding the production of the news product on the local level.

Another bargaining situation where the ultimatum game is appropriate is the interaction between the news media and the president. When the news media go to the president and his administration for source information on various measures, the president often holds informational control. Due to the power of the office, and thus the information and access he possesses, the president is often able to dictate the guidelines, information, and framing to the news media. The media can turn to other information sources outside the presidency, but the potency of the information may be diluted.

Related to the news media covering the president, a venue this basic model applies to is any situation where there is a significant difference between the strength of the news organization and the office of the politician. For instance, the New York Times is likely involved in a different bargaining structure and situation with the Speaker of the House than the Columbia Daily Tribune (MO). Small and local newspapers have much less bargaining leverage with national
politicians than national newspapers such as the *Times* and *Washington Post*.

### 3.1 Structure and Players

The baseline game is composed of two players: a politician with a constituency and a journalist.\(^1\) Both have complete and perfect information about the other player and the sequence of the game. The politician receives a benefit from a given action in office, be it a vote, introducing a bill, pushing certain policies, etc., as well as a benefit from approval by the constituency. The constituency’s level of approval is determined by the story written by the journalist. The story can either be the politician’s version or the journalist’s version, where each player prefers their own version. Politicians value approval from their constituencies at varying levels depending on the status of the office, the election year, the term in office, and individual personality, among others. For example, retiring members of Congress need not worry about their districts’ approval levels (Hulse 2011, Rothenberg & Sanders 2000). To capture this effect, the politician’s interest in constituency approval is weighted. The politician can make an offer to the journalist for reporting his or her version of the story. This offer is conceived as access to and information from the politician. If the journalist rejects the offer, then the journalist reports his or her version of the story. The journalist incurs a cost for acquiring information about the politician and receives revenue for the story on the politician, which varies depending on which version is reported. Again, the journalist can also benefit by accepting the offer from the politician.

### 3.2 Results

**Proposition 1** A subgame perfect equilibrium exists where the politician’s offer is the difference in revenue between the two story versions, the journalist accepts the offer and reports the politician’s version.

**Proof:** See Appendix
For the journalist, the offer needs to cover the difference between the revenue gained from his or her preferred story and the revenue gained from the politician’s preferred version. As the difference between these values grows, the offer must grow accordingly and vice-versa. For instance, if the issue at hand is a scandal involving the politician, the offer would have to be large in order for the journalist to report the politician’s version which may be to bury the scandal or frame it positively for him or her. Or, the issue could be relatively benign and thus the offer would likely be small.

In order to control news content, the politician is willing to make this offer - given the offer is small enough to provide a benefit to the politician. As noted in the appendix, for the politician, the offer must be less than or equal to the difference between approval gained from the two versions of the story weighted by how much the politician cares about approval. It is clear that the politician makes no offer if he or she prefers the same story as the journalist or if the politician does not care about approval. The former is unlikely, though the latter has some empirical merit (Hulse 2011).\(^2\) The politician may greatly prefer the action in office that it makes a gain or loss from approval irrelevant. Politicians who are leaving office, and not seeking higher office, may also care little about approval from the constituency and thus negotiating with the news media provides no benefit for the politician (Rothenberg & Sanders 2000).

Cases in which the politician cares little or nothing about the constituency are infrequent. Instead, politicians weigh what they need to give up to develop the story of their preference. The politician must meet the equilibrium offer for the journalist and this value varies depending on the issue or event. Comparative statics suggest that if the politician cares a great deal about approval, then he or she is willing to pay a high price for content control. Relevant cases include politicians who are in competitive races and newly elected politicians. For example, Cook (1988, 1989) discusses how freshmen members of Congress work hard to cultivate a strong, positive relationship with the local news media to develop accommodating coverage and preferential treatment. These members care a great deal about approval as they are building their re-
4 Alternating Offers Model: Finitely Repeated

While the ultimatum bargaining game is appropriate for considering the news media relationship with certain officials such as the president and in certain news environments, it is less useful for understanding how most political news is developed particularly on the national-level. Instead, the news media and elected officials often engage in a give-and-take approach; or, alternating offers. This is where the term ‘negotiation of newsworthiness’ comes from - the news media and politicians discuss, bargain, and produce the news product (Cook 1998). This finitely-repeated model, then, may be useful in understanding the news production relationship between news outlets with few resources and national or powerful politicians. In this section, I offer a finitely repeated version of an alternating offers bargaining model (Rubinstein 1982).

4.1 Structure and Players

In this finitely repeated model, the journalist has the opportunity to make a counter offer to the initial proposal which the politician can accept or reject. Therefore, I look at only two periods of play, but it is enough to provide insight into most $n$-period finite games. Once again, the politician can make an offer to the journalist, where if the journalist rejects, the journalist makes his or her’s own offer. I also take into account how much each player values the future; some players are inpatient and want to strike a deal immediately, while others are patient enough to wait for future offers.
4.2 Results

**Proposition 2** A subgame perfect equilibrium exists where the politician’s offer takes into account the discounted revenue between the two story versions and the possibility of the journalist’s counter-offer, the journalist accepts the offer and reports the politician’s version.

*Proof:* See Appendix

This result suggests that an agreement between the politician and journalist is made on the first offer and thus the journalist never counters. Here, again, the politician is able to control news content, provided doing so yields a positive benefit to the politician, through negotiating with the news media. If the politician were to ignore the journalist, the story could hurt the politician’s approval levels in the constituency. In reality, politicians and legislators sometimes do ignore the media when an event occurs often to the detriment of their approval and future election chances (Ansolabehere, Behr & Iyengar 1993, Bennett 2007). It is far better to have a hand in controlling content than hoping a given situation will simply disappear.

Assuming the politician cares about approval, what size does the politician’s offer need to be to the journalist to write his or her’s preferred version? There are two relevant variables to the offer - how much the journalist values the future and the potential size of the journalist’s counter offer. The size of the offer will decrease as the journalist becomes increasingly inpatient. So, negotiating with a journalist who has a close deadline can be profitable for a politician hoping to control content. Luckily for politicians, most journalists do face immediate deadlines thus allowing for more leverage in negotiations than would be gained with other journalists such as investigative reporters. For example, beat reporters need to produce stories daily and thus are more reliant on official press releases and statements than reporters with longer lead times (Graber 2005).

The size of the journalist’s offer is contingent on the utility gained from not making a counter offer. If the journalist rejects the politician’s initial offer and does not counter, the journalist receives the discounted revenue from reporting his or her’s version. In order to get
the politician to accept a counter, the journalist’s equilibrium offer is the difference in the constituency’s approval from the two stories weighted by how much the politician values approval. In the extreme of when the journalist is very inpatient and the politician does not care about approval, the politician’s equilibrium offer is the same offer as the ultimatum bargaining game above. Due to the effect of discounting, the journalist can actually receive less in this model than when he or she has no opportunity to counter. But allowing the journalist to make a counter offer, the politician must explicitly take into account his or her own preferences in the equilibrium. The more the politician cares about approval and the larger the difference between the two approval levels, the greater the offer to the journalist. Even though the dynamics have changed, the result suggests that the politician still can maintain leverage over the journalist but typically at a higher cost in a finitely repeated alternating offer bargaining structure.

5 Alternating Offers Model: Infinitely Repeated, Allowing for Risk of Breakdown

Although in practice, no single bargaining situation continues on infinitely, allowing for the possibility provides insight into the potential agreements made in the newsmaking process. If either player knows that if an offer is continually rejected, a counter offer will continually be made, there is a strong incentive to come to an agreement quickly. The risk of breakdown in negotiations is also worth investigating as it is common to numerous bargaining situations. Breakdown occurs for reasons as varied as evidence of no possible resolution, concern for time constraints, and fatigue (Muthoo 1999). In this model, I allow for the possibility of breakdown by incorporating an exogenous probability that negotiations will end. If either party knows that negotiations could end at any time it should insure agreement will be made quickly and likely at a higher cost to the politician. In this model, negotiations breaking down could reflect the journalist’s editor demanding a story now or a politician needing to involve him or herself in
other pressing matters. Both actors have time constraints which can be modeled through use of
the breakdown probability.

The fact that negotiations are modeled on an extended time horizon provides an envi-
ronment to understand how investigative journalism may operate. Investigative journalists are
given more time and resources than traditional journalists to delve deeper into a topic and un-
cover novel and compelling information. Large national news outlets like the Washington Post
and the New York Times continue to maintain strong investigative journalism teams in the
face of drastic cuts at regional and local news outlets (Waldman 2011). In addition, non-profit
news organizations, specifically ProPublica.org, have stepped up to help fill the quickly vanishing
investigative reporting hole.

5.1 Structure and Players

In this infinitely repeated version, I take into account the probability of negotiations failing and
how much each player values the future. In the case that negotiations fail, each player receives
the payoff he or she would attain if no agreement is made and the journalist’s version is reported.

5.2 Results

Proposition 3 A subgame perfect equilibrium exists where the politician’s offer takes into ac-
count the discounted revenue between the two story versions, the possibility of the journalist’s
counter-offer, and the probability of negotiations breaking down, the journalist accepts the politi-
cian’s initial offer and reports the politician’s version.

Proof: See Appendix

Once again, an agreement is made immediately between both actors and the politician is
able to control the news content. However, this control comes at a larger price to the politician
than in the finite horizon case. This agreement may only be struck when the politician cares
greatly about approval and strongly prefers to have a hand in a news story’s creation.
To provide a sense of the equilibrium offer, consider the comparative statics on the probability of negotiations breaking down and how much the journalist values the future. If there is no chance of the negotiations breaking down, the journalist is better off than in the finite case. Allowing for negotiations to continue indefinitely provides more gain for the journalist as the politician must consider a perpetual series of disagreements in creating the news product. Further, as either the probability of breakdown increases and/or the journalist becomes increasing patient, the politician must increase his or her equilibrium offer. In the case of a high probability of breakdown, the politician must stem against the reporting of the journalist’s version if he or she cares about approval. Therefore, the imperative to come to an immediate agreement is greater. Relatedly, if the journalist can afford to engage in long-run negotiations with the politician over story content, the politician will need to provide a larger offer to receive story control. The journalist is always better off in this model of negotiating the news product than the finite examples seen before.

In both of these cases, the politician must hedge against either a story needing to be written immediately (negotiations breaking down) or a journalist with a long lead-time on a story (a large discount factor). These are two ends of the spectrum in the newsmaking process. In the model, the journalist has no control over when negotiations breakdown and thus is equally beholden to the exogenous event as the politician. One can conceive of this situation as an editor demanding a story immediately and thus the journalist will write his or her version if an agreement has not been met. Alternatively, if a journalist has a long-term deadline, he or she may not be willing to give into the preferences of the politician so reticently. Most journalists do not enjoy a luxury of a long lead-time on stories. However, investigative journalists do often have such freedom and thus should be able to extract more information and access from politicians than beat reporters.
6 Extension: Multiple Journalists

Thus far, I have considered a single journalist interacting with a politician. In some cases, such as local news outlets reporting on their local member of Congress, this structure is appropriate. Journalists, though, typically work in information environments with multiple news outlets. In these environments there are incentives for individual journalists to compete with other journalists and get the first scope. However, research has shown that reporters are more likely to work in packs than as lone wolves (Bennett 2007, Cook 1998, Crouse 1973, Gans 1979, Graber 2005, Tuchman 1978). ‘Pack journalism’ exists to reduce investigation and reporting costs and as a means for editors to check the accuracy of their reporters’ stories (Hamilton 2004, McManus 1994). Recently, competing local television stations have been collaborating to create stories in order to reduce newsgathering and reporting costs (Waldman 2011). Therefore, there is a need to consider to a multiple journalist environment.4

Besley and Prat (2006) and Fogarty (2009) examine equilibria when governments and legislators are interacting with multiple news outlets. Both show that under an ultimatum bargaining agreement, the government can make each outlet prefer to not report negative findings with the right incentives. The results also suggest that the ability for voters to hold the government accountable increases with the number of outlets within a media market. Further, the ability of a government to capture the media decreases as the cost increases; or, as the number of outlets to be made offers increases. This extension first establishes equilibria for an ultimatum bargaining environment and then allows each outlet the opportunity to offer a counter proposal. These results improve on past formal models of the media (e.g., Besley and Prat (2006)) by pointing out that it is not simply the number of news outlets that matters for political accountability, but also the quality of the information that is being presented.
6.1 One-Sided Offer

6.1.1 Structure and Players

Let \( n \) represent the number of journalists reporting on a politician, where each journalist is equal in resources and thus equal in revenue and costs. Each journalist’s revenue is decreased based on the number of journalists reporting the same story, but the costs for attaining information on the politician also decreases.

The politician can make an offer to each journalist in order to attain his or her preferred version of the story. Therefore, the total cost for the politician of attaining his or her preferred version may extend to the sum of all the offers to the journalists. I assume that the politician loses approval from each journalist reporting his or her own version.

The sequence to this newsmaking game is identical to section 3 except with multiple journalists.

6.1.2 Results

The first proposition considers the case where the politician wants complete, blanket coverage from the media.

**Proposition 4** If the number of journalists covering the politician is below a certain threshold, the politician offers the difference in revenue between the two story versions to each journalist, all journalists accept the politician’s offer and report the politician’s version.

*Proof:* See Appendix.

The next proposition considers when a politician would only want a simple majority of the news outlets \( \frac{n+1}{2} \) to report his or her version. This may be a more realistic assumption for politicians. Politicians surely would like all the coverage they receive to be positive, but such a goal is often unrealistic. Instead, the politician prefers that on average the coverage they receive is positive.
Proposition 5  If the number of journalists covering the politician is below a certain threshold, the politician offers the difference in revenue between the two story versions to a simple majority of the journalists, all journalists who receive an offer accept the offer and report the politician's version. All other journalists report their own version.

Proof: See Appendix.

Both of these results show that as the number of news outlets increases the politician is less willing to engage in negotiation with the media; paralleling the findings of Besley and Prat (2006) and Fogarty (2009). When the politician refuses to negotiate with the media, each journalist will report his or her version and the politician subsequent loses approval. Again, if the politician cares little about approval, then losing approval does not matter. When politicians and governments are not successful in controlling the media message, we may expect citizens to be better off as the information may be less political biased. Yet, it is not simply more news outlets create a more informed citizenry. Those outlets need to be engaged in quality reporting for the readers to benefit from a multitude of news sources (Waldman 2011).

Clearly, it is easier for the politician to receive a simple majority of preferred coverage than to receive blanket coverage. In most democracies with a free media, attaining positive coverage from a majority of news outlets is tactically preferred by the government and politicians. This is particularly the case with the expansion of online news sources. In authoritarian regimes it is often necessary to manage the message in all news outlets, which can be expensive. Many governments, whether authoritarian or not, manage control over the media by simply having state-owned and operated media. In these informational environments, the strategic incentives and costs may be different than those purposed in this paper.
6.2 Finitely Repeated Offer

6.2.1 Structure and Players

Having established equilibria under a one-sided offer, this section considers results when each outlet has the opportunity to offer a counter-proposal. As in section 4, I limit the game to 2 periods; though the results generalize to a \( n \)-period model. I again take into account how much the players’ value the future. I make the simplifying assumption that each journalist discounts the future the same.\(^5\)

The structure and sequence to this newsmaking game is identical to the one-sided offer game except now journalists have the opportunity to make a counter offer.

6.2.2 Results

Again, I consider equilibria first under complete, blanket coverage and then under simple majority coverage.

**Proposition 6** If the number journalists covering the politician is below a certain threshold, the politician’s offer takes into account the discounted revenue between the two story versions and the possibility of the journalists’ counter-offers, all journalists accept the politician’s offer and report the politician’s version.

*Proof:* See Appendix.

**Proposition 7** If the number of journalists covering the politician is below a certain threshold, the politician’s offer takes into account the discounted difference in revenue between the two story versions and the possibility of the journalists’ counter-offers to a simple majority of the journalists, all journalists who receive an offer accept the offer and report the politician’s version. All other journalists report their own version.

*Proof:* See Appendix.
In both of these results, the politician’s offer is the same as in proposition 2; the offer must be equal to what a journalist would receive if he or she were the only one reporting. The interesting element, then, is the condition of the number of news outlets needed for the politician to want to negotiate. As in the one-sided offer, it is easier to attain a simple majority of preferred coverage than blanket coverage. If all the journalists are impatient and the politician cares about approval, it does not matter how many outlets are seeking coverage of the politician; the politician will deal with all comers. Likewise, as the journalists become increasingly patient and it becomes increasingly expensive for the politician to control the stories, he or she is less willing to negotiate with the media. Therefore, it is possible for a large number of news outlets to negate the control of the government over news content.

The key element to who controls the story content with multiple journalists is how patient the journalists are in making deals. With a one-sided offer, the result simply hinges on the number of news outlets present in a market. When the journalists are able to make a counter-offer, the politician must consider how the news outlets value the future in addition to the number of outlets. As noted previously, most journalists have short lead times, thus maybe impatient, allowing for politicians and governments the ability to maintain leverage over the news media. This suggests investigative reporters in dense media environments may be able to extract more and higher quality information and access from politicians.

7 Conclusion

It would be preferential if researchers could easily observe how negotiations are made between the news media and the government when producing the political news product. This would provide an extensive understanding of the creation of the final news product viewed by citizens. Since we do not have that luxury, we have thus far relied on anecdotes and case studies of the interactions between journalists and politicians. These are undoubtedly useful for understanding the news process for specific elections, certain policies, and specific politicians. However, a richer
understanding of the negotiation of newsworthiness demands a more rigorous treatment. The models in this paper treat the news media as a strategic political actor who seeks to gain information and access from the politician in exchange for story control.

The simple yet tractable models provide unique insight into the process of political news creation across a series of different information environments. In particularly, the formal results suggest when and where we should expect to observe accountability reporting and watchdog journalism. By allowing journalists to make counter-offers and providing a long lead time for reporting, news quality should be more informative and valuable. Politicians and governments may still be able to control or manipulate the news product, but it becomes increasingly difficult in environments containing multiple news outlets with resources. In a media climate of newspapers closing, ad revenues shrinking, and media consolidation, costly investigative reporting falls by the wayside. Columnists and observers have lamented the deleterious effects for the citizenry caused by dwindling investigative reporting units (Bennett 2007, Waldman 2011, Zaller 2003). This paper presents a formal argument for the need of investigative journalism within democracies.

The results suggest foremost for politicians that they should not hide from the media, but seek to actively engage them. Through engagement, politicians can provide the source information and have a hand in what is reported to their constituents and the general public at large. We empirically observe journalists writing stories, but they must rely on politicians and others in government to provide the content (Cook 1998). If politicians choose not to interact with the media, the media will turn to other sources who may provide information not in the best interest of the politician. This may seem obvious, but there is evidence that certain political environments, such as scandals, are conducive to low information exchange. For example, Bianco (1994) finds that members of Congress who remained silent on the check kiting scandal of 1992 were electorally better off than members who offered explanations. However, as thoroughly discussed by Bennett (2007), most politicians and officials in most cases are well-served by
working with the media.

All the models in this paper provide conditions under which politicians can control the news flow and attain preferential treatment. Some see this as a devil’s bargain for journalists - attaining access and source material while giving up content control (Fallows 1997). However, the loser in this newsmaking environment may be citizens. Bargaining over news content appears in certain conditions to hurt the role of the political press to act as a fourth branch of government, providing both information to citizens and checking the transgressions of government. If the news media fail to accurately represent policy choices in their reporting, they do a disservice to citizens in a democracy. Yet, that is the tradeoff for the insider information in the first place.

We trust the political press to negotiate for content without becoming a mere mouthpiece of the government. The question, then, is it better to have potentially compromised reporters gaining insider access or have truly independent journalists who only observe the political arena from the outside?

While the empirical implications of the formal results are numerous, it is less clear how one would go about operationalizing and empirically testing the results. A possible direction is using the strategic interaction statistical modeling techniques developed by Curtis Signorino (Signorino 1999, Signorino 2002, Ramsay & Signorino 2009). Signorino (1999, 2002) illustrates how to empirically model strategic international interactions, specifically whether countries go to war - an easily observable dependent variable. Ramsay and Signorino (2009) take a similar approach to empirically model experimental ultimatum bargaining games. Here, again, the outcomes, or dependent variables, are unequivocally known. The central problem for empirically testing the negotiation of newsworthiness is measuring the outcomes - the stories. Unlike countries going to war or experimental subjects striking a deal, it is not clear how to categorize the bargaining outcomes in stories. For example, how would a researcher know in the aggregate whether a story is mostly a politician’s version or journalist’s version of events? The difficulty in testing the negotiation of newsworthiness is the latent properties of the bargaining mechanism.
However, two empirical strategies hold some promise. First is a return to case study analysis, but applied in a much broader context. For example, the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism released a 2010 report titled “How News Happens” where the researchers examined coverage in all Baltimore news outlets for a one week period. Due the exquisite detail in their analysis, the researchers were able to establish which actors (e.g., government, citizens, press) triggered the news coverage on certain topics. This type of analysis provides unique insight into the production of the news and thus the bargaining that occurs in the final news product. However, questions abound over the generalizability of the findings and the costs associated with expanding this type of analysis to other cities are prohibitive. A second approach is to study how different levels of the news media cover a topic where the ‘truth’ is known or becomes know later on. For example, a study could examine and compare how local and national newspapers covered the rationale for war in Iraq. Though weapons of mass destruction were never found, and thus the rationale for war was based on false information, the American media generally presented the Bush administration with little questioning. The theoretical work in this paper suggests we should find a different news product on the lead up to the Iraq war between varying levels and types of news outlets, particularly as the war continued on. However, this approach presents only a proxy for empirically observing the negotiation of newsworthiness.
8 Appendix: Formal Models

8.1 Baseline Model

8.1.1 Structure and Players

The baseline game is composed of two players: a politician ($P$) with a constituency and a journalist ($J$) who have complete and perfect information about utilities and game play. The politician receives $w > 0$ for a given action in office and receives $a_i \geq 0$ from approval by the constituency. $a_i$ is determined by the journalist’s report to the constituency on the action where $i \in \{p, j\}$ and $p$ equals the politician’s version and $j$ equals the journalist’s version. For the politician, $a_p > a_j$. Politicians value approval from their constituencies at varying levels depending on a variety of factors. To capture this effect, a weight of $\gamma \geq 0$ is placed on $a_i$. The politician can make an offer $b \geq 0$ to the journalist for reporting his or her version of the story. If the journalist rejects the offer, then the journalist reports his or her version of the story. Hence, the politician’s utility function is defined as: $U_P = w + \gamma a_i - b$.

The journalist incurs a cost of $k > 0$ for attaining the information about the politician and receives revenue $r_i \geq 0$ from reporting on the politician. I assume that $r_i > k$ in order for the journalist to engage in the game. The journalist writes a story $s_i$ which is either the politician’s version $s_p$ or the journalist’s version $s_j$. If the journalist reports the politician’s version of the story he or she receives $r_p$ or the journalist receives $r_j$ from his or her version, where $r_j > r_p$. If the journalist accepts the offer from the politician, then he or she reports $s_p$ and receives $r_p$. If the journalist rejects the offer, then $J$ reports $s_j$ and receives $r_j$. The journalist’s utility is then: $U_J = r_i + b - k$.

8.1.2 Proposition 1

A subgame perfect equilibrium exists where $b^* = r_j - r_p$, the journalist accepts the politician’s offer and reports $s_p$.
8.1.3 Proof of Proposition 1

In order for the journalist to accept the politician’s offer and report $s_p$, he or she must be at least indifferent between reporting $s_p$ and $s_j$. Thus, $r_p + b - k = r_j - k$ and solving for $b$ yields $b^* = r_j - r_p$, the SPE offer. Likewise, for the politician to offer $b^*$, he or she must be at least indifferent between making the offer and not. Or, $w + \gamma a_p - b \geq w + \gamma a_j$ and solving for $b$ yields $b^* \leq \gamma(a_p - a_j)$.■

8.2 Alternating Offers Model: Finitely Repeated

8.2.1 Structure and Players

The politician can make an offer to the journalist $b_i$, which if the journalist rejects, the journalist offers his or her own $b_i$, where $i \in \{p,j\}$. Let $\delta_i \in (0,1)$ be each player’s discount factor, where $i \in \{p,j\}$, as a representation of the valuation of the future. Allowing for each player to offer their own $b$ slightly alters the utility functions to: $U_P = w + \gamma a_i - b_i$ and $U_J = r_i + b_i - k$.

8.2.2 Proposition 2

A subgame perfect equilibrium exists where $b^*_p = \delta_j(r_p + \gamma(a_p - a_j) - k) - r_p + k$, the journalist accepts the politician’s offer and report $s_p$.

8.2.3 Proof of Proposition 2

For the journalist to accept the politician’s offer and report $s_p$, he or she must be at least indifferent between reporting $s_p$ and $s_j$. Hence, $r_p + b_p - k = \delta_j(r_p + b_j - k)$ and solving for $b_p$ yields $b^*_p = \delta_j(r_p + b_j - k) - r_p + k$. It must also be the case for the journalist that he or she prefers to make a counter-offer to simply reporting $s_j$ and receiving $r_j - k$. Hence, $b_j \geq r_j - r_p$. For the journalist’s counter offer, he or she must make the politician at least indifferent between accepting and rejecting in the final round. Therefore, $\delta_p(w + \gamma a_p - b_j) = \delta_p(w + \gamma a_j)$ and solving for $b_j$
yields $b^*_j = \gamma(a_p - a_j)$, which also must be less than or equal to $r_j - r_p$. Substituting $b^*_j$ back into the equilibrium offer $b^*_p$, the politician actually makes the offer $b^*_p = \delta_j(r_p + \gamma(a_p - a_j) - k) - r_p + k$.

For the politician to offer $b^*_p$, he or she must be at least indifferent between making the offer and not. Or, $w + \gamma a_p - b_p \geq w + \gamma a_j$ and solving for $b_p$ yields $b^*_p \leq \gamma(a_p - a_j)$.

8.3 Alternating Offers Model: Infinitely Repeated

8.3.1 Structure and Players

In this infinitely repeated version of the bargaining game, let $\alpha \in [0, 1]$ represent the probability that negotiations end after any offer is rejected. Let $\delta_i \in (0, 1)$ be each player’s discount factor, where $i \in \{p, j\}$, as a representation of the valuation of the future. In the case that negotiations end, each player receives the payoff he or she would attain if no agreement is made and $s_j$ is reported, namely $U_P = w + \gamma a_j$ and $U_J = r_j - k$. Incorporating the risk of breakdown into the expected utilities of both players, we have: $EU_P = \alpha(w + \gamma a_j) + (1 - \alpha)(w + \gamma a_i - b_i)$ and $EU_J = \alpha(r_j - k) + (1 - \alpha)(r_i + b_i - k)$.

8.3.2 Proposition 3

A subgame perfect equilibrium exists where $b^*_p = \frac{\delta_j \left[ \alpha(r_j - k) + (1 - \alpha)(r_p + b_j - k) \right]}{(1 - \alpha)(1 - \delta_j)} - \frac{\alpha r_j - k}{1 - \alpha} - r_p$, the journalist accepts the politician’s initial offer and reports $s_p$.

8.3.3 Proof of Proposition 3

For the journalist to accept the politician’s offer, he or she must be indifferent between accepting and rejecting, taking into account the risk of breakdown. Thus, $\alpha(r_j - k) + (1 - \alpha)(r_p + b_p - k) = \frac{\delta_j \left[ \alpha(r_j - k) + (1 - \alpha)(r_p + b_j - k) \right]}{1 - \delta_j}$ and solving for $b_p$ yields $\frac{\delta_j \left[ \alpha(r_j - k) + (1 - \alpha)(r_p + b_j - k) \right]}{(1 - \alpha)(1 - \delta_j)} - \frac{\alpha r_j - k}{1 - \alpha} - r_p$. Similar to the proof in proposition 2, we can solve for the journalist’s counter offer in equilibrium. The politician’s expected utility is $\alpha(w + \gamma a_j) + (1 - \alpha)(w + \gamma a_p - b_j)$ for accepting the counter and $\frac{\delta_j^2 \left[ \alpha(w + \gamma a_j) + (1 - \alpha)(w + \gamma a_p - b_j) \right]}{1 - \delta_p}$ for rejecting. Setting the two values equal and solving for $b_j$
yields \( b_j^* = w + \gamma a_p + \frac{\alpha(w + \gamma a_j)}{1 - \alpha} - \frac{\delta_p}{1 - \alpha}\left[\frac{\alpha(w + \gamma a_j) + (1 - \alpha)(w + \gamma a_p - b_p)}{(1 - \alpha)(1 - \delta_p)}\right] \). In order to maintain some aesthetic parsimony, I refrain from substituting \( b_j^* \) back into \( b_p^* \) in the statement of the proposition.

For the politician to make an initial offer and play the equilibrium strategy, it must be that \( \alpha(w + \gamma a_j) + (1 - \alpha)(w + \gamma a_p - b_p) \geq w + \gamma a_j \). Or that, \( b_p^* \leq w + \gamma a_p - \frac{w - \gamma a_j - \alpha(w + \gamma a_j)}{1 - \alpha} \).

For comparative statics, there are a number of possible cases to examine. Any numeric example, i.e. placing specific values on \( \alpha \) and \( \delta_j \), will show that as \( \alpha \to 1 \) and \( \delta_j \to 1 \), \( b_p^* \) will increase.

\[8.4\text{ Multiple Journalists: One-Sided Offer}\]

\[8.4.1\text{ Structure and Players}\]

Let \( n \) represent the number of journalists reporting on a politician, where each journalist is equal in resources and thus equal in revenue and costs. Each journalist’s revenue is decreased from \( r_j \) to \( \frac{r_j}{\hat{n}} \) for \( s_j \), where \( \hat{n} \) are the number of journalists reporting \( s_j \). Likewise, the revenue for reporting \( s_p \) for each journalist is reduced from \( r_p \) to \( \frac{r_p}{\tilde{n}} \), where \( \tilde{n} \) are the number of journalists reporting \( s_p \). Information attainment costs are also reduced from \( k \) to \( \frac{k}{\tilde{n}} \).

The politician can make an offer \( b \) to each journalist in order to attain his or her preferred version of the story. Therefore, the total cost for the politician of attaining his or her preferred version may extend to \(-\sum_{i \in \hat{n}} b_i\). I assume that the politician loses approval from each journalist reporting \( s_j \).

The first proposition considers the case where the politician wants blanket coverage from the media; all journalists reporting \( s_p \).

\[8.4.2\text{ Proposition 4}\]

If \( n \leq \frac{\gamma(a_p - a_j)}{r_j - r_p} \), a subgame perfect equilibrium exists where \( b^* = r_j - r_p \), all journalists accept the politician’s offer and report \( s_p \).
8.4.3 Proof of Proposition 4

This proof is similar to the proof of proposition 1. Even though there are multiple journalists, in equilibrium the politician must make an offer to the journalist as if he or she was the only one reporting; that offer is \( b^* = r_j - r_p \). For the politician to receive blanket coverage, he or she must offer \( b^* \) to \( n \) journalists; here, \( \hat{n} = n \). The politician’s consideration for playing the equilibrium strategy is now \( n(r_j - r_p) \leq \gamma(a_p - a_j) \), and solving for \( n \) yields \( n \leq \frac{\gamma(a_p - a_j)}{r_j - r_p} \). ■

The next proposition considers when a politician wants a simple majority of the news outlets \((\frac{n+1}{2})\) to report \( s_p \).

8.4.4 Proposition 5

If \( n \leq \frac{2\gamma(a_p - a_j)}{r_j - r_p} - 1 \), a subgame perfect equilibrium exists where \( b^* = r_j - r_p \), all journalists who receive an offer accept the politician’s offer and report \( s_p \). All other journalists report \( s_j \).

8.4.5 Proof of Proposition 5

To receive a simple majority of coverage, the politician must offer \( b^* = r_j - r_p \) to \( \frac{n+1}{2} \) journalists. Similar to the proof of proposition 4, for the politician to play the equilibrium strategy \( n \leq \frac{2\gamma(a_p - a_j)}{r_j - r_p} - 1 \). If a journalist receives \( b^* \), he or she is indifferent between reporting \( s_j \) and \( s_p \) and thus reports \( s_p \). Since \( r_j > r_p \), all other journalists report \( s_j \). ■

8.5 Multiple Journalists: Finitely Repeated

8.5.1 Structure and Players

Let \( \delta_i \in (0, 1) \) be each player’s discount factor, where \( i \in \{p, j\} \), as a representation of the valuation of the future. I make the simplifying assumption that each journalist has the same discount factor.

Again, I consider equilibria first under blanket coverage and then under simple majority coverage.
8.5.2 Proposition 6

If \( n \leq \frac{\gamma(a_p-a_j)}{\delta_j(r_p+\gamma(a_p-a_j)-k)-r_p+k} \), a subgame perfect equilibrium exists where \( b_p^* = \delta_j(r_p+\gamma(a_p-a_j)-k)-r_p+k \), all journalists accept the politician’s offer and report \( s_p \).

8.5.3 Proof of Proposition 6

This proof is similar to the proof of propositions 2 and 4. Again, the offer in equilibrium must be equal to what the journalist would receive if he or she was the only one reporting. As established in proposition 2, the offer is \( b_p^* = \delta_j(r_p+\gamma(a_p-a_j)-k)-r_p+k \). The politician must make this offer to all the journalists in equilibrium. Therefore, the politician’s problem is \( n(\delta_j(r_p+\gamma(a_p-a_j)-k)-r_p+k) \leq \gamma(a_p-a_j)-k \), and solving for \( n \) yields \( n \leq \frac{\gamma(a_p-a_j)}{\delta_j(r_p+\gamma(a_p-a_j)-k)-r_p+k} \).

\[ \blacksquare \]

8.5.4 Proposition 7

If \( n \leq \frac{2\gamma(a_p-a_j)}{\delta_j(r_p+\gamma(a_p-a_j)-k)-r_p+k} - 1 \), a subgame perfect equilibrium exists where \( b_p^* = \delta_j(r_p+\gamma(a_p-a_j)-k)-r_p+k \), all journalists who receive an offer accept the politician’s offer and report \( s_p \). All other journalists report \( s_j \).

8.5.5 Proof of Proposition 7

To receive a simple majority of coverage, the politician must offer \( b_p^* = \delta_j(r_p+\gamma(a_p-a_j)-k)-r_p+k \) to \( \frac{n+1}{2} \) journalists. Similar to the proof of proposition 6, for the politician to play the equilibrium strategy \( n \leq \frac{2\gamma(a_p-a_j)}{\delta_j(r_p+\gamma(a_p-a_j)-k)-r_p+k} - 1 \). If a journalist receives \( b^* \), he or she is indifferent between reporting \( s_j \) and \( s_p \) and thus reports \( s_p \). Since \( r_j > r_p \), all other journalists report \( s_j \).

\[ \blacksquare \]
Notes

1Formal details of all models are in the appendix.

2One extension is to consider the interaction between ideologically-motivated journalists and politicians, and how that changes bargaining and news production.

3An interesting twist would be to model the relationship between journalists and editors in the newsmaking process. See Bovitz et al. (2002) for a version of this interaction.

4An alternative take on this information environment is when multiple sources are competing to get the journalist to write their version. When sources compete, journalists should be able to extract more benefits from the sources (e.g., politicians) and possibly reduce reporting costs. Due to the norms of balanced and objective reporting, journalists could report each politician’s preferred side without taking an adversarial stance towards any sources. This approach would insulate the journalist from any charges of bias.

5This assumption has some natural analogs to any group of reporters serving similar news outlets, such as the White House press pool or congressional reporters filing for the evening newscast. A possible extension would be to vary the discount factor for different types of journalists; for instance, having television reporters discount the future differently than newspaper reporters.
References


