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Bachelor's thesis

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Political communication based on the presidential election debates in U.S.

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Introduction

Digitalization in the 1980s caused steep changes in political communication and in the horizontal and vertical dimensions of political media-environment: horizontally, political journalism has become more complex, and vertically, new media has decentralized the process of political communication (Brown 2011:59). According to McQuail (2010:526), the rise of ‘media logic’ has led to an increase in watching television instead of participating in politics, a decrease of voters trust due to political marketing, negativity in campaigning and its reporting, and the loss of parties own channels of communication which make them more dependent on media channels. Considering all these trends, political events and political communication can be linked to the ‘media logic’ and the results of their correlation can be found.

In terms of the current thesis, the focus lies in the correlation between communicated messages and ‘media logic’, which are researched based on politics communicated in U.S. presidential election debates, in 2012. Televised debates can have an agenda-setting effect and alter perceptions of the candidates’ personality while also affecting voting preferences. The debate-component of U.S. presidential election campaign got introduced to the most Americans in 1960, when heated debate between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon created a phenomenon of test of competence and persuasiveness (McQuail 2010:526). From that on, several scholars and academics have studied the perception of candidates and the messages they communicate, and also the way these messages are mediated in media.

Meanwhile, political communication and campaign communication have adapted to the media’s values and the logic of presenting political matters (Patterson 1993:5 referenced in Brants *et al* 2001:2). According to Patterson (1993:5 referenced in Brants *et al* 2001:2), a consequence of this can be seen in election campaigns and also in political communication in general: they have become “*more candidate-centred, image-driven, polarized and spectacular, and less organized around issues and ideologies*”.

Considering this knowledge, the research question for the thesis tries to find out, how politics is communicated in terms of media coverage of U.S. presidential debates in

2012. The importance of this research question stands in the effects that media has on democracy. As a mediator, media may have an influence on voters and therefore affect democracy, while framing the political messages and the image of candidates. In order to answer the research question, the content of debates and the performance of the presidential candidates communicating their messages during the debates will be found out. Therefore, coverage of the performance of the debates will be measured by the quantity of phrases describing the candidates' emotional attributes, their identity or image, and the coverage of the content will be measured by the quantity describing topics of the discussion, candidates' views and policies. However, the thesis suggests that media coverage have more emphasis on the performance of the candidates, compared to the content of the debates and issues discussed.

In order to find out the answer to the main research question, first, the theoretical part of the thesis will be set down, by defining the concept of political communication and the theory of media effect. In addition, an overview of U.S. presidential elections will be provided and some authors will be brought out, who have researched the topic of presidential debates before. Then, the empirical part of the thesis will be set down by introducing the U.S. presidential debates in 2012 and describing the methodology of the research, process of analysis and data used in the analysis. Then, the results of the research will be explained. In the end, conclusions will be made.

According to the hypothesis for this thesis, performance of presidential debates is covered more in media than the content of the presidential debates. The thesis suggests that media coverage includes describing the body language of the candidates and emotional attributes of debates more than it describes the content of the debates. As it was said before, this kind of media coverage might influence the voters, increase the importance of emotional attributes of the debates and form the voting results according to the candidates' performance, not messages. However, finding the correlation between the media coverage and voters' choices is a material for a further research and is not included in this thesis due to limited length of bachelor's thesis.

1. Theoretical background

In order to understand the topic of this thesis, it is necessary to define some of the most important concepts and theories used. This chapter defines the concept of political communication and theory of media effect, and also provides an overview of presidential elections in general. Finally, some previous researches on U.S. presidential debates will be introduced.

1.1. *Concept of political communication*

In order to analyze the media coverage of presidential debates, it is important to understand different ways of communicating political messages and the concept of political communication.

According to academic and sociologist of media Brian McNair (2007:3), the definition of political communication is not only a written statement, but also “*a visual mean of signification, such as dress, make-up, hairstyle and logo design, i.e. all those elements of communication which might be said to constitute a political ‘image’ or identity*”. He emphasises the idea of scholars of political communication, Robert E. Denton and Gary C. Woodward (1990:11 referenced in McNair1995:4), that the concept is about the intentions of its sender to influence the political environment - therefore communication is ‘political’ not because of the source of a message but because of its content and purpose.

Hence, according to McNair (2007:4), political communication is intentional and purposeful. He stresses that political communication includes: “*communication undertaken by politicians and other political actors for the purpose of achieving specific objectives*”; “*communication addressed to these actors by non-politicians such as voters and newspaper columnists*”; “*communication about these actors and their activities, as contained in news reports, editorials, and other forms of media discussion of politics*”.

One of the most influential scholars in the field of mass communication and political communication studies, Denis McQuail (2010:524), has characterized three main forms of political communication: *“first, there are periodic campaigns for election in which the media are used intensively by competing candidates and parties”*; *“secondly, there is the continuous flow of news which carries messages about events that reflect positively or negatively on governments and other actors in the political arena”*; *“thirdly, there are, in varying degrees, opportunities for political advertising by the same actors, independent of elections”*.

However, according to an American-born theorist of communication and media, Jay G. Blumer (2011:ix), the scholarship has not always characterized political communication fairly, since it is *“an exceptionally rich, complex, fluid and important sub-field among those that populate the overall field of communication studies”*. According to him, it is not correct to focus on isolated particulars of the concept, but it is also wrong to define it too comprehensively as a grand-theory. He suggests, that the concept of political communication should be viewed in two dimensions: a horizontal dimension, where political institutions and media institutions face each other, and vertical dimension, where political and media elites link with audience members and citizens (Blumer 2011:x). He explains the importance of viewing political communication by understanding the ties and influence between different parties: in horizontal dimension political actors adapt media demands and logics, and in vertical dimension the audience takes the role of the communicator.

1.2. Theory of media effect

In addition to the role that political actors play in crafting messages, the media itself is said to have a pro-active effect as well. Here is a selection of media effects connected to the topic of this thesis.

One of the main political scientist and theorist of communication defining the effect of media and mass communication, Harold Lasswell, brought out in his article *“The*

structure and function of communication society” that communication process attempts to answer the question of “**who says what to whom, through what channel and with what effect?**” (1948, referenced in McQuail 2010:70). Therefore, the effect of media consists of the influence on the message, which is communicated from the source through the channel to the recipient. In this way, Lasswell’s theory is about the influence and opinion change, while including main components: source, message, channel, receiver and the impact. Considering this, we can adopt this model to the presidential debates and say that the debating presidential candidate is the source, his political statements and performance are messages, the TV is the channel, and the voter is the receiver of the message. In case of this thesis, there is another actor in this chain – the media coverage – acting as a ‘mediator’. This mediator can significantly impact the path of the message from the source to the receiver while shaping and changing it. In the end, the mediator can influence the receiver and in case of the debates, it may shape the voting results. However, one must keep in mind that voters are also influenced by other factors, besides election debates or media coverage. Moreover, even the ‘media coverage’ influencing the voters is much more than only the coverage of presidential debates – it is everything concerning the presidential election cycle, which starts over a year before the actual election day, and includes press conferences, press events and press releases that are issued every day.

Additionally to Lasswell’s theory, McQuail stresses (2010:512) media’s role in agenda-setting. The concept of ‘**agenda-setting**’ was first introduced by researchers Max McCombs and Donald Shaw – according to the idea of this term, “*news media indicate to the public what the main issues of the day are and this is reflected in what the public perceives as the main issues*” (1972, 1993 referenced in McQuail 2010:512). This kind of correlation was found based on the evidence proving the importance that issues had in media, and the significance that these issues had amongst politicians and public.

Moreover, there are two other media effects similar to the agenda-setting that are stated as **news framing** and **media priming effect**. According to the researcher Mark McDonald (2004:193), “*research in news framing is concerned with how issues are presented in the news – which details are important, which are trivialized or peripheral*”. According to this, emphasizing certain aspects of issues has an impact on how public opinion is formed. Another concept – media priming – has its roots in

cognitive psychology while suggesting that people can be ‘primed’ to make certain choices based on the repeated presentations in media (McDonald 2004:193).

All previously mentioned media effects are reflected in researcher Thomas Patterson’s idea of ‘**game elements**’. He conducted a content analysis of the news media’s coverage of presidential campaign in 1976 and found that ‘the game’, including **non-substantial issues** like winning, loosing etc, was more frequently the topic of media coverage than **substantial issues**, as policies etc. (Patterson 1980 referenced in Burgoon, 1982:609). “*A Handbook of Election News Coverage Around the World*”, edited by Jesper Strömbäck and Lynda Lee Kaid., emphasises two frames in this theory: “issue frame” and “game frame” (Kaid *et al* 2008:211). According to Strömbäck *et al* (2008:211), “*issue frame is a media focus on substantial issues like the economy, on ideology, and on candidates’ positions on the issues*”, and a ‘game frame’ portrays issues as ‘games’, referring to the structure of political campaigns, or ‘horse races’, referring to the competition between the candidates.

Since the goal of this thesis is to find out, how politics is communicated in terms of media coverage of presidential debates, Patterson’s concepts will be applied and formed in order to be suitable for the analysis.

However, the **criticism towards media effects** states that persuasiveness and influence of media’s agenda-setting, framing, priming and ‘game’ effect depends highly on audience’s involvement. Based on Chaffee and Roser (1986, referenced in McQuail 2010:469) “*high involvement is also likely to be a necessary condition for consistency of effects, and thus for a stable and enduring influence*”. Therefore, the media coverage alone will not have an effect, if there is no audience reading it, viewing it, and taking it into account. That, in fact, is a reason why media’s effect on voters cannot always be precisely measured, since voters’ preferences largely depend on other factors too, such as influence from the family, friends and colleagues, personal preferences, personal experiences regarding the party or candidate etc.

1.3. U. S. presidential elections

As the topic of this thesis concerns the presidential debates, a brief overview of U.S. presidential elections will be provided in order to explain the election system, which includes the debates as one of the formal attributes of election.

The President (and the Vice president) of the United States of America is chosen every four years. The process of selecting the President of the United States is defined in the Constitution and according to it, the election of the President is left to electors chosen by the states and the final authority for selecting the President is up to the Electoral College, which includes electors from each state equal in number to the state's total representation in the House and Senate (Cantor *et al*, 2000:2).

The process of Presidential elections includes four stages: “(1) *the prenomination phase, where candidates compete in state primary elections and caucuses for delegates to the national party conventions*; (2) *the national conventions – held in the summer of the election year – in which the two major parties nominate candidates for President and Vice President and ratify a platform of the parties’ policy positions and goals*; (3) *the general election campaign, in which the major party nominees, as well as any minor party or independent contenders, compete for votes from the entire electorate, culminating in the popular vote on election day in November*; and (4) *the electoral college phase, in which the President (and Vice President) are officially elected*” (Cantor *et al*, 2000:2).

There are many aspects different in U.S. presidential elections today compared to the elections held at the end of last century. These differences include wider participation of voters in choosing the party nominees (and increased role of party voters in the states); the increased role of electronic media and Internet, in communicating the information to the voters and shaping the perception and direction of campaigns; and, the financing of presidential campaigns is more regulated (Cantor *et al*, 2000:2). The financing of presidential campaigns is today organized according to a system of public funding in the prenomination, convention, and general election phases, “*enacted in the 1970s in response to increasing campaign costs in an electronic age and the concomitant*

fundraising pressure on candidates” (Cantor *et al*, 2000:2). Therefore, today the presidential elections include both traditional aspects of law and practice and also the modern aspects of technologically advanced society.

According to the Constitution, the candidate running for the position of President (or Vice President) must be a natural-born citizen of the United States, at least 35 years old, and a resident for at least 14 years – in addition he/she cannot run for the President if he/she has served this position for two full terms already (Cantor *et al*, 2000:3).

The potential candidates for President’s position from main two parties – Republican and Democratic – oppose each other in the primaries, which begin in the January and last until about June (BBC 2007). The voters from all 50 states and the District of Columbia, who select party delegates, however - in some states they do it in form of caucus (which is similar to the local meeting system) rather than primaries (BBC 2007). The formal nomination of candidates will be announced in national party conventions, held a few months before the election. These candidates are the ones campaigning and debating for the position of the President of the United States.

Generally, the two candidates running for the President are invited to participate in the general election debates according to the Candidate Selection Criteria, which determines, that the candidate has to be Constitutionally eligible for participation in the debates, *“candidates must appear on a sufficient number of state ballots to have a mathematical chance of winning a majority vote in the Electoral College, and have a level of support at least 15% (fifteen percent) of the national electorate as determined by five selected national public opinion polling organizations, using the average of those organizations’ most recent publicity-reported results at the time of the determination”* (CPD 2012c).

However, it must be brought out that voters technically do not participate in a direct election of the President, which is held on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November (BBC, 2007). The President will be chosen by the Electoral College, which consists of “electors” chosen by voters – the number of “electors” of the state depends on the size of the population of the state. Therefore, in every state, the winner of the popular vote gets all the Electoral College votes in that state. However, due to this

system, the winner of “electors” votes (currently 538 in total) can also get to the White House without actually winning the popular vote (Cantor *et al*, 2000:41). Therefore, the winner of the election has to have at least 270 electoral votes.

1.4. Media coverage of presidential debates in U.S.

According to the global market research, Nielsen Media Research (2012), presidential debates in 2012 were watched more than the ones during previous elections in 2008. This indicates that there were more people who got the information from debates unfiltered by media. Statistics of Nielsen Media Research (2012) bring out that there were 192 057 000 debate-watchers in 2012 compared to 172 174 000 watchers in 2008, which indicates, that the number of watchers has increased over 10%. However, while comparing the most popular debate in 2012 (first debate in October 3, 2012 – over 67, 2 million watchers) with the ones in the 1980s (e.g. the most viewed debate between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan in October 28, 1980 – over 80, 6 million watchers), we can see that general viewership of debates has decreased almost 17% during last 30 years (Nielsen 2008). This, however, may refer to the fact that less people are interested in politics, but also to the fact that more and more people get the information about politics through filtered media.

There have been several researches done previously concerning political communication and presidential debates. One of them is a research done by American researchers on TV debates (Benoit *et al* 2010). They analyzed the ‘horse race coverage’ of the most common topics, character and policy positions and found, that ***“news coverage stressed character more, and policy less, than the messages of the candidates”*** (Benoit *et al* 2010:260). They conducted a content analysis and coded the messages of the New York Times according to the tone (function) and topic (policy versus character), in order to answer their research questions.

Another research (Benoit *et al* 2004) raises the question of whether the coverage reflects accurately the content of debates – and divided the two topics of policy (issues) and image (character) (Benoit *et al* 2004:250). Authors of the research stress that *“although*

*the research is developing an understanding about the nature of presidential debates, the media are an important conduit of information for many voters” (Benoit et al 2004:250). The authors analyzed 25 primary debates while using a method of content analysis and coded one New York Times and one Washington Post article for each debate. According to research results (Benoit et al 2004:257), “**newspaper stories have a consistent tendency to over-represent attacks and defenses and under-represent acclaims. In some cases, newspaper coverage stresses character more, and policy less, than the debates themselves**”. As a result, authors brought out that newspaper reporters cover only part of what was said in the debates and it is important to note that the voters, who only read newspaper coverage of the debates, rely on reporters in order to filter their knowledge of the candidate (Benoit et al 2004:256).*

Similarly to the work of Benoit *et al*, there is another research done by Marek Piasecki (2009). His aim was to analyze the TV debates, while analysing their content in terms of how much emphasis was put on the content of debates and the performance of the candidates. In the same way as Benoit *et al* (2004), Piasecki (2009:2) also used a method of content analysis of TV debates in order to answer several research questions such as what issues and in what proportions were discussed during the debates, and what were the character and types of candidates’ answers. Piasecki (2009:3) has drawn a part of his research on Benoit’s research (2007) “*Communication in Political Campaigns*”, while dividing the statements (e.g. health care system) of presidential candidates into sequences based on the topic, with particular character (i.e. approving, criticising, defending and neutral), and within a specific time period (i.e. month, a year, four years). As a result, these sequences were divided and overviewed in two categories – policy and character. Based on his analysis, **debates covered on TV included policy statements more than candidates’ character statements** (Piasecki 2009:6).

Another research on the topic of political communication and presidential debates has been conducted by Fridkin *et al* (2008) “*Spinning Debates: The Impact of the News Media’s Coverage of the Final 2004 Presidential Debate*”. According to the political scientist Jos de Beus (2011:22), ‘spin’ refers to spinning the news by media experts – creating a desired image of the expert’s or channels’ preferred candidate and the rivals. Meanwhile, a ‘spin room’ such as we know today first appeared during the presidential debates in 1984, when Ronald Reagan attempted to generate spin to the White House

event in order to interpret the performance in a preferred way (Calderone 2012), and has significantly changed the structure of debates in terms of perception of candidates and their performance.

Therefore, the authors (Fridkin *et al* 2008:29) draw their research on the **media's spin, which – as a result – “persuaded potential voters to alter their attitudes regarding the competing candidates”**. In order to determine the media spin, the authors of the research conducted a content analysis of news coverage on television, on the Internet, and in newspapers for the twenty-four hours following the final 2004 presidential debate. Additionally to that, they also examined the reaction of the citizens to the media's coverage and conducted an experiment with individual's attitudes towards debate.

Furthermore, professor of political science, James N. Druckman (2005), has conducted a research on the topic “*Media Matter: How Newspapers and Television News Cover Campaigns and Influence Voters*”. Similarly to the previous research presented in this chapter, he also analyzes the topic of political communication and measures not only the media coverage, but also its influence on voters. In order to conduct a research, Druckman (2005:464) combined a comprehensive media content analysis with an election day exit poll in order to bring out the campaign coverage and its effect on voters. As a result of his research, he states that “**newspapers, and not television news, play a significant, although potentially limited, role in informing the electorate**” (Druckman 2005:463). A year before, Druckman conducted another research (2004:577) named “*Priming the Vote: Campaign Effects in a U.S. Senate Election*”, in which he suggested that **campaigns affect the voters by priming the criteria on which voters make their decisions**. He combined a content analysis of media campaign coverage with an Election Day exit poll in order to find the impact on voters' decisions.

Taking all these previous researches into account, the goal of this thesis is to give an overview of media coverage of the presidential debates held in 2012, and therefore bring out the way that politics was communicated to the citizens/voters. Due to the limited length of the bachelor's thesis, the research will include the method of content

analysis and analyze a selection of online-coverage of the U.S. presidential debates in 2012. The overview of the method for this research will be provided in the next chapter.

2. Presidential debates in 2012

This chapter is going to introduce the empirical data of this thesis and link it to the theoretical background provided before. First, the U.S. presidential debates as a part of U.S. presidential elections and an object of the research for this thesis will be introduced, and then, methodology of research for this thesis will be explained.

2.1. Overview of the U.S. presidential debates

As far as the topic concerns the content the debates, some of the most important points concerning U.S. presidential debates are brought out.

During the U.S. presidential general elections in 2012, four debates were held - three debates involved the presidential nominees and one involved the vice-presidential nominees. According to the Commission on Presidential Debates the mission of the debates is *“to afford the members of the public an opportunity to sharpen their views, in a focused debate format, of those candidates from among whom the next President and Vice President will be selected”* (CPD 2012a).

Since the goal of this thesis is to research the political communication based on presidential debates, the media coverage of only three debates (the ones involving the presidential nominees) will be analysed.

In one of the previous chapters (*1.3. U.S. presidential elections*), criteria for the presidential candidates were explained. Considering these conditions, the two nominees of U.S. presidential debates in 2012 were the current President, Barack Obama, a Democrat, and Mitt Romney, former Republican governor of Massachusetts.

From the three debates held, the topic of the first debate was domestic policy and the debate took place on October 3rd, 2012, in University of Denver. The second debate took place on October 16th, 2012, in Hofstra University in New York and their discussion included different topics. The third debate took place on October 22nd, 2012, in Lynn University, Florida. The topic for the last debate was foreign policy (CPD 2012b).

During the debates, the first and the third debate were divided into six time segments of approximately 15 minutes each, *“the moderator [opened] each segment with a question, after which each candidate [had] two minutes to respond”*; *“the second presidential debate [took] the form of a town meeting, in which citizens [asked] questions of the candidates on foreign and domestic issues”* and the candidates had *“each two minutes to respond”* (CPD 2012g). The participants of the second debate - town hall meeting – were *“undecided voters selected by the Gallup Organization”* (CPD 2012d). The topics of the first debate included the economy, health care, the role of government and governing (CPD 2012e); the topics of the third debate included U.S foreign affairs, situation in the Middle-East and the issue of China’s role in the world (CPD 2012f).

As a result of the presidential elections in 2012, the winner of the elections was Barack Obama with 332 electoral votes from total 538 (HuffPost Politics 2012). However, while analysing the communication of political messages from debates and linking them to the media effect, it is important to keep in mind that there were many other aspects besides the debates or their media coverage that influenced voters during campaigning period.

2.2. Methodology of research

The following chapter is going to explain the process of research of this thesis. First, research question and hypothesis will be provided and then sources and sample of analysis will be described. In the end, method and process of analysis will be explained.

2.2.1. Research question

The goal of this thesis is to find out, **how politics is communicated in terms of media coverage of presidential debates**. Similarly to the research question of Benoit *et al* (2004), this thesis would like to determine, how much the coverage of media includes either policies or performance or both combined, while covering U.S. presidential debates in 2012. As mentioned before (chapter 1.2. *Theory of media effect*), according to the Thomas Patterson's theory, news media's coverage includes non-substantial issues (performance) more frequently than substantial issues (content of discussion/issues). Therefore, the **hypothesis** of this thesis suggests that **performance of the presidential debates is covered more in media than the content of presidential debates**. In other words, thesis suggests that there is a stronger emphasis on candidate's performance, including emotional and personal attributes, instead of content, such as political views or policies discussed during debates.

The next chapter is going to explain, what will be done in order to answer the research question.

2.2.2. Sources and sample of analysis

In order to answer the research question, there was a selection of U.S. online media analysed, due to fact that the length of bachelor's thesis is limited and only the online U.S. media is reachable for the author of this thesis. Therefore, the thesis includes only the most popular news read during the period of debates in 2012. According to the global leader in measuring the digital world and preferred source of digital analytics, comScore (comScore 2012:1), the top three most visited political news sites in U.S. in 2012 were HuffPost Politics¹, CNN Politics² and NBCNews.com Politics³. The executive vice president of comScore, Jeff Hackett (comScore 2012:1), has said that last year the political news sites reached an all-time high – more than 60 million visitors visited in political news sites in October 2012 for up-to-date coverage on the

¹ HuffPost Politics: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/politics/>

² CNN Politics: <http://edition.cnn.com/POLITICS>

³ NBCNews.com Politics: <http://nbcpolitics.nbcnews.com/>

presidential campaigns, debates and the latest polls. Thus, the choice of these three news sites is a reasonable sample for measuring the way politics is communicated to the people.

In order to conduct a research based on these sources, there were 60 articles analysed, which were released on the debate-days or on the following day of debate (therefore: October 3rd, 4th, 16th, 17th, 22nd, 23rd). This was a sample of the articles that included the words from the phrase “presidential debate 2012”. There were no transcripts or videos included. As a result of random selection of articles, half of the articles analysed in this research were released on or on the day after the last debate which exclusively discussed foreign policy issues. This may reflect in the greater representation of foreign policy issues in the results of this research. However, since the emphasis of this thesis stresses the comparison of media coverage in performance and content, specific issues of content or performance do not change the results.

2.2.3. Method of analysis: content analysis

In order to understand how the politics is communicated based on debates, it is important to observe and research, how the messages are represented and events covered in media. The goal of this thesis is to find out, how politics was communicated based on U.S. presidential debates and whether performance was covered more than the content of debates.

The data for this thesis was analysed by using the method of content analysis. The roots of content analysis procedure go back to 1952, when American behavioural scientist Bernard Berelson introduced this field in his book “*Content Analysis in Communication Research*” (Mitchell 1967:230). Berelson (1954:489 referenced in Mitchell 1967:233) described the term of content analysis as “*a technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication*”. The idea referred to the fact that *objectivity* of the method permits multiple researchers to examine the same content and get the same results, *systematic* format of the method is ensured by set of

rules or procedures for coding the message content, and *quantitative* format of the method is provided by coded and tallied content (Sparks 2013:25).

According to the professor of communication, Glenn G. Sparks (2013:24), “*the method of content analysis can be applied to almost any type of communication, but it is particularly appropriate for mass media messages because it permits us to describe precisely a vast diversity of messages content that might otherwise prove elusive*”. Since the goal of this thesis is to research, how politics is communicated, and the data for the research consists of mass media messages, the method of content analysis is a suitable method for the research.

It should be noted that previous researches on this topic (in chapter 1.4. *Previous researches on presidential debates in U.S.*) have also been conducted by using the method of content analysis. Due to similar goals of the previous researches and the current thesis, the method of content analysis was used in this research as well.

The process of content analysis for this research was conducted according to technique that McQuail (2010:362) has described in his book about mass communication theory. First, sample of content from three political news sites was chosen (as described in chapter 2.2. *Sources and sample of analysis*), and then, necessary categories were framed (such as object of analysis, object’s performance, and object’s content). Next, ‘unit of analysis’ was determined – a phrase. After that, a test-coding was conducted by using 10% of articles from the sample. After successful results from the test-coding, these results were formed into a coding key (see *Appendix 1. Coding key*) and used for the analysis of the content of three political news sites.

However, one must keep in mind that there are both, **strengths and weaknesses** concerning the use of content analysis.

According to McQuail (2010:362), the method of content analysis provides statistical summary for mass media and allows finding the links between the objects and the frequency of their representation. In this way, a huge numbers of different materials can be analysed from different aspects and related to specific reasons according to the results of the analysis.

Nevertheless, McQuail (2010:362) brings out that the method of content analysis has also many pitfalls and limitations. For example, he stresses that forming the category systems before applying the analysis may involve the risk of imposing a ‘meaning system’ rather than discovering the correlation in the analysis. So, there is always a question about reliability and validity. In addition, he emphasizes (2010:363) that *“the more one relaxes the requirements of reliability, the easier it is to introduce categories and variables that will be useful for interpretation but ‘low’ in ‘objectivity’”*.

This, however, can be avoided by holding a reliable and reproducible analysis, not unique to the investigator. In order to prevent a ‘meaning system’ of analysis and discover, whether the correlation exists, there was a sample used for creating the coding key. Thus, the keywords for the coding key were formed based on the test-coding – and not created without any basis. In addition, there were 60 articles picked randomly from the debate coverage of three major political news sites, considering the amount of articles (20 articles from each news site) and the date they were released (on the date of debates or on the following date). Therefore, the objectivity of the research can be confirmed due to existing coding key and simplicity of reproduction of the analysis.

2.2.4. Introduction to the coding key for the context analysis

As explained before, in order to process a content analysis, first, research question was established and sample from the sources selected. As stated before, the research question stressed analysing the communication of messages, while specifying, whether performance in presidential debates was covered more than the content of debates. To identify important common descriptive and explanatory keywords that could be used for the full analysis, 10% of the sample (6 test articles) was examined word for word to identify phrases that described separate elements of the debates.

Once all separate phrases were identified and listed, they were parsed for 3 specific pieces of information:

- 1) *object* – the subject of the phrase, such as Obama, Romney, both candidates, or the debates;
- 2) *performance* – ‘non-substantial’ elements that assessed ‘how’ something was done;
- 3) *content* – ‘substantial’ issues of communicated messages.

Here is an example of one of the identified phrases and the way it was broken into three categories:

“In a showdown at close quarters, President Barack Obama and Republican Mitt Romney sparred aggressively in their first campaign debate Wednesday night over taxes, deficits and strong steps needed to create jobs in a sputtering national economy” (Pace *et al* 2012).

Coding:

Object = both candidates

Performance = sparred aggressively

Content = taxes, deficit, jobs/economy

Once this was done for all phrases, keywords for performance and content were counted to determine the most important ones. These keywords in turn were used to code the 60 articles chosen for the sample.

The keywords describing the ‘performance’ e.g. ‘non-substantial’ parts (according to Patterson’s definition of ‘substantial’ and ‘non-substantial’ issues – *see chapter 1.2. Theory of media effect*) of the message (i.e. characteristics, emotional attributes, image etc) were summarized into 31 final words⁴. While summarizing these words, each word was provided with an option of opposite word (e.g. “strong” vs. “weak”, “winner” vs. “loser”, “criticizing” vs. “supporting” etc). It must be mentioned that the test-coding highlighted the domination on negative words describing ‘performance’ (e.g.

⁴ Words describing ‘performance’: “accusing”, “advantageous”, “aggressive”, “agreeing”, “angry”, “arrogant/interrupting”, “attacking”, “avoiding/not mentioning or discussing the topic”, “bickering/nagging”, “boring”, “contrast”, “criticizing”, “defending”, “disagreeing”, “entertaining”, “enthusiastic”, “hard on details/policy”, “incapable”, “loser”, “memorable”, “offensive”, “relaxed”, “safe/passive/timid”, “strong”, “substantive”, “supporting”, “tense”, “weak”, “winner”, “wrong/lying”, “other”

aggressive, accusing, offensive etc) compared to the positive words (e.g. strong, winner etc).

While summarizing the keywords for the ‘content’ part, Druckman’s 28 issues⁵ were used due to the suitable structure of his content-issues (Druckman, 2005:467). In addition, category of “*Defense/Military/Foreign Policy*” was divided into “*Defense/Military*” and “*Foreign Policy*”, in order to separate the topics connected to the military and topics connected to the diplomatic international relations.

In addition, the general information about the articles was also collected, specifying the number of the article, the source, subject, publishing date, author(s) and the category of the article, and whether the article included photo(s) or video(s). Based on that, a final coding key was established (see *Appendix 1*).

3. Results

60 articles were randomly picked from three most visited U.S. political news sites, analyzed and the results formed. As follows, the results of the analysis are presented. However, one must keep in mind that these results provide only the information about the specific media coverage – the coverage of three political news sites about presidential debates. There are many other ways and sources of media coverage - such as different polls, campaign results etc - which all communicate politics to the audience (readers and voters) differently.

The data that was analyzed in terms of this thesis, included articles from three most visited political news sites – HuffPost Politics, CNN Politics and NBCNews.com

⁵ Words describing ‘content’: “Abortion”, “Business Related Issues”, “Campaign Finance / Election Reform”, “Civil Rights / Liberties”, “Crime / Gun Control”, “Defense / Military / Foreign Policy”, “Education”, “Environment / Energy”, “General Sentiments (Leadership, Values)”, “Government Reform”, “Government Spending / Deficit”, “Group Advocacy”, “Health Care”, “Homeland Security”, “Jobs / Economy”, “Moral and Ethical Issues”, “Poverty”, “Social Security”, “Taxes”, “Transportation”, “Women’s Issues”, “Immigration”, “Other”. From: Druckman, J. *et al* (2009) “*Candidate Website Data Key*” Northwestern University, Department of Political Science. <http://faculty.wcas.northwestern.edu/~jnd260/data/Web%20Data%20Key.doc>. (Visited on April 18, 2013)

Politics – 20 articles from each site. Most of the articles were written by reporters and were categorized as news. Almost all articles included photos or videos as well.

There were 956 descriptive phrases registered in these 60 articles, describing performance or content of presidential debates. The descriptive phrases were divided in three segments: descriptions of performance in debate, descriptions of content of debate and description of both together – performance and content. As a result, all three segments were covered almost equally (31% of ‘content’, 37% of ‘performance’ and 32% of both together). However, the performance (including ‘non-substantial’ and emotional attributes of the debate) was covered slightly more than content and issues of discussion (*see Table 1.*). Therefore, the hypothesis stated before is proven, confirming that performance of the presidential debates is covered more in media than the content of presidential debates, even if the coverage differs by 6%.

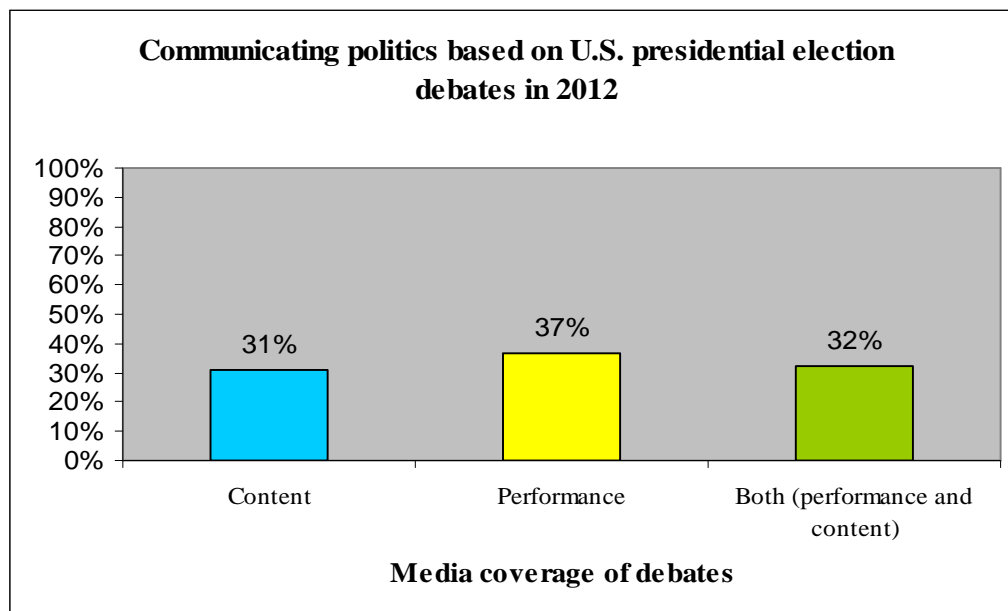


Table 1. Media coverage of U.S. presidential election debates in 2012

It must be noticed that there were some specific keywords used the most while describing ‘performance’ or ‘content’ of debates. For example, while covering the performance, the words such as “strong”, “attacking”, “criticizing”, “weak”, “avoiding/not mentioning or discussing the topic”, “tense”, and “safe/passive/timid” occur the most in the coverage, either describing the debate or candidates (*see Table 2.*).

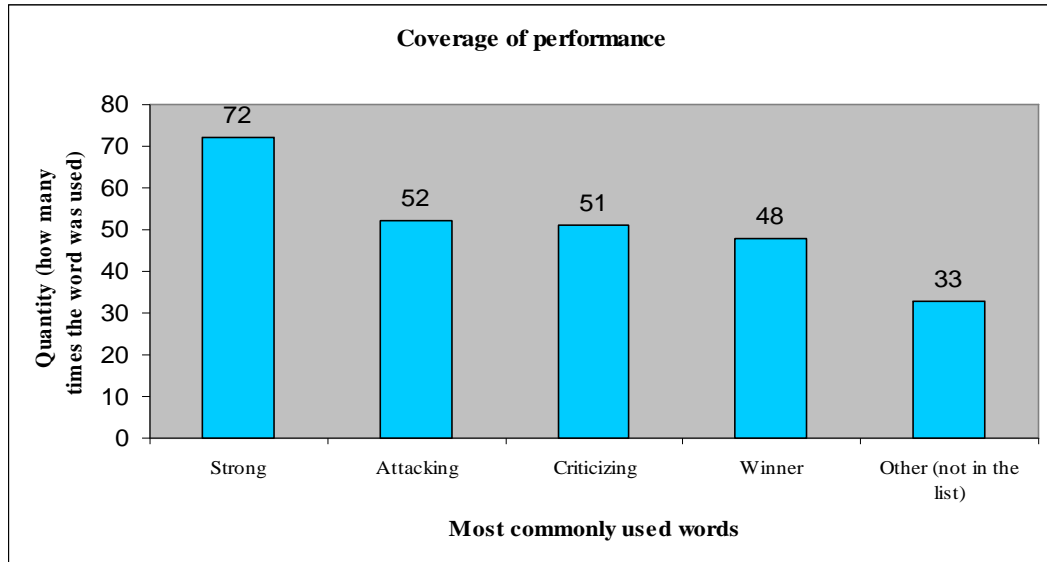


Table 2. Media coverage of performance

Meanwhile, while covering the content of debates, the coverage very often referred to the foreign policy, jobs and economy, and general sentiments, such as candidates' abilities and strategies to be a strong leader for the U.S.. The comparatively high coverage of foreign policy can be explained by the fact that foreign policy was the only topic of the third debate. Also, half of the randomly selected articles for this research were released on the day of or on the day after the third debate. Most commonly mentioned topics of the content can be seen in Table 3.

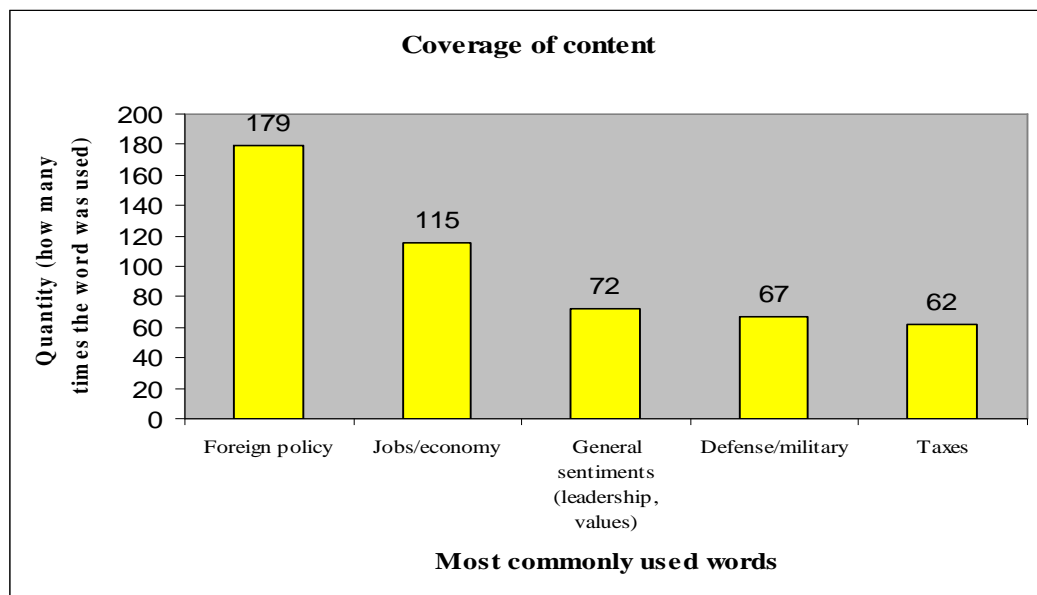


Table 3. Media coverage of content

While comparing the coverage of three political news sites, one can notice that two presidential candidates are almost equally described while talking about their performance (Romney 36%, Obama 38%) while on the issue of content Romney was covered significantly more (Romney 45%, Obama 30%). Also, Romney was covered 13% more in phrases that described both - ‘performance and content’ (*see Table 4*). The term ‘debate’ in Table 4 refers to the descriptive phrases about the event itself, such as its atmosphere, topics of discussion, impression etc.

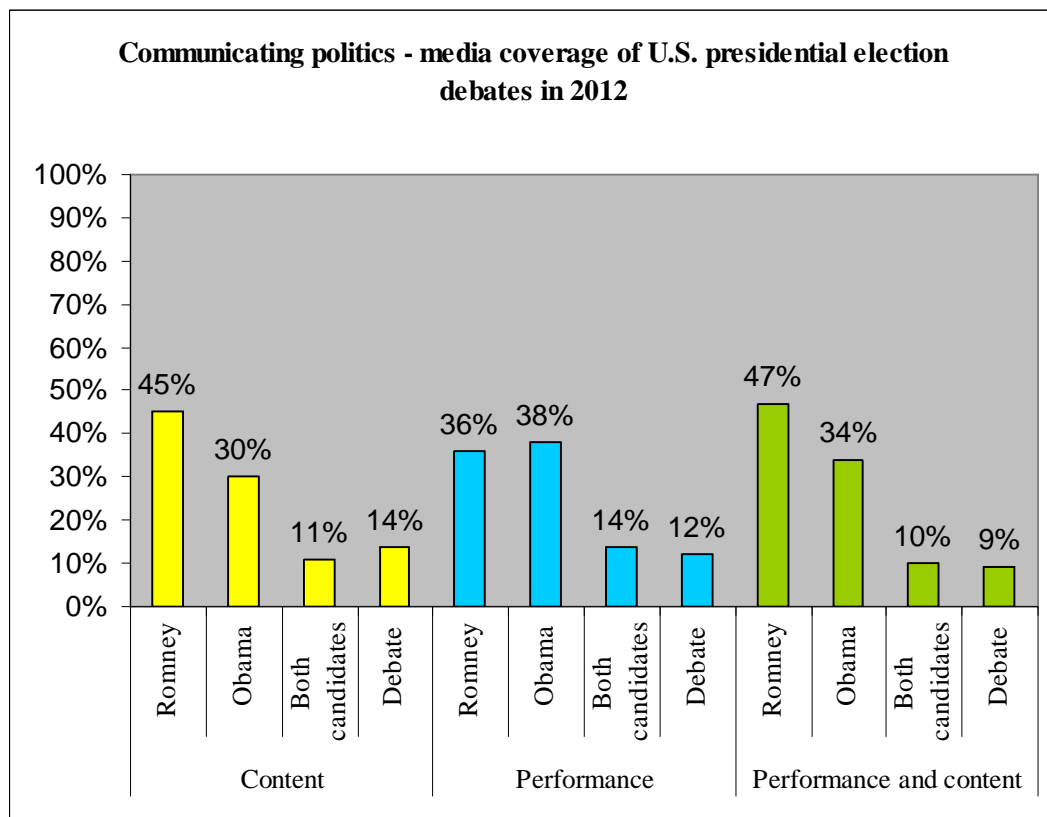


Table 4. Communicated politics – media coverage of U.S. presidential election debates in 2012

According to the CNN contributor and history professor Julian Zelizer the importance of “how” candidates say things during the debates is even more important for Americans than “what” they say (Abdullah 2012). This, however, emphasizes media’s role as mediator and communicator of the messages – and may include manipulation that could influence voters’ perceptions of candidates. Yet, the analysis of media’s influence on voters is a topic for a future research.

Nevertheless, the results of the analysis were similar to the results of Benoit *et al* (2010:260), in terms of proving that news coverage stressed character more than the candidates messages or policies they discussed. It also resembles to the Benoit *et al* research conducted in 2004 (pp. 257), which stated that “*media coverage have a consistent tendency to over-represent attacks and defenses and under-represent acclaims while also stressing more the character of the presidential candidates than the policies that were discussed, or the debates themselves*”. Thus, even the fact that the research of Benoit *et al* (2004) was conducted ten years ago and the data was taken from New York Times, which was not included in the analysis for this thesis, the result remains the same and the emphasis of coverage still stress performance of presidential debates.

Conclusion

As far as the second half of the last century has shown, political communication has turned more and more into marketing, while having a large emphasis on performance, instead of content. Political events and political communication have nowadays adapted to the 'media logic' (McQuail 2010:526) and media's values in presenting political issues as more image-driven and less around political issues (Patterson 1993:5 referenced in Brants *et al* 2001:2). Therefore, this thesis suggested that the same phenomenon occurred also in the media coverage of U.S. presidential debates, which were held at the end of 2012, and where media, as a mediator, might have great significance to democracy.

The goal of this bachelor's thesis is to research, how politics is communicated in terms of media coverage of presidential debates. In order to answer to the research question, the media coverage of content of debates and the performance of the presidential candidates communicating their messages during the debates was analyzed.

First, the theoretical part of the thesis was set down by defining political communication and the theory of media effect. Besides, an overview of U.S. presidential elections and selection of previous researches on U.S. presidential debates was provided. Secondly, the empirical part of the thesis was set down by explaining the structure of U.S. presidential debates in 2012 and describing the methodology of the current research, process of analysis and data used for conducting the analysis. In the end, the results of the research were presented.

In order to find an answer to the research question and determine, whether performance of presidential debates was covered more in media than the content of presidential debates, a research using the method of content analysis was conducted. Since the length of the bachelor's thesis was limited, a selection from the different media sources was made for the research data, and three most visited online political news sites were chosen for analysis: HuffPost Politics, CNN Politics and NBCNews.com Politics. The method of content analysis was used while analyzing 60 articles released on those sites.

As a result, there were 956 descriptive phrases of ‘performance’, ‘content’ and both – performance and content - registered. According to this data, the coverage of performance exceeded the coverage of content (37% of performance, 31% of content and 32% of both – performance and content) and therefore, the hypothesis stated was proven. In addition, the research brought out that while talking about the performance, Obama had a slightly greater coverage (Obama 38% vs. Romney 36%), while covering the content, Romney had more references than Obama (Romney 45% vs. Obama 30%), and while covering both – performance and content – Romney got a greater coverage (Romney 47%, Obama 34%).

However, one must keep in mind that this research was conducted based on three online political news sites. The sample of other choices can have different results. In addition, one must keep in mind that there are many other aspects influencing voters’ perceptions, additionally to the media coverage, such as personal preferences, influence from friends, family or colleagues, polls, election campaign etc. In order to determine a correlation between the coverage of U.S. presidential election debates and the results of U.S. presidential elections, further research must be conducted.

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[ntnt01origid=27&cntnt01detailtemplate=newspage&cntnt01returnid=80](http://www.debates.org/index.php?mact=News,cntnt01,detail,0&cntnt01articleid=41&cntnt01origid=27&cntnt01detailtemplate=newspage&cntnt01returnid=80) (Visited on May 19, 2013)

Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD 2012e). *Moderator Announces Topics for the First Presidential Debate*. September 19, 2012.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Coding key

1. Number of the article
2. Source of the article (name and address of the website)
3. Subject of the article
4. Publishing date of the article
5. Author of the article
 - 5a. reporter
 - 5b. specialist
 - 5c. politician
 - 5d. representative of the organisation
6. Category of the article
 - 6a. news
 - 6b. opinion story
 - 6c. editorial
 - 6d. blog post
 - 6e. interview
7. Article includes a photo(s)
 - 7a. Yes (how many)
 - 7b. No
8. Article includes a video(s)
 - 8a. Yes (how many)
 - 8b. No
9. OBJECT:
 - D. Debate
 - B. Both candidates
 - O. Obama
 - R. Romney
10. PERFORMANCE (i.e. candidates' image or characteristics)

| | |
|---|--------------|
| 1 | Accusing |
| 2 | Advantageous |
| 3 | Aggressive |
| 4 | Agreeing |
| 5 | Angry |

| | |
|----|---|
| 6 | Arrogant/interrupting |
| 7 | Attacking |
| 8 | Avoiding/not mentioning or discussing the topic |
| 9 | Bickering/nagging |
| 10 | Boring |
| 11 | Contrast |
| 12 | Criticizing |
| 13 | Defending |
| 14 | Disagreeing |
| 15 | Entertaining |
| 16 | Enthusiastic (smiling, waving, eager) |
| 17 | Hard on details/policy |
| 18 | Incapable |
| 19 | Loser |
| 20 | Memorable |
| 21 | Offensive |
| 22 | Relaxed |
| 23 | Safe/passive/timid |
| 24 | Strong |
| 25 | Substantive |
| 26 | Supporting |
| 27 | Tense |
| 28 | Weak |
| 29 | Winner |
| 30 | Wrong/lying |
| 31 | Other |

11. CONTENT (issue of discussion, topic)

| | | | |
|---|----|--------------------------|----|
| Abortion | 1 | Group Advocacy | 13 |
| Business Related Issues | 2 | Health Care | 14 |
| Campaign Finance / Election Reform | 3 | Homeland Security | 15 |
| Civil Rights / Liberties | 4 | Jobs / Economy | 16 |
| Crime / Gun Control | 5 | Moral and Ethical Issues | 17 |
| Defense / Military | 6 | Poverty | 18 |
| Education | 7 | Social Security | 19 |
| Environment / Energy | 8 | Taxes | 20 |
| General Sentiments (Leadership, Values) | 9 | Transportation | 21 |
| Government Reform | 10 | Women's Issues | 22 |
| Government Spending / Deficit | 11 | Other | 23 |
| Foreign Policy | 12 | Immigration | 24 |

Appendix 2. List of articles used for context analysis

1. 10/03/2012, HuffPost Politics “Presidential Debate 2012: Mitt Romney Gets His Moment” (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/03/presidential-debate-2012_n_1933249.html)
2. 10/03/2012, HuffPost Politics “Presidential Debate 2012: Showdown Between Obama, Mitt Romney Captures Political Spotlight” (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/03/presidential-debate-2012_n_1935168.html)
3. 10/03/2012, HuffPost Politics “Presidential Debate 2012: Mitt Romney, Obama Spar In Colorado” (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/03/presidential-debate-2012_n_1937280.html)
4. 10/03/2012, HuffPost Politics “Debate Fact Check: How Obama, Romney Statements Hold up” (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/03/debate-fact-check_n_1937831.html)
5. 10/03/2012, HuffPost Politics “Obama On Mitt Romney Tax Shifts: His Big, Bold Idea Is ‘Never Mind’” (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/03/mitt-romney-taxes_n_1937785.html)
6. 10/04/2012, HuffPost Politics “Mitt Romney Versus Obama: 4 Key Moments From First Presidential Debate” (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/04/mitt-romney-debate_n_1938052.html)
7. 10/16/2012, HuffPost Politics “Presidential Debate 2012: Obama Gets Aggressive In Rematch Against Mitt Romney” (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/16/presidential-debate-2012_n_1970698.html)
8. 10/17/2012, HuffPost Politics “Presidential Debate Winner? HuffPost Readers Weigh In” (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/17/presidential-debate-winner_n_1972215.html)
9. 10/17/2012, HuffPost Politics “Obama-Romney Debate Won By President (VIDEO)” (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/17/obama-romney-debate_n_1970693.html)

10. 10/22/2012, HuffPost Politics "Presidential Debate 2012: Obama, Mitt Romney Spar On Foreign Policy"
(http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/22/presidential-debate-2012-n_2003880.html)
11. 10/22/2012, HuffPost Politics "Presidential Debate 2012: Obama, Romney Have Final Showdown In Boca Raton"
(http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/22/presidential-debate-2012-n_1998027.html)
12. 10/22/2012, HuffPost Politics "Mitt Romney Wants To Get People Off Food Stamps 'Not By Cutting The Program'"
(http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/22/mitt-romney-food-stamps_n_2004015.html)
13. 10/22/2012, HuffPost Politics "Obama Sinks Romney Charge On Shrinking Military" (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/22/obama-romney-military-debate_n_2003973.html)
14. 10/22/2012, HuffPost Politics "Barack Obama: U.S. Will Stand With Israel If Attacked" (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/22/barack-obama-israel_n_2003964.html)
15. 10/23/2012, HuffPost Politics "Presidential Debate: Obama, Romney Agree On Foreign Policy (VIDEO)"
(http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/23/presidential-debate-2012_n_2004043.html)
16. 10/23/2012, HuffPost Politics "Climate Change Not Mentioned In Presidential Debates For First Time In A Generation"
(http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/23/climate-change-presidential-debate_n_2004067.html)
17. 10/23/2012, HuffPost Politics "Presidential Election: Obama, Romney Race To Finish Line" (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/23/presidential-election-2012_n_2006458.html)
18. 10/23/2012, HuffPost Politics "Presidential Debate: With Little Mention Of Afghanistan Or Drones, Obama Avoids Hard Questions"
(http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/23/presidential-debate-afghanistan-obama_n_2005174.html)

19. 10/23/2012, HuffPost Politics “Presidential Election 2012: Obama, Mitt Romney Dash To Finish Line” (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/23/presidential-election-2012_n_2004875.html)
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Kokkuvõte

Poliitiline kommunikatsioon USA presidendivalimiste debattide näitel

Helena Hain

Käesoleva bakalaureusetöö “Poliitiline kommunikatsioon USA presidendivalimiste debattide näitel” eesmärgiks oli uurida, kuidas kommuniqueeritakse meedias poliitikat presidendivalimiste debattide näitel. Viimase poole sajandi jooksul on poliitiline kommunikatsioon muutunud ühe enam turunduseks, rõhutades poliitilistes sõnumites tegeliku sisu asemel üha rohkem esitlusviisi. Käesolev bakalaureusetöö eeldas, et sama fenomen kerkis esile ka 2012. aasta USA presidendivalimiste debattide meediakajastuste puhul. Et leida vastus püsitatud uurimisküsimusele, viidi läbi uuring, mille eesmärgiks oli selgitada välja, kas USA presidendivalimiste debattide meediakajastustes kuvatakse rohkem esitlusviisi või sisu.

Bakalaureusetöö piiratud mahu tõttu valiti uuringu valimiks kolm enim külastatud ameerika uudisteportaali – HuffPost Politics, CNN Politics ja NBCNews.com Politics. Analüüsi käigus uuriti kontentanalüüsi meetodil 60 artiklit, mis olid avaldatud neil veebilehtedel debattide päevadel või nendest järgneval päeval (ehk 3., 4., 16., 17., 22., ja 23. oktoobril 2012). Analüüsiühikuna oli kasutusel fraas, mis iseloomustas vastavalt esitlusviisi, sisu või mõlemat – esitlusviisi ja sisu. Sellisel moel registreeriti 956 fraasi/kirjet.

Tulemuste kohaselt olid debattide meediakajastustes esitlusviisi ja sisu kajastused peaaegu võrdse kaaluga. Siiski ületas esitlusviisi kajastus sisu kajastust 6 protsendiga, mistõttu võib kinnitada töö alguses püsitatud hüpoteesi: presidendivalimiste debattide meediakajastustes kuvatakse rohkem esitlusviisi kui sisu.

Uuringu käigus selgus, et esitlusviisi kajastamisel kasutati meediakajastustes enim sõnu „tugev“, „ründav“ ja „kritiseeriv“, kirjeldamaks debateerivaid kandidaate või debatti. Sisu kirjeldustes said enim tähelepanu välispoliitika, tööhõive ja majandusküsimused ning üldised tunded, mis puudutasid näiteks juhi rolli ja väärtushinnanguid USA presidendiks kandideerimisel. Lisaks oli märkimisväärne ka see, et kolm analüüsitud

meediaväljaannet kajastavad kummagi presidendikandidaadi – B. Obama ja M. Romney – vaates peaaegu võrdsel määral nii esitlusviisi kui ka sisu. Sellegi poolest võib märgata, et Obamat mainivates kajastustes on rõhk mõnel määral siiski enam esitlusviisil kui diskussiooni teemadel ning Romney kajastustes rõhk mõnel määral enam diskussiooni sisu kajastamisel.

Seesugune tulem, mille kohaselt esitlusviisi kajastatakse debattide sisuga peaaegu võrdselt või isegi natuke rohkem, juhib tähelepanu asjaolule, et meedial on igal juhul suur roll lugejate arvamuse kujundamisel ja mõjutamisel. Kindlasti tasub rõhutada, et käesoleva töö raames mõõdeti taolist nähtus vaid kolme poliitilise uudisteportaali näitel. Siiski võib selline tulemus anda omakorda aluse hüpoteesile, et meediaväljaannete kajastused mõjutavad omakorda ka valimistulemusi, kuna osa valijatest ei pruugi debattide otseülekandeid jälgida, vaid lähtuvad oma arvamuse kujundamisel debattide (ja muu valimiskampaania) meediakajastustest. Kuid kuna käesoleva bakalaureusetöö maht on piiratud, jääb meediakajastuste ja valimistulemuste vahelise korrelatsiooni määramine edasiste uurimuste pärusmaaks. Lisaks ei tasu unustada, et valijate eelistusi mõjutavad ka paljud teised faktorid peale meedia, nagu näiteks isiklik eelistus, pere ja tuttavate eelistused, valimisreklaamid ja –kampaaniad ning palju muud.