

The Makers of Meaning: National Public Radio and the New Long Journalism, 1980–2000

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U.S. news media have seen the simultaneous shrinking of political sound bites and audience ratings in the past quarter century. The news also shifted away from event-centered coverage, instead emphasizing reporters and their opinions in what has been called the new long journalism. To observe the depth of these trends, this case study looks at a potential exception to the rule: National Public Radio. Since the late 1970s, its flagship news programs, “All Things Considered” and “Morning Edition,” have evolved from an alternative source of opinion and information, based on lengthy sound features, into a primary news service. Content analysis of election-year samples reveals a fundamental change affecting most aspects of NPR reports and sound bites. Although insulated somewhat from the market, the programs became more—not less—centered on journalists and their opinions. The coverage did not provide more of the background and information needed to make sense of political events, despite the NPR mission to involve the public. The nostrum for shrinking sound bites and audience ratings—that journalists do a better job of explaining the context that gives political events meaning—thus had unintended consequences, making journalists more important as sense-makers, empowering them rather than citizens.

Keywords elections, journalism, news, NPR, politics, radio, reporting, speech, sound bites, sources

Until 1980, when journalists routinely said thank you at the end of an interview on National Public Radio, politicians replied, “You’re welcome,” if they responded at all. Within 20 years, “You’re welcome” had all but disappeared from political usage. Instead, when the reporter offered thanks after an interview, the politician replied, “Thank you.” This shift in manners, although subtle, reveals a qualitative change in the status of NPR reporting. In 1980, “All Things Considered” and “Morning Edition” were still new

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and somewhat outside the mainstream of American news. The presidential elections that year were the first held after both programs were on the air, and political candidates, especially incumbents, clearly did a public service by taking time to appear on the fledgling programs. By the 2000 election, all that had changed. During the intervening election cycles, NPR news transformed into a mainstream institution and its journalists into prominent voices in public discussion. Politicians by 2000 had abandoned all pretense of generosity, insisting instead on their own indebtedness for the chance to appear on NPR.

Beyond anecdotal accounts, the transformation of NPR into the *New York Times* of the air has been little studied, but the redefinition of news on NPR parallels a longer trend in U.S. news that began decades earlier. The new long journalism grew out of changes in the professional practices of journalists and in their authority as meaning-makers, especially when covering politics. In other media, the change affected each aspect of news content (the who, what, when, where, how, and why), as well as the forms of news presentation (the length of reports, the structure of journalist speech, and the use of visual imagery and dramatic effects). This article quantifies the trend on the flagship NPR news programs as part of a larger project tracking the redefinition of news—and its political ramifications—during the past century.

Redefining News

Serious news early in the 19th century was largely denotative, and political news was often presented as a transcription of official acts and ceremonies (Schudson, 1978). The definition of news evolved over the course of that century, as the newspaper industry became first more partisan and then more commercial and industrial (Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001). By the end of that century, what gave journalism urgency was the *new*, finding stories that had not already been told, which produced the now-familiar doctrine of the “scoop,” a competition to relate stories first.

In the course of the 20th century, U.S. journalism gradually redefined itself again, shifting initially from storytelling into rendering events factually, but moving subsequently to emphasize the interpretation of events. Several studies point to the trend. Schudson (1982) looked at newspaper coverage of the State of the Union address and found that each period since the mid-19th century had become more interpretive. Patterson (1993) also observed a movement away from descriptive campaign coverage in the *New York Times* of the 1960s and toward interpretation in front-page stories by the 1992 election.

A similar trend also occurred in television news (Schudson, 1982). Some histories quote prominent journalists who observed the change first hand (Donovan & Scherer, 1992), and others cite market pressures (McManus, 1994). Hallin (1992) saw the interpretive role of journalists increase as political candidates faced shrinking sound bites on network newscasts. The level of interpretation varies for different content and coverage (Iyengar, 1991), but the faster pacing of all television news accompanied more visually entertaining formats (Adatto, 1993). Less focus on event coverage and more on explanation and interpretation produced less lively storytelling for news, but changes in form then added visual variety.

Research on the long journalism hypothesis has analyzed the new form and content that emerged. A content analysis of three U.S. newspapers found that stories began to emphasize social problems and interpretations over the past century (Barnhurst & Mutz, 1997). Newspaper stories grew longer, added more interpretation, focused away from specific locations to broader regions, emphasized more history, and talked of more groups,

officials, and outside sources while naming fewer ordinary people. Studies of newspaper format confirm the trend away from pages filled with many small news items and toward pages on which journalists use their expertise to order and prioritize events (Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001). The resulting simplicity and clarity made news pages appear less lively, and newspapers began to make adjustments in layout, including more self-promotional items and visual effects (Barnhurst, 1994). The trends toward more abstract content and more dramatized form together have tended to enhance the prominence and authority of print journalists without necessarily adding depth to coverage.

On television, a related pattern emerged. Content analysis of network newscasts during U.S. presidential campaigns of the past 30 years found that, as commercials took more time and soft news expanded, political coverage shrank overall. Journalists, however, tended to hold their ground (especially in light of the shrinking sound bite). They offered a growing number of judgments and evaluations about the candidates and elections (Steele & Barnhurst, 1996). They also altered the form of newscasts, masking abstract interpretations by changing to more entertaining and attractive formats. They played their own images larger and more frequently on screen while reducing politicians to brief image bites (Barnhurst & Steele, 1997).

The rise of NPR came after news had been redefined, and so its news programs might be expected to provide a counterexample to the trends in other media. As newspapers changed, they adopted longer forms. Once television began to scoop newspapers routinely for breaking news, print editors argued that they could still compete by providing background (Barnhurst & Mutz, 1997). Under pressure from the visual marketplace, however, TV journalists responded by expanding explanations too, expressing more opinions while reducing the length of reports and sound bites. Public radio provides a vantage point to triangulate the move to more explanatory content, more dramatic forms, and more authoritative journalists by controlling for the dimensions of visual form, which is absent, and commercial advertising, which is less prevalent than in other news media.

Development of NPR

National Public Radio became the object of scholarly inquiry soon after launching its flagship news programs. Studies began emerging in the early 1980s in response to conservative charges of so-called liberal bias and the effort to limit the role of public broadcasting (all of which accompanied a budget crisis at NPR; see Witherspoon & Kovitz, 1987). In fact, one analysis of bias found that “All Things Considered” subjected presidential coverage to more negative reporting than other topics received (Larson, 1989). Republican presidents fared especially poorly, with Ford and Reagan getting more minutes of negative coverage than did Carter.

Conservatives expressed antipathy toward NPR news partly because the network used public funding to air diverse points of view (Ledbetter, 1997). Founded in 1970, “All Things Considered” in its first 10 years emphasized long sound-based features and documentaries analyzing social issues, designed to distinguish NPR from commercial radio and based on a philosophy of giving voice to common people and preparing listeners to participate in democracy (Doyle, 1990). Content and adult-learning analyses of its early years confirm the program did just that. Legal and political affairs placed highest on the list of coverage and satisfied listeners’ need to stay current and perform their civic responsibilities (Larson, 1985). At the end of its first decade, despite institutional growth, public broadcasting remained “on the margins of public discourse and support” (Rowland, 1986, p. 270).

The marginal status and populist aims of NPR changed over the next decade, largely as a result of its “contradictory mission: to create a single national identity while giving voice to those excluded by the marketplace” (McCourt, 1999, p. 1). Beginning in the early 1980s, the network moved away from its roots as an experimental alternative to commercial broadcasting and into the mainstream (McCauley, 1997). The network reached bureaucratic stability during the period, with large audiences and budgets, partly by focusing on national news in response to pressures from affiliate stations. Institutional advancement for NPR came at the cost of its own difference, in editorial content and tone, from commercial radio. That NPR news is now “part of the establishment” has also been recognized by the journalism trade press (see, e.g., Porter, 1990). A content analysis during 1991 confirmed that “All Things Considered” had drifted toward the mainstream and had become “grounded in the same journalistic values” (Stavitsky & Gleason, 1994, p. 782).

Much of the research on NPR focuses on its first decade, and subsequent studies have laid the historical groundwork, with ample discussion of the journalists and institutional setting (e.g., Engleman, 1996). Popular accounts of public radio have also followed (e.g., Looker, 1995), but no previous study has undertaken long-term measurements of NPR news content.

Analyzing NPR Content

This study focuses on public radio news during election years, beginning with all topics before examining political reports in detail. Did the reports on NPR get either longer, as in newspapers, or shorter, as on television? Did the coverage follow other trends in mainstream news? If so, the emphasis will have shifted toward interpretation, moved from nearby events to larger geographic areas, and become less neutral in tone. After examining any changes in political reports, the study then looks at their constituent elements: speech acts and sound bites. Did political speech on NPR follow the trends found on television? If so, journalists would speak relatively more, while politicians, expert sources, and ordinary citizens speak less. Hosts would interview other journalists, and their talk would be less denotative (focused on information, events, and action) and more connotative (focused on historical background, current meanings, and future outcomes).

The study includes NPR coverage for six election years during the 20-year period since “Morning Edition” and “All Things Considered” have both been on the air. The sample comprises a randomly constructed week (Monday through Friday), with each weekday drawn independently, and includes all of the reports from both programs that aired on each day. Transcripts (from Nexis) as well as audio links (from the NPR Web site) were available on line for broadcasts after 1990, and earlier broadcasts were available on audiotape (from the network and the U.S. National Archives).

The two programs began the period under study with quite different patterns of organizing and presenting content. “Morning Edition” was standardized, relying on a formula that arranged relatively short stories into an hour meant to serve an audience of commuters. “All Things Considered” was initially less tightly structured, which permitted more variety and more long-form reporting. Over the period, however, the two programs came to resemble each other, with the afternoon program adopting some of the patterns of its morning counterpart and the morning program moving in the direction of longer-form reports.

Despite these differences, each day’s programming might provide a full range of content: packaged reports, interviews, features, commentaries, and occasional live events.

To focus on in-depth coverage, the study excluded news roundups and teasers that open the programs and the recaps and next-ups that air each half hour. In the general run of coverage, all other forms of content were included, but in coverage dealing with politics, whether domestic or international, NPR producers usually limit the forms to packages and interviews—the modes of hard news—along with some commentaries. Although the sample included both programs from each randomly selected day, no duplicate reports were aired on both programs.

The report served as the unit of analysis when research questions focused on the changing definition of news. For each report, coders took note of length, topic, and proximity (local to international). Besides these manifest measures, coders rated two latent variables: emphasis (to indicate whether the report centered on event coverage or on interpretive news analysis, using a 10-point scale developed by Barnhurst & Mutz, 1997) and tone (to record whether the report was negative, mixed or ambiguous, neutral, or positive, using an approach adapted from Hallin, 1992).

The speech act served as the unit of analysis for questions concerning the relative prominence of reporters and their sources in the news. Coders recorded each time a journalist or a source spoke continuously, and any single report could have several sources, each with multiple speech acts. Besides two manifest variables, the length of each speech and the type of speaker (including several categories of journalists, politicians, experts, and non-elite sources), the study included two latent variables. Coders classified each speech act according to what task the speaker accomplished: providing information, expressing an opinion, offering a suggestion, asking a question, or reacting negatively or positively (categories developed by Bales, 1951, and adapted to news by Steele & Barnhurst, 1996). Coders also classified each speech act by its function, a variable designed to capture how journalists recount news stories: indicating action, identifying a character or scene, providing background, interpreting, or interjecting (categories developed by Barnhurst, Hallin, & Steele, 1997).

An assessment of intercoder reliability was first completed using transcripts. A subset of reports for 1996 was then coded again using tapes, and no appreciable differences in coding were found between tapes and transcripts. The coding proved quite reliable (Scott's π averaged .85, ranging from .72 for latent to 1.00 for some manifest variables).

Because the study explores the direction of historical change, further analyses looked for meaningful differences over time. To test for trends, regressions were calculated predicting changes in the variables based on the passage of time. Simple linear models were run for continuous variables, such as length and emphasis, and curvilinear models (probit or ordered probit) were run for noncontinuous variables, such as location and tone. As noted in what follows, for most of the regression analyses, a significant prediction was obtained in the expected direction; that is, news on NPR usually followed the trends in other U.S. news media.

More Interpretive Reports

The long journalism hypothesis suggested that newspaper stories became longer overall, that the emphasis in the reporting moved from event-centered coverage to interpretive news analysis, and that the tone of reports became more negative (Barnhurst, 1994). The data for the full range of reports on the two NPR programs show that stories did get longer (Table 1). The average report grew by almost a third in length over the period, from three and a half minutes to four and almost three quarters. As the reports grew longer, they also became more consistent (as reflected in the declining standard

Table 1
 NPR reports: Some descriptive aspects of reports on
 "All Things Considered" and "Morning Edition," 1980–2000

	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000
Length						
Seconds, <i>M</i>	212.34	223.84	242.48	270.92	281.44	281.55
<i>SD</i>	182.84	153.53	152.14	152.14	111.62	134.60
Emphasis, on a scale from most event-centered (1) to most focused on interpretative news analysis (10)						
Rating, <i>M</i>	4.61	4.73	4.87	6.47	6.90	6.55
<i>SD</i>	2.26	2.49	1.88	2.40	1.97	1.95
Tone, in an ordered range: negative (1), mixed/ambiguous (2), neutral (3), positive (4)						
Rating, <i>M</i>	2.94	2.97	2.99	2.40	2.27	2.59
<i>SD</i>	.60	.62	.55	1.00	1.08	1.11
Location, percentage ^a by geographic domain, based on smallest location of coverage						
Local	21.2	8.6	8.2	11.4	13.1	7.0
State/regional	7.9	13.1	12.8	20.5	10.5	15.2
National	36.7	39.2	33.8	41.7	51.0	51.3
International	34.2	39.2	45.2	26.5	25.5	26.6
Politics						
Percentage	16.2	20.8	23.7	25.8	45.8	32.3
<i>SD</i>	36.9	40.7	42.7	43.9	50.0	46.9
Cases, <i>N</i>	278	245	219	132	153	158

^aColumns may not total 100% due to rounding.

deviations). The longer reports left room for fewer stories during each broadcast. Between 1992 and 1996, "Morning Edition" broadcasts went from 90 to 120 minutes, so that both programs ran the same length. In the length of reports and the overall length of the programs, NPR news became more ample, paralleling the way newspapers expanded the volume of pages as stories got longer (Barnhurst & Mutz, 1997).

In previous studies, news stories also shifted in emphasis, moving away from event-centered reporting (at the low extreme of a 10-point scale) and more toward news analysis (at the other end). The emphasis in reports on NPR likewise moved in the same direction (see Table 1). NPR reports focused much more on interpretation than did the general run of newspaper articles from the previous study (where the means also grew slightly but never reached beyond 3 on the same 10-point scale; Barnhurst & Mutz, 1997). On NPR, reports began higher on the scale of emphasis and moved even higher still, peaking in 1996 and ending more than a third higher than where they began. The changes occurred over a 20-year period and increased much more than newspaper articles did over a much longer period. NPR was less denotative than newspapers, as expected.

The long journalism hypothesis initially suggested that reporting had moved toward

a more negative tone. That trend turns up in the overall NPR coverage (see Table 1), but the changes were more complex than predicted. Reports throughout the period came very close to neutral on average, with coverage leaning slightly toward the positive pole in the 1980s and then in the next decade slipping toward the negative pole. When the categories are examined in detail, the share of neutral stories declined by half over the period (the numbers of mixed and ambiguous stories moved up and down in no clear pattern). Positive and negative reports both increased, but the number of negative stories grew more (from 5.8% of reports in 1980 to 25.9% in 2000) than positive stories did (from 9.0% to 22.8%). Although consonant with the predicted direction of change, these results suggest that the relation of tone to long journalism is complex.

Previous studies measured a shift in geographic domain away from reporting local events. That change also emerges in the overall NPR coverage (see Table 1). International news coverage grew as a share of reports during the 1980s, then dropped back and stayed roughly level in the next decade. State and regional stories increased initially, then bounced up in 1992 and down in 1996. The most important shifts in geography were away from local and toward national news, which resulted at least in part from institutional pressures and demands from affiliate stations during the 1980s. NPR abandoned more than half of its local coverage after 1980 and did not restore it despite increases in 1992 and 1996. After 1992, national news stories grew to fully half of all reports on the programs. Overall, these complex shifts in the geographic domain of news were significant (Table 2).

The most marked changes in locations occurred in the early election years. When the geographic domains (the ancillary coefficients) are analyzed separately, the overall changes turn out to be largely a result of the drop-off in local coverage (log likelihood = -423.56 , $p < .000$, Pseud. $R^2 = .034$), followed by a decline in international coverage (log likelihood = -748.05 , $p < .000$, Pseud. $R^2 = .016$). More recent changes appear to cancel each other out in the overall analysis, including a further drop in local news in 2000, preceded by a jump in national news (log likelihood = -791.99 , $p < .01$, Pseud. $R^2 = .013$).

In the other aspects measured, significant linear trends occurred in the length of reports and in the emphasis on interpretation. This was true of the change in emphasis despite a slight decline in the final year. The trend toward taking a less neutral tone, although more complex, was also significant, and like the other aspects, much more so in the later election years. In other words, in the general run of reports, the two flagship NPR news programs joined mainstream news outlets, adopting the long journalism, with its dedication to interpretation and analysis as against event coverage, with an increasingly negative but, more importantly, much less neutral tone, and with less attention to local events and greater attention to national coverage.

These trends accompanied another shift, toward expanded coverage of politics (see Table 1). The coverage included stories that NPR reporters identified on the air as political, including those that hosts introduced using politics as a hook. The expansion of political coverage is statistically significant (see Table 2). Political reports increased as a share of the news from 1980 to 1984 and grew slightly in the next two election seasons. The coverage then almost doubled in 1996, and despite a decline in 2000, ended significantly higher than it was in 1980. The expansion of political reports probably measures several moving targets, including journalists' changing use of political angles and attention to political consequences of events, as well as the expansion of what U.S. society includes in the definition of political, some of which had previously been considered private (see Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001).

Table 2

Variations in reports: Regressions for all reports on the NPR programs, 1980–2000

	1980–1984	1984–1988	1988–1992	1992–1996	1996–2000	Constant
Length						
β	11.49	30.14*	58.58***	69.10***	69.21***	212.35***
<i>SE</i>	13.10	13.51	15.80	15.05	14.89	8.97
$R^2 = .033, \text{Adj. } R^2 = .029$						
Emphasis						
β	.11	.25	1.86***	2.28***	1.94***	4.62***
<i>SE</i>	.19	.20	.23	.22	.22	.13
$R^2 = .156, \text{Adj. } R^2 = .153$						
Tone						
Coef.	.06	.07	-.61***	-.74***	-.32**	
<i>SE</i>	.10	.10	.12	.11	.11	
Ancill. Param.: Cut 1 Coef. -1.39, <i>SE</i> .08; Cut 2 Coef. -.90, <i>SE</i> .07; Cut 3 Coef. .95, <i>SE</i> .07						
L.R. $\chi^2 = 87.41, ***$ Log likelihood = -1,244.28, Pseud. $R^2 = .034$						
Location						
Coef.	.26**	.36***	-.04	.01	.09	
<i>SE</i>	.10	.10	.11	.11	.11	
Ancill. Param.: Cut 1 Coef. -1.05, <i>SE</i> .07; Cut 2 Coef. -.56, <i>SE</i> .07; Cut 3 Coef. .54, <i>SE</i> .07						
L.R. $\chi^2 = 22.13***, \text{Log likelihood} = -1,469.45, \text{Pseud. } R^2 = .008$						
Politics						
Coef.	.17	.27*	.34*	.88***	.53***	-.99***
<i>SE</i>	.13	.13	.15	.14	.14	.09
L.R. $\chi^2 = 50.11***, \text{Log likelihood} = -648.62, \text{Pseud. } R^2 = .037$						
Cases, $N = 1,185$						

Note. Models are linear, ordered probit, or probit.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Longer Political Reports

The analysis next turns to a subset of the data that includes only political reports. In the case of television news, the average segment of political coverage grew shorter (Steele & Barnhurst, 1996). Political reports on the NPR programs, however, followed the pattern set by most content in newspapers, growing longer (Table 3).

At the outset, political reports were longer than the general run of NPR news (see Table 1). They dropped back slightly in 1984, but grew longer by 1988 and longer again in each subsequent election year. The increase in length meant that reports in 2000 were a third longer than in 1980. Over the years, a typical day's coverage of the U.S. presidential campaign would include two reports from the trail, but on average, the coverage ran shorter for Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan in 1980 than for George W. Bush and Al Gore in 2000. The largest jump, of some 40 seconds, occurred in 1992, when Bill Clinton first won election.

Table 3
Political reports: Descriptive aspects of political reports
on the NPR programs, 1980–2000

	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000
Length						
Seconds, <i>M</i>	224.24	220.21	244.78	281.94	291.32	292.78
<i>SD</i>	136.51	77.15	194.97	106.54	109.34	136.41
Emphasis						
Rating, <i>M</i>	5.86	5.92	5.63	6.82	7.08	6.66
<i>SD</i>	2.06	2.18	1.70	2.22	1.79	2.02
Tone						
Rating, <i>M</i>	2.80	2.90	2.88	1.97	2.10	2.39
<i>SD</i>	.73	.64	.58	.87	.97	1.05
Themes, percentage ^a for each principal theme						
Issues	68.9	68.6	73.1	38.2	51.4	54.9
Horse race	15.6	9.8	23.1	47.1	40.0	27.5
Character	4.4	13.7	1.9	5.9	2.9	13.7
Polls	8.9	5.9	1.9	2.9	1.4	0
Other	2.2	2.0	0	5.8	4.2	4.0
Cases, <i>N</i>	45	51	52	34	70	51

^aColumns may not total 100% due to rounding.

The data also show a shift toward greater emphasis on interpretation. Political reports throughout the period were less centered on event coverage, and so their shift toward interpretation was less pronounced than for NPR reports in general (see Table 1). Journalists interpreted politics by looking for the hidden agenda at work behind overt acts and by engaging in a critique of policies. For example, to cover the Nicaraguan election in 1996, David Welna not only reports what candidate Daniel Ortega says in a speech but also analyzes what goes unsaid and criticizes the candidate's policies:

He said his government would respect private property, though he made no offer to buy or give up the mansion he lived in that his previous government confiscated from a local businessman.

Ortega also said it was time to make peace with the United States, which in the 1980s provided money and weapons for more than 20,000 peasants who took up arms against the Sandinista regime. [*continues over Ortega's voice*] Ortega said he was ready to work with the United States and maintain relations that would, in his words, "set an example to the rest of the world." He said nothing, though, about severing his close ties with Saddam Hussein, Fidel Castro, and Muammar Qaddafi. ("Morning Edition," October 17)

The change in coverage becomes most clear in a comparison of two U.S. election reports from early and late years of the sample. In 1980, reporter Linda Wertheimer opens her report on some Carter hecklers by focusing on the *what* and *when*. Any charged terms—"mincing" and "defect"—come in a paragraph attributed to the candidate.

President Carter went to the Forest Hills Jewish Community Center to, as he said in his speech, “let the people of Queens know exactly where I stand,” but when the president began to speak, demonstrations began as well.

[Sound bite of Carter, 16 sec.]

President Carter said he wished to confront without mincing words a question that has been raised in the Jewish community about the president’s support of Israel after the election, especially if large numbers of Jewish voters defect the Democratic Party.

[Sound bite of Carter, 39 sec.] (“All Things Considered,” October 13)

The move toward interpretive reporting reached a peak in 1996. In that year, Joanne Silberner opens her report on a health care discussion during the presidential debate with a personal exclamation and then expresses her judgment about the politicians’ current (and, by implication, past) health care proposals:

What a difference four years makes. In the last presidential campaign, then-candidate Bill Clinton drew plenty of support for his promise of universal health care.

[Archival sound bite of Clinton, 14 sec.]

In the 1996 campaign, both Republicans and Democrats are offering vaguer, less ambitious plans for changes in the nation’s health care system. (“All Things Considered,” October 17)

As these two examples indicate, reporting during the 1980s remained only slightly above the midpoint (5.50 on the scale from 1 to 10; see Table 3), then moved to a new level in the 1990s, a full point higher, and stayed there in 2000. The year-to-year swings increased, but the variability within each year followed no clear pattern.

Unlike the results for all reports on NPR, there was no significant change in the locations for stories on political topics. NPR news defined its political beat as primarily national, with international a distant second. National reports consistently accounted for close to 60% of the coverage, and international close to 20%. Stories from smaller domains varied widely, with none at all in some years, but usually around 10% of reports were regional and 3% were local. In the division of labor, affiliate stations may cover local politics during breaks in the national broadcasts to which this study is limited.

Previous research on NPR indicated that coverage grew more negative in tone for politics than for all topics combined (Larson, 1989), and the subsequent period included in this study does not appear to contradict those findings (see Table 3). Compared to the tone of all NPR reports (see Table 1), political coverage leaned consistently more toward the negative pole. The political reports were fairly neutral throughout the 1980s, coming closest to neutral (3.00 on the range) in 1984, but dropped toward the negative pole in 1992 and recovered somewhat by 2000. In short, reporting shifted away from a neutral tone.

The reports followed a pattern similar to all other news. The share of negative political stories (11.1% in 1980) more than doubled by 2000 (to 29.4%), as predicted. The average number of positive reports increased (from 6.7% to 13.7%), but not enough to offset the otherwise negative tone. During most years neutral stories accounted for the largest share of the political coverage, but the share fell dramatically (from 77.8% to 41.2%), while reports with a mixed or ambiguous tone increased (from 4.4% to 15.7%).

Another way to show the tone of reporting is by describing what happened in the

news. The preponderance of stories during the year of the Carter-Reagan campaign were neutral, but by the 1992 Clinton-Bush campaign, negative stories accounted for the largest share, and none of the coverage that year was positive. The tone of political reporting became less negative in each of the next two election years, especially during the evenly divided 2000 election, when neutral stories rebounded to their highest share since 1992. In 2000, positive stories increased and negative stories declined somewhat. These changes occurred in local and foreign political news as well, but the less negative tone in 2000 appears to be due largely to the introduction of reports on third-party candidates for U.S. president, which were among the most positive in the sample.

In other words, NPR political news did not simply become more negative. The changes in tone might better be described as polarization. Negative reports grew more frequent overall as journalists expressed more judgments, but more importantly reports became less neutral and more likely to be positive or negative, as an expression of the increase in interpretation.

In the 20th century, U.S. journalism began reporting more election news within a who's-ahead frame, in the manner of a horse race (Patterson, 1993), and political reports on NPR followed that pattern (see Table 3). Issue coverage predominated in the reports, although dropping irregularly over the period. Polls provided an occasional and declining frame, and the candidates' character emerged as a theme due to the particulars of each campaign, such as attacks on Reagan by Walter Mondale and the Democrats in 1984 and the moralistic anti-Clinton rhetoric of George W. Bush during 2000. In years when character did not play so prominently, the horse race theme grew in importance. Horse race coverage recasts politics as a winner-take-all contest in which strategy and brute strength override subtleties. When analyzed separately, the share of political reports framed as a horse race was the most significant change in the themes of political reporting (Table 4).

The changes in themes occurred mostly in elections of the 1990s, and the decline in issues coverage was less marked than the increase in horse race coverage. No significant predictions emerged in either the geographic domain or the tone of political coverage. The less robust findings are not surprising when splitting the cases further into these categories, especially given the small size of the political subsample each election year. On the key findings, for the length and emphasis of political reports, the changes ran more deeply, with significant results that were somewhat more marked in the later years of the data.

Based on the results for reports (as unit of analysis), it appears that NPR political coverage followed the general direction of other American news stories. Journalists adopted a more interpretive style of reporting, as they did in other media, and in the process their reports grew longer, just as general news did in newspapers. The lack of change in the geographic domains reflects the long-standing focus of NPR news on national politics, leaving local reports to the member stations in major cities. The tone of reporting changed in complex ways that can be understood as an increased polarization.

Shrinking Sound Bites

The long journalism hypothesis suggested that reporting became "distanced from the individual citizen," by focusing on the interpretations of journalists, who "go on the radio . . . to present their different points of view" (Barnhurst, 1994, pp. 15, 17). To discover whether the reporters on NPR have expressed more opinion requires attention to their individual speech acts. For television research, the sound bite, a short recording

Table 4
 Variations in political reports: Regressions for political reports
 on the NPR programs, 1980–2000

	1980– 1984	1984– 1988	1988– 1992	1992– 1996	1996– 2000	Constant
Length						
β	–4.03	20.54	57.70	67.08**	68.54*	224.22***
<i>SE</i>	27.03	26.91	30.03	25.25	27.03	19.70
$R^2 = .053$, Adj. $R^2 = .037$						
Emphasis						
β	5.490 ⁻²	–.232	.957*	1.219**	.800*	5.867***
<i>SE</i>	.405	.403	.450	.378	.405	.295
$R^2 = .077$, Adj. $R^2 = .062$						
Themes						
Issues Coef.	–.007	.122	–.792**	–.457	–.370	.493*
<i>SE</i>	.268	.270	.293	.246	.263	.195
L.R. $\chi^2 = 16.23$ **, Log likelihood = –196.127, Pseud. $R^2 = .040$						
Horse race						
Coef.	–.280	.276	.939**	.760**	.414	–1.013***
<i>SE</i>	.330	.297	.312	.272	.294	.226
L.R. $\chi^2 = 24.85$ ***, Log likelihood = –164.491, Pseud. $R^2 = .070$						
Cases, $N = 303$						

Note. Models are linear or probit regressions.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

of a source's words inserted into a report, has been the benchmark measure (Hallin, 1992), and other research has timed the speech of journalists (Steele & Barnhurst, 1996). In both cases, the trend has been for these acts of continuous speech to get more fragmented, without shrinking as much for journalists as for politicians.

Speech acts during all reports on NPR declined by about a fifth in length (from 22.42 seconds in 1980 to 18.02 in 2000 overall). Some categories of speakers ran longer, but by 2000 the deviation from the norm dropped by a quarter (from 26.22 to 19.83 seconds). All speech acts for each year were grouped into several classes of speakers. Of these, involved citizens and other non-elite sources accounted for a larger share (growing from 18.1% in 1980 to 20.7% in 2000), but their sound bites shrank unmistakably, by almost half (from 19.16 seconds in 1980 to 10.71 in 2000). Non-elite sources provided the second largest number of sound bites for all types of content on the NPR programs, in line with the network's stated purpose. Except for these differences, however, the general run of speech acts during all topics of reporting on NPR did not differ much from the smaller subset of speech during political reporting (Table 5).

For example, in political reporting and other news, the sound bites of expert sources shrank by almost half in length, but their share of speech acts grew by almost half. In other words, they held onto their share of all the speaking (at about 16.5%), but their speech became more fragmented.

Table 5
Political speech: Length and share of speech for classes of speakers
during the NPR political reports, 1980–2000

	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000
Journalists						
Seconds, <i>M</i>	22.27	33.32	26.61	23.77	23.98	22.08
<i>SD</i>	28.33	40.03	24.60	24.72	25.67	19.15
Percentage	63.5	67.9	65.5	64.3	60.1	53.4
Politicians, officials						
Seconds, <i>M</i>	25.92	33.83	35.24	23.18	21.59	16.45
<i>SD</i>	24.65	27.15	23.56	16.15	13.90	15.91
Percentage	11.4	9.4	10.8	12.4	9.7	7.9
Expert sources						
Seconds, <i>M</i>	25.00	24.00	20.52	21.53	17.99	13.01
<i>SD</i>	14.94	14.13	12.06	32.94	10.02	11.51
Percentage	14.3	15.5	19.7	19.1	16.7	21.8
Non-elite sources						
Seconds, <i>M</i>	6.63	15.44	9.59	19.29	9.81	5.90
<i>SD</i>	6.81	11.20	8.75	16.00	9.65	5.92
Percentage	10.8	7.2	3.4	4.2	11.5	14.2
Others						
Seconds, <i>M</i>			13.00		5.52	16.00
<i>SD</i>			10.82		4.43	27.78
Percentage	0.0	0.0	0.6	0.0	2.0	2.6
All speakers						
Seconds, <i>M</i>	21.39	30.63	25.69	23.08	20.75	17.20
<i>SD</i>	25.33	34.97	22.62	25.31	21.63	17.42
Cases, <i>N</i>	455	374	498	403	954	833

Note. Columns may not total 100% due to rounding.

By comparison, non-elite sources played a minor role. They accounted for a smaller and more variable proportion of the speakers in political coverage than in other news, with their share dipping to a low in 1988 before rebounding after 1992 (to overtake politicians). Although non-elite sound bites were more frequent by 2000, they always ran the shortest of any group in reports on politics, and their length changed from year to year without any clear pattern.

Two types of speakers comprised the category, private citizens directly involved in events and other persons “in the street” who are not involved directly. Involved citizens experienced a jump in frequency of speech during political coverage (from less than 0.4% in 1980 to 5.4% in 2000, much greater than the increase for their speech during the coverage of all topics), and the length of their average sound bite did not fall (at 7.50 seconds in 1980 and at 7.84 in 2000).

The voices of non-involved citizens tended to counterbalance the changes for

involved citizens. In 1980, in-the-street sound bites from voters were often presented without comment, and the journalist simply asked questions, as in this example:

Female voter: You know, actually, I've come to the conclusion that it's like the lesser of two evils, and neither one, uh, you know, seems to be filling the bill.

Linda Wertheimer: [interviewing] Are you, uh, considering the possibility of voting Republican?

Male voter: Very possibly.

Wertheimer: Have you ever done that before?

Male voter: Never—[female voter repeats in background: "Never"]. ("All Things Considered," October 13)

In 1996, after several years of declines, NPR organized some otherwise uninvolved citizens into focus groups in an effort to make their voices heard. The journalist, however, would speak for them or explain what their sound bites meant, as in this example:

Mara Liasson: Even Clinton supporter Rudy Soto, a student and full-time worker, said that answer was a cheap shot that made President Clinton look slick. Overall, the debate left our group of voters wanting much, much more. They called the debate a draw; they said both Clinton and Dole were dull and evasive. They were disappointed that neither the audience members nor the moderator asked any follow-up questions. And worst of all, the 90-minute exchange did little to help them make up their minds. Each one of these voters left with their opinions unchanged. Sherrie Willis said she was in the same muddled state as before.

Willis: I still am just as torn as I was in making a solid decision as to who I will vote for. ("Morning Edition," October 17)

For directly involved citizens, longer, more frequent sound bites were countered by other qualities. Instead of more reason, their voices conveyed more emotion. They were largely confined to local concerns in domestic coverage or to foreign settings. In the coverage of the 2000 U.S. presidential campaign, the voices of citizens fell all but silent. The only instances in the sample occur in a report by Andy Bowers on the Reform Party convention, which contained heated exchanges during the credentials fight that split the party:

[Sound bite of loud voices, door being slapped open] *Unidentified Man 6:* Illegal meeting!

Unidentified Man 7: It's an illegal meeting.

Unidentified Man 8: They don't have a quorum.

Unidentified Man 9: They do not have a quorum! ("Morning Edition," August 9)

In short, the voices of individual citizens remained the briefest of any group, and although those directly involved in politics increased, they were usually relegated to minor topics of coverage or to distant places. In U.S. national news, qualitative observations suggest that citizen voices dwindled and became more emotional.

Politicians and officials spoke somewhat less often over the period (see Table 5), and their average sound bite shrank by more than a third across the board for candidates and other directly involved politicians and officeholders, as well as for other government officials. The falling length coupled with the falling frequency of politicians' speech occurred within the context of longer reports and longer programs, which made the shrinking sound bites even more notable.

In a 1980 story on a speech where Reagan was heckled, Carolyn Craven dedicates the longest segments to the candidate. Reagan has three sound bites (totaling 1 minute, 42 seconds) and takes up half of the time (in a report lasting 3 minutes, 27 seconds). The candidate does the speaking, and the reporter provides transitions between the excerpts:

Craven: And in response to anti-ERA chants, he defended his position on women's rights.

Reagan: I don't believe that there is anyone in this crowd who does not support equal rights for everyone in this country. [long applause and cheers] Now it just so happens that I do not believe that simple sounding amendment is the answer to securing those rights. [cheers and applause] It will remove from elected representatives, and put in the hands of unelected judges, that entire matter.

Craven: Most of the speech, however, was on education. . . . ("All Things Considered," October 13)

Politicians' and officials' sound bites got longer over the next two election cycles, as they continued to shrink on television (Hallin, 1992). Then, as awareness of the shrinking sound bite emerged and television journalists made promises of reform (Barnhurst & Steele, 1997), the NPR sound bites began to shrink. By 1996, in Silberner's report on the presidential debate about health care, the two candidates spoke five times (62 seconds total, including Clinton's extra sound bite from the archives), for less than a sixth of the time (in a report running 6 minutes, 25 seconds). The journalists, on the other hand, spoke 11 times (4 minutes, 28 seconds in all), and a political analyst spoke three times, almost as long as both candidates (55 seconds). The shrinking reached a nadir during 2000, when Anthony Brooks filed a routine campaign update from Michigan that allowed the two candidates to speak five times (48 seconds total), for one fifth of the report (which ran 4 minutes). Two of Al Gore's sound bites amounted to a greeting, "Hi guys," followed by the sound of laughter in a day-care center, then his departing "Bye-bye" ("All Things Considered," October 5). The journalists' seven speech acts ran much longer in total (2 minutes, 24 seconds) and on average (20.5 seconds, compared to the candidates' average 5.6 seconds).

To the credit of these NPR news programs, the length of sound bites allotted to politicians and officeholders is almost double what they can expect on television news, where their speech has been shrinking more dramatically. Even so, the relative change has made news more journalist centered. Although their share of all speeches declined, in length they held their ground. Journalist speech was longer in 1984 and then returned slowly to its 1980 length, so that there was very little difference in the bookend years. The changes were significant overall, but mostly occurred in the initial two intervals (Table 6).

The most important changes, however, occurred in the length of sound bites. Non-elite sources bounced up in the first and third intervals (1980–1984 and 1988–1992) and

Table 6
 Variations in political speech: Linear regressions for length by speaker classes
 during the NPR political reporting, 1980–2000

	1980–1984	1984–1988	1988–1992	1992–1996	1996–2000	Constant
Journalists						
β	11.06***	4.35*	1.50	1.72	-.19	22.27*
<i>SE</i>	2.30	2.16	2.29	1.93	2.02	1.57
$R^2 = .016$, Adj. $R^2 = .014$, $N = 2,146$						
Politicians, officials						
β	-1.00	-4.48	-3.47	-7.01**	-12.00***	25.00***
<i>SE</i>	2.89	2.56	2.70	2.36	2.31	1.99
$R^2 = .064$, Adj. $R^2 = .057$, $N = 639$						
Expert sources						
β	7.91	9.32*	-2.74	-4.33	-9.47*	25.92***
<i>SE</i>	4.29	3.81	3.89	3.40	3.64	2.72
$R^2 = .099$, Adj. $R^2 = .086$, $N = 350$						
Non-elite sources						
β	8.81***	2.95	12.66***	3.18*	-.73	6.63***
<i>SE</i>	2.08	2.45	2.45	1.49	1.48	1.24
$R^2 = .150$, Adj. $R^2 = .137$, $N = 338$						
Others						
β		-3.00		-10.48		16.00**
<i>SE</i>		12.46		6.34		4.32
$R^2 = .063$, Adj. $R^2 = .017$, $N = 44$						
All speakers						
β	9.24***	4.30**	1.69	-.64	-4.19**	21.39***
<i>SE</i>	1.65	1.53	1.62	1.35	1.38	1.11
$R^2 = .028$, Adj. $R^2 = .026$, $N = 2,517$						

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

down in other years, falling to their shortest level by the end of the period. Politicians saw their sound bites decline most in the last two intervals. The year-to-year changes in expert sources were not as significant. Every class of speakers had significant overall changes, and the results for all speakers combined showed the greatest changes early and late in the period.

The Role of Journalists

As politicians' speech shrank, as expert sources became more fragmented, and as the *vox populi* became less coherent, the role of journalists as sense-makers in reporting grew. That role was perhaps most apparent when journalists themselves began acting as expert sources. Through the 1990s the practice emerged in which hosts held discussions with other journalists. The following segment between host Bob Edwards and his two sources on "Morning Edition" is a typical introduction:

Edwards: Joining me now is NPR's Cokie Roberts and Kevin Phillips of *American Political Report*. Good morning.

Roberts: Good morning, Bob.

Phillips: Good morning.

Edwards: So, did last night's debate really change anything?

Roberts: I don't think so. I think that—that the polls coming out of it looked pretty much like the polls going into it. Now, they're highly partisan. (October 17, 1996)

The questions and answers throughout the report place the journalist in the role of expert source. Edwards asks, "So, do you think—was Dole's move into the ethics area too tepid? Should he have been—you know, should he have turned the heat up?" And Roberts responds, "I don't know how he could have," before describing examples from the debate. The number of these incidents is very small but grew irregularly over the period (Table 7).

All of the voices on the NPR reports saw an initial jump in average speaking length between 1980 and 1984, but the voices of journalist-experts increased the most of any group. Other sound bites then grew shorter in subsequent years, but journalist-experts,

Table 7
Journalist speakers: Selected aspects of speech acts
during the NPR political reporting, 1980–2000

	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000
Journalists as experts						
Political coverage, <i>N</i>	4	33	53	33	30	36
Percentage	.7	8.8	10.6	7.9	3.1	4.3
All coverage, <i>N</i>	98	116	456	144	70	151
Percentage	3.7	5.3	5.7	8.8	3.4	6.5
Tasks, percentage ^a of speech acts dedicated to communicative tasks						
Gives information	47.8	65.0	56.7	60.6	45.9	36.2
Expresses opinion	18.3	17.7	21.0	23.6	38.9	48.6
Offers suggestion	0.7	0.4	0.9	0.8	0.7	0.0
Asks a question	25.3	14.6	18.2	14.7	13.8	10.9
Reacts	8.0	2.4	3.3	0.4	0.7	4.3
Functions, percentage ^a of speech acts used to accomplish narrative functions						
Indicates action	54.3	68.9	64.4	54.4	38.7	27.4
Describes char/scene	3.8	2.0	7.0	14.7	12.0	14.8
Gives background	10.7	7.9	7.6	5.0	9.1	4.9
Interprets	23.5	21.3	20.7	17.4	35.3	50.3
Interjects	7.6	0	0.3	8.5	4.9	2.6
Cases, <i>N</i>	289	254	326	259	573	445

^aColumns may not total 100% due to rounding.

after an initial decline, grew again, reaching almost a minute by 1996. Although the length of their speech dropped by not quite half in 2000, the pattern was clear: Journalists as expert sources spoke longer on average than all other journalists (and all other speakers) every year after 1980.

The substance of journalist speech changed as well. On television news, research shows a shift away from giving information, the most common task in speech, to other tasks, especially expressing opinions (Steele & Barnhurst, 1996). On NPR, asking questions, an archetypal task for journalists, declined dramatically. The comments by voters (quoted previously) illustrate the way journalists paraphrased instead of airing their questions and citizens' answers. The mainstay of giving information also seesawed down, varying widely from year to year as news content changed. By 2000 giving information no longer represented the largest share of speech, and journalists instead expressed opinions more than twice as often.

Stating opinions jumped most during U.S. election coverage in the 1996 transcripts. While discussing the debates the morning after, journalists used the phrase "I think" 20 times to introduce their opinions. (The bulk of these came from Cokie Roberts; Kevin Phillips tended to use more elaborate language, such as "I'm starting to have a fundamental problem with this.") Such expressions were not limited to analytical pieces. Consider Elizabeth Arnold's handling of a routine campaign report during the same broadcast:

Dole says he'll contest California, but it'll take more than appealing to the conservative base. He attributes cutting Clinton's lead in half to his recent efforts in the state, but it may have more to do with the fact that the Democrats, so confident of a win in California, stopped advertising here a month ago. ("Morning Edition," October 17, 1996)

Here Arnold concludes her report on the Dole campaign with her assessment of what the candidate needed to do in California. Within the first sentence, she speaks for Dole and issues her own retort. Next she distances herself from Dole's assertion about California, before expressing another judgment about causes and motives behind the events. These opinions might have come from party sources but are delivered without attribution.

Conversational tasks may differ from the functions journalists perceive in their work. To check the analysis, each speech act was coded on its function within the journalistic story (see Table 7). Journalists used more than half their utterances to report actions through 1992, but then in 1996 the share of interpretations jumped. The lackluster presidential campaign that year, with Dole trailing Clinton consistently, may have had fewer newsworthy actions, but the 2000 election was hotly contested and speeches focused on action continued to decline. Journalists dedicated more than half their utterances to interpreting that year. Of course, the changes occurred in all sorts of political coverage, not just the news of U.S. elections.

Description was another element in the shift between indicative and interpretive functions in the news. NPR journalists relied increasingly on describing the personalities and scenes of politics. For example, Andy Bowers can be seen sketching a personality and presenting a setting in a story on a 1996 Russian cabinet change:

It's a view of their president Russians are getting used to—a tired and gaunt looking Boris Yeltsin, staring sometimes at the camera, sometimes off into

space, addressing the nation from his sanitarium. Tonight, however, Yeltsin's eyes danced with anger as he fired the most popular politician in Russia. ("All Things Considered," October 17)

Describing does provide information, and any judgment implied by the description seems attributable to the scene itself, not to the reporter. In the U.S. election stories, however, the descriptive statements often focused on the character of candidates. The shift reflected a heightened interest in public morality, occasioned by years of attacks on Clinton's questionable personal judgments, and provides a measure of how often journalists spoke as judges of political life.

The changes in journalist speech were statistically significant (Table 8). The role of journalists as experts was more marked in the political subsample than in coverage overall, but largely because the practice emerged so dramatically after 1980. The coefficients for all subsequent intervals (with one exception, all coverage for 1992–1996) were above that initial year. In other words, the practice of journalists interviewing other journalists took root on NPR in the 1980–1984 interval and became a small but persistent way of packaging stories thereafter.

The changes in journalist tasks were also significant overall, focused especially during the first three intervals of the sample. Shifts up and down within the categories can obscure some of these changes, but when analyzed separately, the likelihood of expressing opinion during political coverage jumped most in the last two intervals (1992–1996 and 1996–2000). Likewise, the functions of speech during reporting changed significantly overall, and also during each interval except at mid-course (1988–1992). Once again, a separate analysis reveals a significant trend in interpretation focused on the last two intervals of the data.

Regardless which way their speech is measured, the archetypal activities for journalists—asking questions and reporting what was happening—declined during the NPR political coverage. From 1980 to 2000, journalists moved away from the denotative, focusing on events, and toward the connotative, explaining what events mean. It should also be noted that the shift from event-centered to interpretive and opinion-laden reporting did not pay off in the currency of more context in the news. The share of giving background declined by more than half (see Table 7).

NPR News and Public Life

Studies of the rise of long journalism cover a century for newspapers and a quarter century for newscasts. The NPR flagship news programs came on the scene well after television and newspapers had changed. It would not be surprising if NPR had continued much as it began, but instead "All Things Considered" and "Morning Edition" took the long journalism further. The change did not simply add context to reporting, but instead represents a redefinition of news, one affecting speech acts and report contents. The change also ran deeply, affecting all sorts of news, not just political stories. The researchers' experience of listening to tapes and reading transcripts confirmed that political news was not different from other topics covered.

Qualitative observations also suggest that NPR news oriented itself more toward commercial and entertainment concerns. In 2000, a broadcast of "All Things Considered" would be interrupted five times to announce the list of underwriters, along with their slogans and Web addresses or toll-free numbers. This never occurred during any of the 1980 broadcasts of either program. In 2000, "All Things Considered" also ran re-

Table 8
 Variations in journalist political speech: Regressions for political news
 on the NPR programs, 1980–2000

	1980– 1984	1984– 1988	1988– 1992	1992– 1996	1996– 2000	Constant
Journalists as experts						
Political coverage						
Coef.	1.13***	1.23***	1.07***	.62***	.76**	–2.48***
SE	.22	.22	.22	.22	.22	.21
L.R. $\chi^2 = 77.59***$, Log likelihood = –691.849, Pseud. $R^2 = .053$, $N = 3,517$						
All coverage						
Coef.	.17**	.21**	.43***	–.03	.28***	–1.79***
SE	.06	.06	.06	.07	.06	.05
L.R. $\chi^2 = 71.46***$, Log likelihood = –2,648.761, Pseud. $R^2 = .013$, $N = 12,769$						
Journalist Tasks						
Coef.	–.55***	–.33***	–.52***	–.28**	–.16	
SE	.10	.09	.10	.08	.08	
Ancill. Param.: Cut 1 Coef. –.28, SE .07; Cut 2 Coef. .62, SE .07;						
Cut 3 Coef. .64, SE .07; Cut 4 Coef. 1.70, SE .08						
L.R. $\chi^2 = 47.50***$, Log likelihood = –2,380.94, Pseud. $R^2 = .010$, $N = 2,146$						
Expresses Opinion						
Coef.	–.02	.09	.18	.62***	.91***	–.90***
SE	.13	.12	.12	.10	.10	.09
L.R. $\chi^2 = 158.84***$, Log likelihood = –1,256.08, Pseud. $R^2 = .060$, $N = 2,146$						
Journalist functions						
Coef.	–.48***	–.41***	–.07	.24**	.41***	
SE	.10	.10	.10	.08	.08	
Ancill. Param.: Cut 1 Coef. –.03, SE .07; Cut 2 Coef. .23, SE .07;						
Cut 3 Coef. .44, SE .07; Cut 4 Coef. 1.90, SE .08						
L.R. $\chi^2 = 161.32***$, Log likelihood = –2,625.34, Pseud. $R^2 = .030$, $N = 2,146$						
Interprets						
Coef.	–.08	–.11	–.22	.37***	.76***	–.72***
SE	.12	.11	.12	.10	.10	.08
L.R. $\chi^2 = 152.83***$, Log likelihood = –1,255.94, Pseud. $R^2 = .057$, $N = 2,146$						

Note. Models are probit or ordered probit regressions.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

peated teasers designed to promote upcoming stories and encourage listeners to stay tuned. This sort of self-marketing was also absent in 1980. Promos and donor commercials took up more than three minutes of one broadcast, a small share of the program but longer than a typical news report from 1980.

The trends on “All Things Considered” and “Morning Edition” quantify what histo-

rians observed: that National Public Radio has moved into the mainstream. As the network's cultural prominence grew, its political reporting expanded. Politics, the premier beat for reporters, is a marker of authority within journalism. NPR journalists have always focused on national politics, but in other coverage, as historians noted, the news "abandoned the local in favor of the universal" (McCourt, 1999, p. 183). Reports became more focused on interpretive news analysis. Their tone became somewhat negative overall, as predicted, but that simple expectation did not anticipate that coverage had grown less neutral and more polarized. As journalists adopted stronger positions on the events they covered, NPR became not the *New York Times* but the *New Yorker* of the air (see McCourt, 1999).

While political reports grew longer, following the trend at newspapers, sound bites shrank, following the trend for television. Citizens spoke more often but also more briefly and emotionally and had less to say about politics than about other matters. Politicians took a double hit, speaking less often and in shorter sound bites; they fared worse than experts. Overall, speech became more fragmented. Even when reports run longer, a rapid pace can interfere. Studies of memory show that speed of exposure is the enemy of recall (Gordon, 1996), and the new forms of quick-time reporting may reduce what citizens can learn from news (Graber, 1990).

As others spoke less coherently, NPR journalists held their ground. They spoke less often but about as long. They stuck to information less often and added many more opinions. These are traits that dominant speakers exhibit. Despite the common assumption that a reporter's primary task is to ask questions, the NPR journalists did so less often. By asking others, reporters could glean answers from outside journalism, instead of drawing primarily from within journalism itself. The packaging and pacing of speech imply a fundamental change in the professional role of journalists, who put themselves forward as interpreters of the political world.

As the speech of hosts and reporters became less denotative, they began to focus less on actions, a change that was offset by an almost fourfold increase in descriptions of characters and settings. The shift emphasized the drama of news. Previous studies found that newspapers and television adopted more exaggerated forms of news presentation, what Bennett (2001) calls the trend toward dramatized news.

These two aspects of news—more interpretation and greater dramatization—are twin processes. An emphasis on interpretation rather than on events tends to make the content of reports less dynamic. Marketing hype serves to deaden the news it surrounds. When replacing action with abstraction, journalists do not leave news unchanged but look for more dramatic forms. Both processes can result in greater superficiality, emphasizing style over substance (Bennett, 2001). Journalists do not usually have the resources to go beyond conventional explanations, and the need to make analysis more dramatic can distract them from that work. Both processes may also enhance the cultural authority of journalists, who not only pronounce judgment but do so with increasingly sophisticated technical effects.

At least since Walter Lippmann, critics of journalism have demanded deeper and more fully contextualized news. The Hutchins Commission called for more context in 1947, and activists called for more relevance in the 1960s. These demands coincided with the professional aspirations of journalists, who wanted to be the makers of meaning, not mere mechanics of event transmission. But the demand for context had unanticipated consequences. Instead of empowering citizens with fuller stores of information, it empowered journalists. The outcome was especially evident on NPR when journalists began interviewing each other as experts.

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