

The Effects of Dramatized Political News on Public Opinion

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Today's American political news environment is more fragmented than ever before. In order to attract a larger audience, many political news reporters, editors, and producers work to create a product that is not only informative, but also entertaining and compelling. A popular method of achieving this goal is to dramatize news coverage of politics. While the goal of dramatizing the news is to entertain, previous research has discussed a number of possible side-effects. Empirical evidence on this subject, however, is seriously lacking. Using a controlled laboratory experiment, this article analyzes the effect of dramatically-embellished news on public opinion. The results indicate that, although entertaining for some, dramatically-embellished political news has some negative effects on larger political attitudes, including overall support for political leaders and trust in the news media.

The ever-fragmenting media environment in America is reshaping the manner in which political news is presented to the public. New media such as Internet, cable news, and political talk shows are offering the American news consumer a growing multitude of choices (Davis and Owen 1998). Although media ownership is consolidating, there is a staggering number of political journalists and news outlets competing for a shrinking news audience. This fierce competition has created a political news environment where simply presenting the news in-and-of itself is not sufficient to maintain an audience. More than ever before, political news journalists strive to present news that is entertaining and compelling (Davis and Owen 1998; Fox and Van Sickle 2001).

A popular manner of presenting political news is to focus on the dramatic aspects of a story by emphasizing personalities, conflict, and human struggle (Baum 2003a; Bennett 2005; Epstein 1973, Paletz and Entman 1981). As a producer of a major television network noted, a good news story should have, "structure and conflict, problem and denouement, rising action and falling action, a beginning, a middle, and an end. These are not only the essentials of drama; they are the essentials of narrative" (quoted in Epstein 1973, 4-5). Scholars have noted this trend as well. Lance Bennett, for example, observed, "It is no secret that reporters and editors search for events with dramatic properties and then emphasize those properties in their reporting" (2005, 55).

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The tendency to cover political news with a dramatic flare is not a new phenomenon. While journalists expend considerable time and effort toward *informing* the public, scholars would be remiss not to recognize the commitment toward *coloring* the content. Today, however, this practice has been taken to fantastic proportions (Bennett 2005; Hovind 1999). Creating an entertainment news product through the use of dramatic narrative has become a common tool in modern political journalism. Simply presenting information is not enough to keep a news business afloat in today's environment of heightened competition between journalists, producers, and editors (Paletz 2002; West 2001). Nowhere was this more evident than during the Gulf War of 2003, where television news networks relentlessly tried to one-up each other with dramatic tales of conflict, heroism, tragedy, and redemption.¹ More than ever before, the pursuit of drama drives political news in America.

As drama becomes more prevalent in today's news coverage of politics, it is surprising how little empirical research has been conducted in this area. Even less research has discussed the effects of dramatized news on the public. This article offers a glimpse into the possible effects of dramatized political news on the viewing public. A controlled experimental analysis is conducted in which subjects are randomly assigned to read either a straight political news story or a dramatically-embellished version of the same article. The findings indicate there several possible effects of exposure to dramatic news.

Dramatic News and Public Opinion

Dramatically-embellished news contains strong focus on conflict, revolving plot, character development, and action (Hovind 1999). The advantage of dramatic political news for news producers is that it is compelling and even addictive for viewers, drawing a potentially larger audience. As Matthew Baum notes, "To be profitable it [is] necessary to capture and maintain a substantial audience, much of which [is] not interested in large doses of dispassionate reporting of the political issues of the day" (2003a, 36). Thus, infusing drama into otherwise mundane political news can pay dividends in a business where profit is the primary objective.

Studies of drama in the news reach back several decades. Network evening news coverage especially over-dramatizes the political world (Altheide 1974; Bennett 2005; Epstein 1973; Gans 1980). A "dramatic" or "melodramatic" imperative has been found to exist in mainstream news and modern campaign coverage (Hovind 1999; Nimmo and Combs 1990). Objective characteristics of political news and events do not define the coverage. Instead, political news is defined by the drama itself. The dramatic

embellishment of the story has the potential to define the public's perception of reality more than the event itself (Altheid 1974; Bennett 2005; Delli Carpini and Williams 2001).

A public that understands politics in a dramatic content is not reacting to the realities of the political world, but instead to a "hyper-reality" created and perpetuated by the dramatic narrative (Delli Carpini and Williams 2001). From this perspective, scholars have speculated on the effects of dramatic news on the public. Barker (2002) found that the inflammatory rhetoric of political talk-radio has strong persuasive power on the listener by altering an array of policy positions and political attitudes, especially for like-minded listeners. The result of the dramatic imperative, according to others, can be a disillusioned public (Nimmo and Combs 1990; Bennett 2005). The focus on drama in the news compels the public to base its understanding and evaluation of politics not on issues and events, but on the dramatic story. The political world is understood by the public in terms of characters, conflict, and the evolution of the story. Substance loses out to the drama of the unfolding story (Bennett 2005).

Matthew Baum found that entertainment-based news media, or "soft news," successfully ensnares the interest of the inattentive public when covering high-profile political events because the programs package "human drama as entertainment" (2002, 91). Also, certain issues are more likely to be dramatized by "soft news" than others (e.g., military conflict, disasters, crime, scandals, etc.; Baum 2003a). Baum's research, however, discusses the dramatization of politics primarily in the context of truly dramatic crises (i.e., war) in "soft news" programs, and does not discuss the larger effects of drama on perceptions of political leaders and institutions. In today's ultra-competitive news media environment, dramatization of politics exists not only in the "soft news" world—it has penetrated the legitimate news. Truly dramatic political issues and events are certainly overemphasized in the legitimate news. But these types of political events are relatively rare, and dramatic narrative is now infused into more mundane political news as an attempt to grab the public's attention more frequently. Thus, it is important to understand the larger scope of the effects of drama in the public, especially regarding support for those involved in the drama.

The debate is ongoing as to how dramatic embellishment in the soft news influences political learning amongst the inattentive public (Baum 2003b; Prior 2003). But how might the elements of dramatic news influence the public's larger perceptions of the political world, political actors, and political institutions? The answer can be found in the particular aspects of drama—the elements that make a story dramatic. Conflict is an obvious element, as is personalization of the issue or event. These two aspects of drama necessitate a focus on individual personalities as well. Also, scandal

and negativity in the news perpetuates drama, as does the inevitable strategic analysis that takes place as a story unfolds in dramatic fashion (Morris 2002). Strategic analysis of the horserace, for instance, has become the most prevalent aspect of presidential campaign coverage (Patterson 1993; Ridout 1993).

Studies have analyzed the various aspects of drama separately, and a common theme is that these elements (which are necessary in creating a dramatic picture of political issues and events) have the potential to negatively influence support for political leaders and the system as a whole. For example, Cappella and Jamieson (1997) used laboratory and field experiments to find if strategically framed news generates cynicism on the part of viewers. Negativity in the news and in political advertising also fosters a cynical viewing public by lowering efficacy, quelling political interest, and depressing turnout (Iyengar and Kinder 1995). Furthermore, low public esteem toward Congress has been attributed to negative media coverage of the membership (Rozell 1994, 1996) and a tendency to dwell on personalities instead of policy (Mann and Ornstein 1994). Finally, political conflict has the potential to negatively influence overall support for political institutions as well (Forgette and Morris 2004; Morris and Witting 2001; Mutz and Holbrook 2003). While dramatic information with a strong ideological tilt to the right can actually increase support for conservative leaders among a like-minded audience (Barker 2002) and even persuade liberals and moderates to lean more to the right (Lenart and McGraw 1989), news that pursues drama from a more ideologically-neutral perspective (as most mainstream news does) has the potential to alienate a larger portion of people. When the separate elements are combined in the news to create a dramatic narrative of politics, public support for the people and institutions involved should decrease.

The utility of dramatic news is the entertainment value. Drama has the potential to entertain and generate interest on the part of the viewer. Unfortunately, while political drama entertains and increases interest, it also has the potential to generate negative attitudes amongst the public because the very elements of drama (scandal, conflict, the use of political strategy, personalization, and subjective interpretation) are frustrating to Americans when placed in the context of the federal government. *Although Americans are entertained by dramatic news, a byproduct is cynicism toward, and contempt for, political leaders and institutions.* While panel research has found that exposure to fictitious docudrama can shift policy perceptions (Lenart and McGraw 1989), the purpose of this analysis is to test the effect of dramatized political news on larger perceptions of political actors and institutions. Turning government news coverage into a barrage of political soap operas has entertainment value (Baum 2002; 2003a), but the end result is not positive regarding popular support for political institutions and

leaders. Both dramatic fiction and dramatic non-fiction entertain. Unlike fiction, however, spinning non-fictitious government news into a dramatic frame generates contempt for the players and institutions involved in the story. This analysis tests whether or not a news story containing elements of drama negatively affects public support. Specifically, the following hypotheses will be tested:

H1: *Exposure to dramatic news lowers support for political leaders.*

H2: *Exposure to dramatic news increases cynicism toward the political system.*

H3: *Exposure to dramatic news lowers support for political institutions.*

H4: *Dramatic news is considered more entertaining than news with less drama.*

These hypotheses reflect the contention that dramatic news, while entertaining, has the potential to generate cynicism on the part of the viewer. As the preceding discussion illustrates, dramatic news contains elements that have been shown to induce negative responses on the part of the viewer. Testing the above four hypotheses will provide empirical evidence regarding the effects of dramatically framed news on public opinion toward political leaders, institutions, and the political system as a whole.

Experiment Design

The purpose of the experiment is to examine systematically the effects of dramatic news on public opinion compared to news that lacks drama. The analysis uses an experimental design in which subjects are exposed to one of two frames of the same news story: the dramatic frame or the non-dramatic frame. This focus eliminates the necessity of a control group, as the lack of exposure to any news at all falls outside the scope of this study. Taking this approach simplifies the experiment and strengthens the validity of the findings by increasing the number of subjects in each group.

Subjects were taken on a voluntary basis from political science courses at a large Midwestern University. Students were randomly assigned for exposure to either a dramatic frame or a non-dramatic frame of a news story on efforts by the President and Congress to stimulate the U.S. economy. Following exposure to one of the two news stories, subjects were given a posttest questionnaire measuring political attitudes, interest, efficacy, and

several other items. Students were told that they were participating in a study on political attitudes, and were instructed to read the newspaper article attached to the front of the survey and then fill out the questionnaire. A total of 281 subjects participated in the experiment (N = 142 in the dramatic frame; N = 139 in non-dramatic frame).

This was a posttest-only experimental design (Campbell and Stanley 1963). In an experimental design where no pretest exists, the effect of the independent variable can still be assessed on the condition that subjects are randomly assigned to experimental groups. Experimental design theory allows the assumption that significant differences in the posttest between randomly assigned groups can be attributed to the experimental treatment (Campbell and Stanley 1963; Kinder and Palfrey 1993). In the case of this particular experiment, random assignment was confirmed by conducting a difference of means tests on key demographic and attitudinal variables in the posttest (race, gender, education, family income, political knowledge, and party identification). None of the differences between the two experimental groups on these variables were statistically significant.

Pretests are valuable in assessing individual change as a direct result of the experimental stimulus. Pretests, however, can create complications as well. The information contained in a pretest has the potential to bias posttest responses by generating testing effects as a result of subject awareness (Campbell and Stanley 1963). Therefore, the validity of the independent variable can be threatened as a result of a pretest. For this reason, a pretest was not used.

Both stories were fictional, but based on an actual newspaper article from the *New York Times* and presented to subjects as actual print news stories. The experiment administrator informed subjects that the story was taken from a national newspaper, and the article was also formatted in a manner that visually resembles print stories. Both stories revolved around the debate over an economic stimulus package, and a large portion of the stories were identical to each other to maintain control over extraneous factors. The non-dramatic frame presented the story in a straight manner, and did not illuminate the elements of drama (conflict, personalities, scandal, political strategy, and negativity). The dramatic frame was a dramatized version of the same story. Dramatic flare was added to the article by injecting dramatic elements into the story. These additions did not alter the story fundamentally, but did change the presentation from a straight format to a dramatic presentation.² The Appendix contains the stimuli used in the experiment. Section One is the non-dramatic frame of the news story, and Section Two is the dramatic frame. The bolded portion in each frame denotes text that is exclusive to that story.

Because this project is a comparison between dramatic and non-dramatic political news, it could be argued that newer media should be used to examine the effects of exposure to dramatized news, such as television. This approach was not used because it would have sacrificed experimental control in favor of impact and mundane realism, which jeopardizes validity (Kinder and Palfrey 1993). Using real televised news stories would damage internal validity because the experimental stimulus could not be effectively manipulated while keeping all other factors constant. Furthermore, because many Americans still do read the news as text via newspapers and/or the Internet, the use of a print-based experimental stimulus is warranted.

Creating an experimental stimulus and environment that closely mirrors the “real world” is important; this is why the article was presented to subjects in a format that reflected that of a newspaper article. However, if control over manipulation and administration of the independent variable (drama) and extraneous factors is lost as a result, causal inference is compromised (Campbell and Stanley 1963). Presenting the stimulus in print form allowed for maximum control over extraneous factors, and gave the best opportunity to manipulate the dependent variable in the experiment. Also, while some degree of mundane realism may have been sacrificed by not presenting the dramatic frame in a newer media format, the news was presented to the subjects as an actual story taken from a daily newspaper, which is regularly read by 60 percent of the American public on a daily basis (Pew Research Center 2004). As a result, subjects were under the impression they were being exposed to legitimate news. Since this project is focused on the presentation of news in a dramatic format, an acceptable degree of realism was maintained, and control over the experimental stimulus was maximized.

Measurement and Operationalization

The posttest questionnaire used several items to measure political attitudes on leaders, institutions, as well as the political system as a whole. Subjects were also asked to provide demographic information, political attitudes, and several measures of political knowledge were included as well. The posttest questionnaires were sorted by news frame (dramatic or non-dramatic).

As Hypotheses One through Four illustrate, the major purpose of this analysis is to understand how exposure to dramatic political news influences support for political leaders, political cynicism, support for political institutions, and interest in the news. Several items in the posttest questionnaire are included to operationalize these concepts and provide valid measures of support. First, three different survey items are used to measure the concept

of support for political leaders. Support for the President, for example, is measured in the questionnaire by asking subjects, “Overall, do you approve or disapprove of the way the President is handling his job?” Support for leaders in Congress is measured by asking, “Overall, how would you rate the performance of the leaders of Congress?” Support for local political leaders is measured by asking, “Overall, how would you rate the performance of our leaders in [this state]?” Table 1 shows that these items load on a single dimension, and thus can be used to measure a single concept—support for political leaders.

Political cynicism is the second item. Erber and Lau simply define political cynicism as “distrust” toward government (1990, 236). It is important to recognize, however, that cynicism is a more complex concept, and thus should be measured accordingly. Cappella and Jamieson (1997) discuss political cynicism as a multidimensional concept. Two major aspects of cynicism, according to Cappella and Jamieson, are distrust toward government officials and a lack of political efficacy. This analysis measures both distrust and political efficacy as representations of cynicism. Efficacy is measured by asking subjects to agree or disagree with a series of non-*efficacious* political statements. For example, subjects were asked to agree or disagree with the following statement: “I don’t think public officials care much what people like me think.” High agreement in this case would indicate a lack of political efficacy (or high *inefficacy*). Table 2 illustrates the exact wording for these survey items. Additionally, Table 2 also shows that each item loads on a single dimension.

Table 1. Factor Analysis: Support for Political Leaders

Survey Item	Factor 1 ^a
1. Overall, do you approve or disapprove of the way the President is handling his job? (1 = strongly disapprove, 2 = disapprove, 3 = neither approve or disapprove, 4 = approve, 5 = strongly approve)	.546
2. Overall, how would you rate the performance of the leaders of Congress? (1 = poor, 2 = only fair, 3 = good, 4 = excellent)	.778
3. Overall, how would you rate the performance of our political leaders in [your state]? (1 = poor, 2 = only fair, 3 = good, 4 = excellent)	.746
Eigenvalue	1.46

^aCell entries are principle component factors. While factor scores for additional dimensions were employed, they are not listed as their eigenvalues were well below 1.0.

Within the efficacy items illustrated in Table 2, it is important to distinguish between internal and external efficacy (Niemi, Craig, and Mattei 1991). According to Cappella and Jamieson (1997), efficacy can refer to a person’s ability to understand and participate in politics (internal) or a person’s perception of the effectiveness of government (external). In Table 2, questions one through three measure the lack of external efficacy. The last item in Table 2 measures the lack of internal efficacy. For each variable in Table 2, higher values reflect a lack of efficacy. Not surprisingly, the internal efficacy item loads the weakest on the efficacy factor.

The second aspect of cynicism—distrust—is measured using two different survey items. These two items are statements in which the respondent is asked to either disagree or agree. The first item stated, “Today, I trust the U.S. Congress to do the right thing,” and the second item stated, “Today, I trust the President to do the right thing.” Responses to the two survey items were moderately correlated ($r = .58$), and therefore can be combined into a single measure of trust.

Third, support for political institutions is measured by several items that ask subjects to rate the performance of national political institutions as well as their ability to work together. For example, subjects were asked to answer the question, “Overall, do you approve or disapprove of the way the

Table 2. Factor Analysis: Political Efficacy Items

Survey Item	Factor 1 ^a
1. I don’t think public officials care much what people like me think. (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = neither agree or disagree, 4 = somewhat agree, 5 = strongly agree)	.841
2. Generally speaking, those we elect to Congress lose touch with the people pretty quickly. (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = neither agree or disagree, 4 = somewhat agree, 5 = strongly agree)	.768
3. People like me don’t have any say about what the government does. (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = neither agree or disagree, 4 = somewhat agree, 5 = strongly agree)	.818
4. Sometimes politics and government seems so complicated that a person like me can’t really understand what’s going on. (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = neither agree or disagree, 4 = somewhat agree, 5 = strongly agree)	.366
Eigenvalue	2.10

^aCell entries are principle component factors. While factor scores for additional dimensions were employed, they are not listed as their eigenvalues were well below 1.0.

United States Congress is handling its job?” A second measure of institutional support asked, “Overall, how would you rate the ability of Congress to work with the President in passing laws?” Support for the media as a political institution was measured by asking subjects to agree or disagree with a series of positive statements about the media. For example, subjects were asked to agree or disagree (on a five point scale) with a statement that said, “Today, I trust the media to cover political events fairly and accurately.” High agreement reflects high approval for the news media. Table 3 gives the exact questions used to measure support for the news media, and shows that the items load on a single dimension.

The final concept, the entertainment value of the experimental stimulus (the news article), is measured by asking subjects to agree or disagree with statements about the article. The first statement says, “I was interested in the political news story attached to this questionnaire,” and the second statement

Table 3. Factor Analysis: Trust in the Media

Survey Item	Factor 1 ^a
1. Today, I trust the media to cover political events fairly and accurately. (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = neither agree or disagree, 4 = somewhat agree, 5 = strongly agree)	.923
2. Today, I trust newspapers to cover political events fairly and accurately. (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = neither agree or disagree, 4 = somewhat agree, 5 = strongly agree)	.857
3. Today, I trust network television news (ABC, CBS, NBC) to cover political events fairly and accurately. (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = neither agree or disagree, 4 = somewhat agree, 5 = strongly agree)	.921
4. Today, I trust cable new channels (FOX News, MSNBC, CNN) to cover political events fairly and accurately. (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = neither agree or disagree, 4 = somewhat agree, 5 = strongly agree)	.821
5. Today, I trust tabloids (The National Enquirer, The Star, The Sun) to cover political events fairly and accurately. (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = neither agree or disagree, 4 = somewhat agree, 5 = strongly agree)	.401
Eigenvalue	3.27

^aCell entries are principle component factors. While factor scores for additional dimensions were employed, they are not listed as their eigenvalues were well below 1.0.

says, “I would like to read more about the story attached to this questionnaire.” High agreement with these statements reflects high levels of interest in the stimulus. Due to the high correlation between these two items ($r = .85$), they are combined into a single additive measure.

Multivariate analysis is used to measure the direct effect of dramatic news while controlling for factors that are known to influence public opinion toward leaders, institutions, and the political system as a whole (party identification, political knowledge, and demographic variables). Also included in the models are several variables that control for indirect effects, as it is likely that some of the independent variables, particularly political knowledge, could interact with the experimental stimulus to influence the key dependent variables. Because items in the survey are measured at the ordinal level, ordinary least squares (OLS) regression is not advisable. In these cases, ordered probit is used, which accounts for an ordered dependent variable. In cases where multiple ordinal measures are combined into a single additive index, OLS regression is used.³

Findings

The experiment findings point toward the possibility that the effects of dramatized news are not benign. Although some of the above hypotheses were falsified by the results, some interesting trends do emerge. Hypothesis One contends that a news frame that dramatizes political interaction would lower public esteem for political leaders. The dependent variable in Table 4 is an additive index of three separate leadership support measures. This index provides a more comprehensive look at support for political leaders as a whole—not simply one leader or leaders from a single institution (see Table 1 for description of the index). Table 4 shows exposure to dramatic news has a significant negative effect on the indexed measure of support for political leaders, even when indirect effects are controlled. The comprehensiveness of the indexed measure provides enough evidence to accept the contention that brief exposure to a dramatic political news story may negatively influence support for some political leaders. Not surprisingly, support for political leaders is also significantly influenced by party identification, with Republicans displaying higher levels of support. Indirectly, the interaction between the dramatic frame and political knowledge indicates that the experimental stimulus lowered support most for those with less political knowledge, while those with the highest knowledge were less susceptible to the main effect of the dramatic frame.

Hypothesis Two states that dramatic news increases political cynicism. This hypothesis is driven by the theory that elements of dramatic narrative paint a picture of the political world that is frustrating to the public, and this

Table 4. Factor Analysis: Trust in the Media

Variable	Leadership Support Index ^a
Dramatic Frame ^b	-1.09 (.60)*
Political Knowledge ^c	-.19 (.12)
Party ID ^d	.28 (.07)*
Race ^e	.39 (.31)
Gender ^f	.87 (.47)*
Education ^g	-.15 (.13)
Family Income	.08 (.05)
Drama x Knowledge	.27 (.13)*
Drama x Gender	-.36 (.42)
Drama x Education	.05 (.19)
Gender x Knowledge	-.23 (.13)*
Constant	7.57 (.59)
Adjusted R ²	.14
N	247

*p < .05 (one-tailed test)

Note: Cell entries are OLS estimate with standard errors in parentheses.

^aDependent variable is an additive indexed measure of support, combining responses from three survey items: (1) Overall, do you approve or disapprove of the way the President is handling his job? 1 = strongly disapprove . . . 5 = strongly approve; (2) Overall, how would you rate the performance of the leaders of Congress? 1 = poor; 2 = only fair; 3 = good; 4 = excellent; (3) Overall, how would you rate the performance of our political leaders in [your state]? 1 = poor; 2 = only fair; 3 = good; 4 = excellent. The scale ranges from 3 (lowest possible support for political leaders) to 13 (highest possible support for political leaders).

^b1 = subjects exposed to dramatic news frame; 0 = non-dramatic news frame.

^c0 to 5 scale. 0 = lowest knowledge . . . 5 = highest knowledge.

^d7 point scale. 1 = strong Democrat . . . 7 = strong Republican.

^e1 = white; 0 = non-white.

^f1 = male; 0 = female.

^gNumber of years spent in college.

frustration creates a cynical view of the system. To measure the effect of dramatic news on political cynicism, the posttest survey contains several items that gauged external political inefficacy, internal inefficacy, and trust in public officials. Table 5 shows the effect of the dramatic news frame on the various components of political cynicism (see Table 2 for cynicism survey items). The effect of drama on any aspect of cynicism does not reach statistical significance, so Hypothesis Two must be rejected.⁴ Furthermore, there was no evidence indicating that exposure to the dramatic frame significantly interacted with knowledge, gender, or education to influence cynicism.

Table 6 shows the effect of drama on support for political institutions. Hypothesis Three states that institutional support suffers as a result of

Table 5. Political Cynicism

Variable	External Inefficacy ^a	Internal Inefficacy ^b	Trust in Public Officials ^c
Dramatic Frame	.05 (1.06)	-.37 (.47)	.08 (.70)
Political Knowledge	-.25 (.21)	-.19 (.09)*	-.08 (.14)
Party ID	-.11 (.12)	.07 (.05)	.28 (.08)*
Race	-.73 (.55)	-.25 (.24)	.19 (.37)
Gender	-.26 (.83)	.04 (.37)	.12 (.55)
Education	-.14 (.24)	-.16 (.11)	.03 (.16)
Family Income	-.04 (.09)	-.05 (.04)	.09 (.06)
Drama x Knowledge	-.22 (.23)	-.03 (.10)	.09 (.15)
Drama x Gender	.30 (.74)	.24 (.33)	-.23 (.49)
Drama x Education	.28 (.34)	.16 (.15)	-.13 (.22)
Gender x Knowledge	.11 (.23)	-.10 (.10)	.07 (.15)
Constant	11.48 (1.04)*	4.31 (.46)*	5.14 (.69)*
Adjusted R ²	.02	.10	.05
N	254	254	253

*p<.05 (one-tailed test)

Note: Cell entries are OLS estimate with standard errors in parentheses.

^aThe indexed measure was a scale of 3 (lowest possible external inefficacy) to 15 (highest possible external inefficacy). The external Inefficacy index was based on respondent agreement with the following three statements: (1) I don't think public officials care much what people like me think; (2) Generally speaking, those we elect to Congress lose touch with the people pretty quickly; and (3) People like me don't have any say about what the government does. Respondents could either agree or disagree with each of the three statements on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = somewhat disagree; 3 = neither agree or disagree; 4 = somewhat agree; 5 = strongly agree).

^bInternal inefficacy was based on respondent agreement with the following statement: Sometimes politics and government seems so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on. Respondents could either agree or disagree with the statement on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = somewhat disagree; 3 = neither agree or disagree; 4 = somewhat agree; 5 = strongly agree). Low scores indicated low inefficacy, and high scores indicated high levels of inefficacy.

^cThe indexed measure was a scale of 2 (lowest possible trust) to 10 (highest possible trust). The trust index was based on respondent agreement with the following two statements: (1) Today, I trust the U.S. Congress to do the right thing; and (2) Today, I trust the President to do the right thing. Respondents could either agree or disagree with the statements on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = somewhat disagree; 3 = neither agree or disagree; 4 = somewhat agree; 5 = strongly agree). Low scores indicated low trust, and high scores indicated high levels of trust.

exposure to dramatic news. This hypothesis is driven by the argument that portraying political institutions in a dramatic light will make the institutions appear inefficient and unresponsive, and thus draw negative responses. Two indicators of institutional support are used in the models reported in Table 6. The first indicator, reported in the first column of Table 6, measures support for Congress. The second indicator, reported in the second column of Table 6, measures respondents' ratings of Congress and the president's ability to

Table 6. Institutional Support

Variable	Support for Congress ^a	Faith in Congressional and Presidential Cooperation ^b
Dramatic Frame	.16 (.44)	-.29 (.45)
Political Knowledge	.12 (.09)	-.09 (.09)
Party ID	.08 (.05)*	.05 (.05)
Race	.21 (.23)	.03 (.24)
Gender	.37 (.35)	.21 (.36)
Education	.08 (.10)	.06 (.10)
Family Income	.04 (.04)	.05 (.04)
Drama x Knowledge	.05 (.10)	.16 (.10)
Drama x Gender	.26 (.32)	-.07 (.32)
Drama x Education	-.19 (.14)	-.05 (.14)
Gender x Knowledge	-.20 (.10)*	-.09 (.10)
Constant 1	-1.66	-1.30
Constant 2	.06	.43
Constant 3	1.09	2.64
Constant 4	3.81	—
Log Likelihood	-261.33	-230.12
χ^2 (11)	13.98	8.73
N	254	254

* $p < .05$ (one-tailed test)

Note: Cell entries are ordered probit estimates. Standard errors are in parentheses.

^a1 = strongly disapprove . . . 5 = strongly approve.

^b1 = poor; 2 = only fair; 3 = good; 4 = excellent.

work together in passing laws. These two items examine institutional support from two different angles, looking at support for a single institution (Congress) and faith in the two most powerful institutions to work together effectively in performing their constitutional roles (Congress and the President working together to pass legislation). The items had a weakly moderate relationship ($r = .35$), and thus were not combined into a single index measure.

The results, however, do not substantiate Hypothesis Three. It is clear from the findings reported in Table 6 that support for Congress is not influenced by dramatic news coverage. Likewise, faith in the ability of the legislature and executive branches to work together in passing laws does not depend on dramatic news either. Exposure to the dramatic frame did not interact with knowledge, gender, or education to significantly influence institutional support.

Although support for governmental institutions does not appear to vary as a result of exposure to dramatic political news coverage, opinion toward

the news media is a different situation. The news media, often referred to as the “fourth branch of government,” has continued to gain recognition as a viable political institution in American politics (Cook 1998; Dautrich and Hartley 1999; Sparrow 1999). The dependent variable used in Table 7 is an additive index of five separate survey items measuring trust in the media (see Table 3 for exact question wording of each item in the index and factor loadings). Table 7 shows that overall trust in the media’s ability to fairly and accurately cover politics drops as a result of exposure to dramatic news coverage. Additionally, political knowledge is a significant predictor as well, indicating that knowledgeable individuals are more skeptical of the news media. Family income, on the other hand, positively correlates with support for the news media. Indirectly, both political knowledge and gender interacted with exposure to the dramatic frame to significantly influence trust in the news media. Knowledgeable individuals that read the dramatic frame reacted less negatively to the stimulus than others, and men’s trust in the news media appears to diminish greater than women’s as a result of reading dramatic news.

This finding illustrated in Table 7 indicates that trust in the media as an institution suffers from dramatized political news coverage. By dramatizing the news to gain a larger audience, the media jeopardize their own legitimacy. Taking the liberty to inject dramatic elements into a story appears to backfire in this respect. Dramatizing the political world plays into many of the preexisting criticisms held in the public—the media are too negative, too preoccupied with conflict and scandal, and too subjective (Fallows 1996).

Why, then, would media outlets produce overly dramatic news? Would not the possible loss of credibility with the public be a deterrent to dramatizing news? The first column in Table 8 provides an answer to this concern. Although dramatically framed news may provoke less-than-positive attitudes toward the news media as a whole, it has great potential to capture public interest and attention. The results in the first column of Table 8 illustrate that exposure to the dramatic frame of news increases interest in the story. Additionally, interest in the experimental news story is also positively correlated with political knowledge, which is not surprising given that political knowledge has been found to determine an individual’s interest in political news. The gender effect is interesting as well, indicating that men had more overall interest in the experimental news story.

The second column of Table 8, however, complicates the results. By including the interaction variables in the model, the effect of the dramatic frame is diminished. Instead, the interaction of the dramatic frame and gender that significantly influences interest in the news story. This interaction shows that men’s interest in a news story is more conditional on the dramatic presentation than women’s.

Table 7. Trust in the News Media

Variable	Trust in the News Media ^a
Dramatic Frame	-3.46 (1.61)*
Political Knowledge	-.76 (.32)*
Party ID	.09 (.18)
Race	-.16 (.86)
Gender	1.90 (1.28)
Education	-.42 (.36)
Family Income	.28 (.14)*
Drama x Knowledge	1.09 (.36)*
Drama x Gender	-1.96 (1.14)*
Drama x Education	.12 (.52)
Gender x Knowledge	-.25 (.36)
Constant	14.88 (1.61)*
Adjusted R ²	.05
N	253

*p < .05 (one-tailed test)

Note: Cell entries are OLS estimate with standard errors in parentheses.

^aThe indexed measure was a scale of 5 (lowest possible trust) to 25 (highest possible trust). The media trust index was based on respondent agreement with each of the following five statements: (1) Today, I trust the media to cover political events fairly and accurately; (2) Today, I trust newspapers to cover political events fairly and accurately; (3) Today, I trust network television news (ABC, CBS, NBC) to cover political events fairly and accurately; (4) Today, I trust cable news channels (Fox News, MSNBC, CNN) to cover political events fairly and accurately; and (5) Today, I trust tabloids to cover political events fairly and accurately. Respondents could either agree or disagree with each of the five statements on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = somewhat disagree; 3 = neither agree or disagree; 4 = somewhat agree; 5 = strongly agree).

Overall, subjects in the dramatic news group displayed more interest in the story than subjects exposed to the less dramatic story, implying that a dramatic story can generate higher levels of interest and capture public interest, while a less dramatic version of the same story fails to do so. This effect, however, was contingent on gender. Nevertheless, this finding indicates a potential benefit for the media outlets that can successfully dramatize the news—more interested viewers who are more compelled to follow the drama as it unfolds over a period of a day, weeks, or even months. This finding supports Hypothesis Four, which states that dramatic news is considered more entertaining than news lacking drama.

It is important to note, however, that the interest dramatic news generates for a story does not translate into broader political interests. The third and fourth column of Table 8 shows no relationship between the dramatic frame and interest in national and international affairs (general political interest). Political knowledge was the only direct variable in the model to

Table 8. Institutional Support

Variable	Interest in Experimental News Story ^a		General Political Interest ^b	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Dramatic Frame	.52 (.27)*	.98 (.83)	.11 (.23)	.33 (.72)
Political Knowledge	.29 (.09)*	.31 (.16)*	.58 (.08)*	.47 (.14)*
Party ID	.06 (.09)	.08 (.09)	.01 (.08)	.01 (.08)
Race	.39 (.44)	.39 (.44)	-.31 (.38)	-.31 (.38)
Gender	.52 (.29)*	1.80 (.65)*	.06 (.25)	.61 (.57)
Education	-.13 (.14)	-.08 (.19)	.10 (.12)	.08 (.16)
Family Income	.07 (.07)	.07 (.07)	.10 (.06)	.11 (.06)*
Constant	4.20 (.66)*	3.65 (.82)*	4.98 (.57)*	4.91 (.71)*
Drama x Knowledge	—	.13 (.18)	—	.12 (.15)
Drama x Gender	—	-1.38 (.58)*	—	-1.37 (.51)*
Drama x Education	—	-.07 (.27)	—	.06 (.23)
Gender x Knowledge	—	-.20 (.18)	—	.06 (.16)
Adjusted R ²	.08	.09	.08	.21
N	254	254	254	254

*p<.05 (one-tailed test)

Note: Cell entries are OLS estimate with standard errors in parentheses.

^aThe indexed measure was a scale of 2 (lowest interest) to 10 (highest possible interest). The index was based on respondent agreement with the both of the two following statements: (1) I was interested in the political news story attached to this questionnaire; and (2) I would like to read more about the story attached to this questionnaire. Respondents could either agree or disagree with each statement on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = somewhat disagree; 3 = neither agree or disagree; 4 = somewhat agree; 5 = strongly agree). The two items are strongly correlated (r = .85), and thus can be combined into a single additive measure.

^bThe indexed measure was a scale of 2 (lowest interest) to 10 (highest possible interest). The index was based on respondent agreement with the both of the two following statements: (1) I have a great deal of interest in national affairs; and (2) I have a great deal of interest in international affairs. The two items are strongly correlated (r = .78), and thus can be combined into a single additive measure.

significantly correlate with general political interest. This finding regarding the effect of dramatic news on *general political interest* is important because it displays that dramatic news environment has greater potential to stimulate interest in that particular story than overall political interest. There is little ability to create a more politically interested or engaged public.

Discussion

Drama intrigues viewers, and dramatic news has the potential to benefit journalists wishing to capture the public’s attention. The experimental analysis reported in this research illustrates that dramatically-framed political

news has an impact on the public, although the results are somewhat mixed. The findings indicate that support for political leaders erodes as a result of exposure to dramatized news. Also, attitudes toward the media are influenced as well. Subjects exposed to the dramatic frame of news illustrated much more hostility toward the news media than subjects exposed to straight news. Finally, an equally compelling finding was that subjects expressed more interest in dramatic news, and expressed a greater willingness to follow the story in the future. This interest, however, was contingent upon gender and limited to the news story contained in the experimental stimulus. There was little evidence that the interest spilled over into broader issues of domestic or international politics. Lenart and McGraw (1989) found that fictitious political docudrama on television can shift policy attitudes of viewers, and this analysis illustrates that dramatization of political news spills over into influencing broader opinions, particularly support for leaders and the mass media.

The null effect of dramatic news on public support for governmental political institutions and cynicism toward the system as a whole are surprising, especially considering the indications from earlier literature. Instead, the public's negative response to dramatically framed news is directed toward political leaders and the news media. In part, these null findings are likely the result of the public's growing tendency to view the media and political leaders as increasingly separate from the larger institutions or the political system as a whole. The American political system has become increasingly candidate-centered and personalized (Patterson 1993), and the media continues to grow in visibility as a viable political entity itself (Cook 1998; Fallows 1996; Sparrow 1999). As a result, support for government institutions and feelings toward the political system as a whole does not suffer as a result of exposure to a dramatized story regarding the actions of political leaders.

This article provides an empirical and theoretical contribution to understanding media effects in America. If dramatizing the news does indeed damage the credibility of our political leaders, there could be further erosion of public confidence if the media's dramatic coverage continues to expand. Also troubling is the negative influence the media's over-dramatization can have on public trust in that institution. As new media sources continue to spice their political news coverage in the continuous quest to capture and keep an audience, support for the entire institution may continue to plummet as a consequence. Because Americans rely heavily on the media to follow political news and events, a further erosion of trust in the institution could discourage political learning and participation.

Dramatic news does have a discernable effect on the public. By focusing on individual elements of drama, such as conflict, negativity, and

political strategy, earlier analyses have found negative effects regarding public support for political leaders and the system as a whole (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Fallows 1996; Patterson 1994). The contribution of this analysis has been to show that these elements of drama, which are becoming more prevalent in today's political news coverage, work together to negatively influence support for political leaders and trust in the news media as an institution. As the media perpetuate drama in their coverage of politics, public support for the "fourth branch" suffers, as does support for public officials. The media, however, continue to pursue this course to their own detriment because of the short-term payoff of generating public interest in a given story. This is the cycle we are witnessing in today's political news environment—a cycle that shows no sign of slowing.

APPENDIX

Experimental Stimulus

Part 1: Non-dramatic Frame

CONGRESS, PRESIDENT DEBATE ECONOMIC PLAN

President Urging Up to \$75 Billion to Revive Economy

By Sue Ellen

President Bush has recently urged Congress to pass a package of tax cuts and additional spending worth up to \$75 Billion as part of an economic stimulus package.

Republican and Democratic leaders said they would support an economic recovery plan of the scale suggested by Mr. Bush. But they said there was no agreement yet on the plan's components, and some Republicans expressed concerns about spending increases.

Democrats were largely displeased with many of the President's proposals.

In particular, Democrats demanded that the individual income tax cuts go primarily or exclusively to low- and middle-income people. Under the across-the-board reduction in tax rates favored by the administration, the benefits would accrue mostly to upper-income people, who pay the most in income taxes.

But in a sign of the tricky task the administration faces in piecing together a plan that can win broad bipartisan support, the White House's approach came in for heavy criticism from Republicans on Capitol Hill, especially conservatives who object to increased government spending and tax cuts that would be limited to low-income people. They said that the White House was caving in to demands from Democrats too quickly and dissipating the economic impact of the stimulus plan in the process.

Lawmakers want to use the recovery package to address a wide range of economic issues. Congressman Jack Miller, Republican of Arizona, urged with a great deal of enthusiasm that the administration support construction of a natural gas pipeline from his state to Chicago. Congressman Benjamin Johnson, Democrat of Minnesota, is strongly opposed to spending the stimulus money in such a manner.

As a practical matter, the legislative maneuvers are as much a political exercise as a fiscal and economic one. President Bush's political strategy is to position himself as the

Appendix continues

APPENDIX (continued)

voice of moderation and to portray liberal Democrats as overly partisan. In accordance with this strategy, the President used his recent radio and television address to challenge his opponents to negotiate with him to generate comprehensive stimulus plan.

As a response, House and Senate strategists said this week that congressional Democrats were likely to create their own version of an economic stimulus plan, confronting the President with the possibility of a potentially slow and bitter debate over how the money should be spent.

Part II: Dramatic Frame

A NATION CHALLENGED: THE ECONOMY

A Dramatic Battle in Congress Set to Begin over America's Future

By Sue Ellen

President Bush has recently urged Congress to pass a package of tax cuts and additional spending worth up to \$75 Billion as part of an economic stimulus package.

Republican and Democratic leaders said they would support an economic recovery plan of the scale suggested by Mr. Bush. But they said there was no agreement yet on the plan's components, and some Republicans expressed concerns about spending increases.

Several characters have emerged as key players in the debate over where the stimulus money should go. The process now resembles a game of who can claim the most pork. Congressman Jack Miller, Republican of Arizona, urged with a great deal of enthusiasm that the administration support construction of a natural gas pipeline from his state to Chicago. His overbearing personality coupled with a reputation for generating controversy in the House created a dramatic response from the opposition.

Congressman Benjamin Johnson, Democrat of Minnesota, is strongly opposed to spending the stimulus money in such a manner. Johnson said, "We will not be bullied. It's time the American public became aware of the way Mr. Miller and others like him are abusing their power. These congressmen, Democrat and Republican, have manipulated their way to power by slyly stealing from the American public."

Democrats were largely displeased with many of the President's proposals.

In particular, Democrats demanded that the individual income tax cuts go primarily or exclusively to low- and middle-income people. Under the across-the-board reduction in tax rates favored by the administration, the benefits would accrue mostly to upper-income people, who pay the most in income taxes.

But in a sign of the tricky task the administration faces in piecing together a plan that can win broad bipartisan support, the White House's approach came in for heavy criticism from Republicans on Capitol Hill, especially conservatives who object to increased government spending and tax cuts that would be limited to low-income people. They said that the White House was caving in to demands from Democrats too quickly and dissipating the economic impact of the stimulus plan in the process.

As a practical matter, the legislative maneuvers are as much a political exercise as a fiscal and economic one. President Bush's political strategy is to position himself as the voice of moderation and to portray liberal Democrats as overly partisan. In accordance

with this strategy, the President used his recent radio and television address to challenge his opponents to negotiate with him to generate comprehensive stimulus plan.

As a response, House and Senate strategists said this week that congressional Democrats were likely to create their own version of an economic stimulus plan, confronting the President with the possibility of a potentially slow and bitter debate over how the money should be spent.

NOTES

¹The most compelling example of dramatizing news from the Gulf War can be found surrounding the rescue of Private Jessica Lynch, who was taken prisoner of war following an attack on her convoy during the first few days of the American invasion of Iraq. Initial accounts of the capture and rescue aired on broadcast and cable television networks told dramatic stories of firefights and acts of heroism that were highly compelling. These dramatized tales, however, were later found to be inaccurate.

²Instead of presenting news of an actual dramatic issue or event, the dramatic frame of this experiment was an overdramatization of a story that would be considered mundane by most individuals. See the Appendix.

³In the models that use an additive index as the dependent variable, ordered probit and OLS regression analysis was conducted. Because there was no substantive or significant difference between the estimates, the OLS findings were presented in order to maintain consistency across models where the dependent variable was an index score. Ordered probit was maintained only when the estimates differed significantly from OLS estimates for ordinal dependent variables.

⁴Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995) argue that less partisan voters become more cynical and inefficacious as a result of negative advertising. This contention was tested with regard to dramatic news by running the analysis for only partisan moderates (independents and weak partisans). The results did not differ from the results on all subjects, indicating neutral partisans were not apt to respond negatively to political drama.

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