



When official consensus equals more negativity in media coverage: Broadcast television news and the (re-)indexing of the 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' repeal

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Abstract

Media coverage surrounding the repeal of the 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' (DADT) military policy was analyzed to examine how tones in coverage change over time and along the contours of increases in official consensus. In advancing the concept of indexing beyond actual military conflict, or the threat of war and honing in on a domestic but still military issue, this study examines broadcast network news coverage for a period of one year before and after DADT was repealed. Findings observed here indicate that media coverage may be more independent of official consensus than shown in previous research, specifically in reporting more negatively after official consensus was achieved. These results further suggest that coverage was moderated by network and that conceptions of indexing may not hold in the contemporary media and political environment. Implications are discussed in relation to media coverage of contentious issues and performance in polarized politics.

Keywords

broadcast news, consensus, DADT, indexing, LGB, military coverage

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In fulfilling his campaign promise to lift the ban barring gays from serving in the military, then-President Bill Clinton ignited one of the most fractious controversies in American history, splintering the opinions of powerful elites, the public, and military on multiple sides of the issue that would simply become known as DADT, an acronym for the 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' policy for homosexuals serving in the US military (Belkin, 2008; Burks, 2011; Herek, 1993; Steele, 1997). The debate that surrounded the legal, ethical, and moral implications of this policy continued for nearly two decades before its repeal was signed into law by President Barack Obama on 22 December 2010. Yet in spite of the official governmental consensus that was achieved to legally formalize the repeal of DADT, on 22 September 2011 – just two days after that repeal was enacted in the US military – Republican presidential hopeful Rick Santorum openly stated in a debate aired on Fox News that, if elected, he would reinstate DADT.

Santorum's remarks came in response to a video question posed by Stephen Hill, a gay soldier who was then serving in Iraq, about whether the respective candidates would 'intend to circumvent the progress that's been made for gay and lesbian soldiers in the military' (Memcott, 2011) and Hill was then openly booed by the audience members present at that debate. Santorum's response initially suggested that the repeal of DADT was undermining the ability of the military to defend the country and, when pressed by moderator Megyn Kelly, he said that 'what we're doing is playing social experimentation with – with our military right now. And that's tragic' (Memcott, 2011). The fact that DADT was being openly debated in a nationally televised presidential debate nine months after the repeal had been signed into law introduces it as a case study with a unique vantage point from which to analyze contemporary indexing as a byproduct of journalistic norms and routines that highlight the relationship between official governmental consensus and media coverage.

Previous research on indexing is replete with studies showing that, in times of crisis and war, mass media have largely abdicated their watchdog role of monitoring the three branches of government, and – more often than not – uncritically report the official governmental position to the public (Harmon and Muenchen, 2009; Reese and Buckalew, 1995; Schwartz, 2004). The conditions under which officials can influence media coverage and thereby act on policies that set the direction of the country for years to come are of vital consideration, particularly for the issues surrounding sexual orientation and legal rights. As such, this study is a timely evaluation of both public policy and contemporary theorizing in communication research.

Indeed, the study reported here extends beyond just the coverage of a single isolated conflict, terrorist attack, or military intervention and examines media coverage of the DADT repeal over a two-year timespan. Although these analyses do not include coverage for all 17 years from the start of DADT in the Clinton era to its repeal by the Obama administration, it nonetheless brings to light media coverage of an issue that over its duration directly affected an estimated 13,000 military personnel by examining how the tone of media coverage changes over time and in response to – or independent of – official consensus (Burks, 2011).

Issue context of 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell'

In December 1993, President Bill Clinton and military officials agreed to a plan unofficially labeled 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' that would become one of the most divisive in

American politics (Belkin, 2008; Steele, 1997). The agreement was promoted as a more benevolent military policy toward lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB)¹ service personnel in that 'sexual orientation [was] considered to be personal and private unless expressed in one or more forms of homosexual conduct, which includes behaviors that may be verbal physical, and/or sexual' (Burks, 2011: 605).

Clinton's effort to allow LGB persons in the military through DADT was initially met with opposition, and the controversy over DADT continued as support grew over time for greater military service rights of LGB individuals (Belkin, 2008). The prominence of these rights was manifest in the passage of DADT, which was initially presented as a way to have LGB personnel serve in the military without discrimination. Perhaps somewhat ironically, this policy was later expanded and then repealed because over the course of nearly two decades, it came to be seen as too discriminatory against LGB service members. For purposes of this study, the analytic focus is on the DADT repeal, which was signed into law by Barack Obama on 22 December 2010.

As DADT has long been a central point of contention that played out among journalists, the military, government officials, and the public, media coverage of the debate surrounding the repeal of the DADT military policy was analyzed in this study to examine how tones in coverage changed over time and along the contours of increases in official consensus. Even a cursory overview of this coverage, such as the 3 December 2010 Fox News story that led with the headline 'Military Chiefs cast doubt on repealing "Don't Ask, Don't Tell"' suggests that critical coverage surfaced regularly, as did more supportive coverage such as the "'Don't Ask Don't Tell" consigned to history' or 'A personal look at "Don't Ask Don't Tell"' pieces, both from CBS News on 20 September 2011 and 2 February 2010, respectively.

In examining the concept of indexing beyond actual military conflict (or the threat of war where it has been typically applied) and honing in on a domestic yet inherently military issue, this study seeks to contribute to a body of media research that is continually evolving and being (re)negotiated. On this point, it is worthwhile noting that this topic also intersects with advocacy organizations whose efforts may well have contributed to the shaping of media coverage and public opinion on LGB rights (Brewer, 2003; Killian, 2010) more broadly, but also DADT specifically (Belkin, 2011; Scheper, 2014). As such, this work thus also takes into consideration certain cultural dimensions of indexing and examines those within a theoretical framework of the tenuous and, at times, inimical relationship between the media and the military on DADT.

The military, media coverage, and indexing

Many scholars have noted that the military often makes a concerted effort to have the media, politicians, and public move in sync to support a war effort (Bennett et al., 2006; Harmon and Muenchen, 2009; Hickerson et al., 2011; Steele, 1997). Reese and Buckalew (1995: 41) describe this interplay as the 'interlocking reinforcing triangle of government' in which government engages the media to cultivate public opinion that is supportive of the military and warfare. Kellner (1992: 237) calls the effects of this triumvirate the 'militarization of consciousness', a process aimed at creating a reality dominated by positive military images and messages. Often, such news originates from military officials and follows military-approved interpretations.

Hiebert (2003) asserted the military has promoted the more recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan using techniques borrowed from both public relations and propaganda. He further asserts that the story lines, rhetoric, and terminology used to promote the conflict were designed to be perceived favorably by television audiences. Similarly, Hutcheson et al. (2004: 27) found that military and government officials continually emphasized nationalist rhetoric during media interviews and consistently reiterated 'American core values and themes of U.S. strength and power while simultaneously demonizing the "enemy," and that journalists closely paralleled this nationalist language in their stories'. While military officials often used terms like 'us' and 'we' describing US officials and 'they' and 'them' to describe enemy combatants, media coverage was shown by Hutcheson and colleagues to have been regularly couched in such terms, which created a veritable *us* versus *them* dichotomous frame in media reporting.

Once in motion, these themes and supportive tone of coverage are repeated 'from the boardroom to the beat' (Bennett, 1990: 106), and alternative viewpoints are thereby minimized in ongoing media content that normalizes and reinforces the dominant official perspective. The effectiveness of media coverage in shaping public opinion can be especially pronounced during military interventions, which tend to be unobtrusive events in that they occur on foreign soil and are experienced by only very few Americans directly. Moreover, civilian populations have been shown to understand and evaluate military engagements primarily through the valence of media coverage (Harmon and Muenchen, 2009; Schwalbe, 2006).

As a theoretical construct, indexing is based on Bennett's (1990) articulation of certain social and political conditions that impose observable constraints on the frequency and intensity of news coverage that is critical or otherwise oppositional toward governmental policy (Groshek, 2008; Mermin, 1999; Zaller and Chiu, 1996). The key political condition of indexing is the level of consensus – or alternatively, dissensus – that exists among policy officials (Bennett, 1990; Bennett et al., 2006). Put briefly, indexing suggests that as the level of consensus becomes greater in official government circles, the level of critical reporting correspondingly diminishes in media reports. Contrary to some idealized conceptualizations of the news media acting as an independent check on the balance of power in American politics, indexing positions critical media coverage as a function of the expression of open disagreement among government officials (Bennett, 1990).

Indexing follows the research trajectory of Hallin (1986), whose work on the Vietnam War countered the popularized conception that critical media coverage emerged prior to government officials breaking ranks and publicly criticizing the war effort. Though not the first to suggest such a relationship, in the 20-plus years since Bennett published his seminal piece on indexing, scholars have found consistent support for indexing as the logical outcome of journalists having been socialized to norms and routines based on the performance of objectivity. That is, in the process of covering policy decisions, journalists are trained to construct a 'web of facticity' (Tuchman, 1978: 160) that is anchored upon government officials and other influential actors in the process of policy-making as news sources (Gans, 1979). Thus, as Groshek (2008: 316) has summarized, 'the level of critical media coverage during policy debates is often indexed to the breadth, duration, and intensity of competing arguments advanced by officials and other elites.'

Indeed, it has become widely accepted that powerful business leaders, government officials, and social elites who comprise the majority of sources for news largely influence media content (Bennett, 1990; Bennett et al., 2006; Groshek, 2008; Livingston and Eachus, 1996). Journalists are wedded to routines that require continual surveillance of prominent officials, which often underscores their influence on issues determined to be important (Chomsky, 1986; Tuchman, 1978). Bennett (1990: 106) advanced the indexing hypotheses to explain the phenomenon of how media amplify certain powerful voices while winnowing down the opinions of less powerful actors. He observed that news coverage has a tendency 'to "index" the range of voices and viewpoints in both news and editorials according to the range of views expressed in mainstream government debate about a given topic' (p. 106).

Yet as Groshek (2008: 316) wrote, 'There are important theoretical distinctions between framing and indexing' specifically in that 'framing affords a certain level of control and agency' to audiences and journalists whereas 'indexing orients journalistic decisions as hierarchical and subordinate to the level of official consensus'. As for those journalists – having been socialized to rely upon the military and government as sources for information – media often employ officials' descriptions to construct their coverage (Schwartz, 2004). Beyond just words and themes, Bates (2004: 452) suggested that metaphors, when applied properly, could transcend national boundaries and 'find ideological justification for political action because metaphors provide meaning beyond personal interpretation'. Moreover, when government officials advance military policies, such as repealing DADT, it is a highly orchestrated and controlled process that delimits press coverage (Wolff, 2004).

Considering all of these factors, the first hypothesis follows the logic of previous indexing studies by comparing the tone of media coverage within the context of the DADT repeal. Of course, relatively little indexing research has been explicitly carried out for domestic policies; however, the work of Lawrence (1996) on police brutality in the US found that, while the indexing norm did not follow in the case of 'accidental events' such as the Rodney King beating, the repeal of DADT was normalized and planned through an ongoing series of coordinated press releases and interactions between the military and media such that the repeal of DADT could be considered 'routine coverage' (cf. Berkowitz, 1992) by 2010 and 2011.

Indeed, after 17 years, DADT had certainly become a routine news item for mainstream network news coverage. Given that military policy is not just a domestic issue but one that intersects with foreign affairs, military conflict, and international relations – areas where indexing has often been supported, this study therefore begins by advancing its first hypothesis, which suggests that as the administration and the military jointly built support and then achieved official consensus for the repeal of DADT, those efforts would be observable in media coverage such that:

H1: Overall, there was *less* negative coverage of repealing DADT than non-negative coverage.

It is important to note, however, that although the military's attempts to influence media coverage is often direct, previous research has compared broadcast news outlets

in military campaigns and specifically identified Fox News as having adopted more pro-military coverage that is more critical of liberal policies such as repealing DADT (Aday, 2010; Kull et al., 2003) than other channels. In addition, Fox News has been consistently shown to appeal to Americans whose political opinions are more right of center (Alterman, 2003) with content more favorable toward conservative political actors and their policies (Morris, 2005; Rutenberg, 2003). The next hypothesis therefore builds upon cross-network comparisons where Aday (2010) found Fox News coverage to be more sympathetic toward conservative political actors. In the context of DADT, where a Democratic president was advancing a change to military policy that was contested along ideological lines and social values, the following hypothesis expects:

H2: Relative to other network news, Fox News had *more* negative coverage of repealing DADT than non-negative coverage.

Content change, specifically with regard to supportive or critical tones in the indexing model of media coverage, is largely contingent on official consensus, or the extent to which opinions are divided and aired among high-ranking officials and elites (Bennett et al., 2006; Entman, 2003). In this way, changes in the tone of coverage are not necessarily reflective of journalistic independence or alternative sourcing and, as such, substantive changes in the level of critical reporting require not just a change of public issue position by political officials, but also shifts in journalistic routines in order to incorporate a broader range of perspectives than those already in the established discourse (Entman, 2003; Powlick and Katz, 1998).

Based on this overview, along with previous findings on indexed news coverage (Bennett, 1990; Groshek, 2008) and the demonstrated tendency of Fox News to produce coverage especially more regularly at odds with Democratic administrations (Aday, 2010; Groeling, 2008; Morris, 2005), the following hypotheses are advanced regarding official consensus and the repeal of DADT:

H3: Overall, negative coverage of the DADT repeal was *more* prevalent before President Obama signed the repeal into law than after.

H4: There is an interaction between consensus and networks such that negative coverage from Fox News *increased* after the repeal of DADT resolution passed whereas negative coverage from other networks *decreased* after the repeal of DADT.

Method

A content analysis of coverage from the mainstream broadcast networks ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox News was carried out to empirically test the hypotheses advanced here. While it is possible, of course, to include additional channels, such as CNN or MSNBC, the primary purpose of this study was to analyze nightly network news coverage and compare those with one another and Fox News, especially since Fox News has been shown in previous studies to vary significantly from other broadcast news networks (Aday, 2010; Kull et al., 2003; Morris, 2005; Rutenberg, 2003). This sample also provides insights into network news coverage on ABC, CBS, and NBC that reached a

combined average of 21.6 million and 22.5 million viewers per night in 2010 and 2011, respectively (Pew, 2012a) as well as the leading cable news channel, Fox News, which reached approximately 1.9 million prime-time viewers in 2010 and 2011 (Pew, 2012b). Of course, this study acknowledges distinctions between national nightly network television news and 24-hour cable news channels such as differing news cycles and related production requirements as well as in the viewers of these respective outlets, which makes this study especially apt to this topic and to indexing.

Timeframe, unit of analysis, and story selection criteria

For the purposes of this inquiry, data comprised coverage from one year before and one year after the repeal of DADT was signed into law on 22 December 2010. These two years were especially pertinent to analyze because they include a timeline long enough for prominent events and actors related to the DADT repeal to emerge in coverage. As such, the mediated representation of DADT in a longitudinal track both before and after the repeal offers a more detailed analysis of immediate and longer-term reactions by government officials, the public, and media outlets. Altogether this timeline thus provides a rigorous test of indexing and its permanence or fluidity. While many other studies based on indexing feature weeks of coverage around a specific policy decision (Groshek, 2008; Mermin, 1999), this study engages 2 years of coverage situated at the culmination of a military policy that lasted 17 years.

The unit of analysis was the story, which was topically filtered by the data collection agency MediaTenor to only include stories that were relevant to the DADT policy or very closely related topics, such as thematic coverage of homosexuality or gay marriage as it pertained to military or defense issues. On the broadcast networks considered in the sample that was provided, there were 226 stories in 2010 before the repeal was signed into law and 159 stories after that through 31 December 2011.

Consensus

A crucial component of indexing is the proper identification of a specific date or event that can be situated within the context of a larger timeline to indicate increases (or decreases) in official governmental consensus, as best as can be reasonably understood. Specifically, in this study the Don't Ask, Don't Tell Repeal Act passed the House of Representatives on 15 December 2010, with a vote of 250 in favor and 175 opposed. The Senate likewise voted to repeal DADT on 18 December 2010, with 65 yeas and 31 nays. President Obama officially signed the repeal of DADT from military policy into law on 22 December 2010. Like many other studies of indexing (Bennett, 1990; Bennett et al., 2006; Groshek, 2008; Mermin, 1999; Zaller and Chiu, 1996), the determination of official consensus is often signified by key dates and policy votes, and in this study that date is 22 December 2010, when the DADT repeal became law.

Although perfectly identifying full consensus – or alternatively, the complete absence of dissent – that exists among policy makers and governmental officials can be somewhat imprecise, in most cases, it is achieved through a combination of votes and reports from the *Congressional Record*. Voting was largely along party lines, and overall, 58.8

percent of House Representatives that voted were in favor of the DADT repeal, whereas 67.7 percent of those that voted from the Senate were likewise in favor. Although these figures are not overwhelming levels of support that would be considered perfect consensus,² at minimum they demonstrate that ‘Congressional consensus was greater after the resolution passed than before, if only for the very fact that the *policy decision* was no longer on the floor for debate’ (Groshek, 2008: 324, emphasis in original).

In addition, over the course of the timeframe considered here, the raw number of items in the *Congressional Record* that explicitly mentioned ‘Don’t Ask Don’t Tell’ dropped from 192 before the repeal to just 55 after the repeal was signed into law. These numbers show a decrease of 71.4 percent in the total volume of proceedings and debates related to DADT in official Congressional sessions. Moreover, 21 of the 55 statements made by Congresspersons after the repeal occurred from 20 September through 22 September 2011, to recognize the implementation of the DADT repeal. Of those 21 statements, 20 expressed clear and strong support for the repeal of DADT, and commended its implementation.

Thus, when applying a common measure of Congressional consensus (Althaus et al., 1996; Groshek, 2008; Zaller and Chiu, 1996) it is noticeable that in this instance, there was only a modest level of observable consensus prior to President Obama officially signing the repeal of DADT from military policy into law on 22 December 2010. After that point, as indicated by the official record of proceedings and debates that take place in the United States Congress, it is clear that the level of official consensus can be considered robust. Indeed, this increased level of consensus is realized in part precisely because any remaining dissent that did exist to the repeal of DADT was going largely unexpressed or not gaining momentum among fellow dissenters.

By most conventional standards, the official debate surrounding the repeal of DADT was shown to be all but over when it was signed into law on 22 December 2010. The application of this date in this study as a general measure of increased official consensus thus matches parameters outlined in previous studies, and in fact the decrease of mentions in the *Congressional Record* observed here is even more pronounced than that of Groshek (2008) in his study of media coverage of the decision to go to war in Iraq in 2002.

Coverage tone

The central subjective variable analyzed in this study was the overall tone of a given story, and it was coded ‘negative, neutral, or positive’ on the basis of explicit and implicit valuations that were identified by a team of specifically-trained content coders. As noted in the codebook, operationalizing valuation

can be determined by the use of clearly positive or negative terms, like ‘villain’ or ‘hero’. This explicit rating can be contrasted with an implicit rating that embeds the description of the protagonist in a positive or negative context, which allows for the whole story as a contextual unit. That is, if the coder can relate ambiguous information to other unequivocal information in the same story, this context can be used to interpret the respective valuation. (MediaTenor, 2006: 2)

In the context of this study, ‘negative’ coverage was identified as reporting set in opposition to the proposed repeal of DADT that was being advanced by the

administration, which would represent the performance of independent reporting that challenges official government policy. Such coding is not unlike that of Hallin (1986) in his examination of media coverage of the Vietnam War, where 'negative' coverage was that which cast the official administration position of repealing DADT in an unfavorable context. One example of negative coverage is from NBC Nightly News on 9 July 2010 when gay rights advocates were described and shown visually as protesting the results of a survey that was sent to 400,000 service members for being biased, claiming the LBG advocates were 'up in arms' and that support for the repeal of DADT was going to be a 'messy process', according to senior Pentagon officials. On the other hand, positive coverage was observed in an ABC News report on the day President Obama signed the repeal in law that marked how he was 'fulfilling a campaign promise and marking a historic step forward for gay rights'. The story went on to detail crowds of cheering LGB supporters and how the repeal itself would benefit military recruiting and that it had broad support among top military and administration officials.

In the study reported here, overall intercoder agreement (see also Scammell, 2005) for this item for the 2-year period of coverage considered here was 83.4 percent and reliability checks were ongoing throughout the data collection period. In carrying out analytic procedures for the purpose of hypothesis testing, the tones of stories were collapsed into a binary 'negative/non-negative' metric. Since indexing is particularly centered on negative (or critical) coverage, this coding is conceptually and empirically parsimonious (cf. Bennett, 1990; Dimitrova and Strömbäck, 2005; Groshek, 2008).

Findings

A total of 385 stories were analyzed, including 226 (58.7%) on or before the repeal of DADT on 22 December 2010, and 159 stories (41.3%) after that date through the end of 2011. The frequency of stories fluctuated over each year across the repeal of DADT and the overall volume of coverage demonstrated clear variations over time. This distribution of stories is further analyzed for specific features as follows.

The first hypothesis predicted that overall there was *less* negative coverage of repealing DADT than non-negative coverage. This hypothesis was supported by the fact that 97 stories (25.2%) were coded as negative compared with 288 stories that were coded as non-negative (74.8%). A simple one-sample test of proportions revealed a statistically significant difference ($Z = 13.77, p = .000$) in the direction predicted. In addition, the average level of negative coverage per day was 0.76 (SD = 1.48) compared to an average of 2.25 (SD = 2.96) stories per day that were coded as non-negative, and a paired samples t -test of these averages ($t(127) = 4.77, p = .000$) achieved statistical significance. Thus, there is reasonably strong support for the distribution of overall negative and non-negative coverage as expected, which demonstrates an overall tone supportive of the administration's efforts towards repealing DADT from military policy. These results are summarized in Table 1.

Based on the work of Aday (2010), Groeling (2008), Morris (2005), and others, the second hypothesis situated a specific test of indexing where we could expect it to hold under these circumstances, namely that relative to other network news, Fox News had *more* negative coverage of repealing DADT than non-negative coverage. There was

Table 1. Relationships between overall tone of coverage and networks.

Tone	Network				
	NBC (%)	ABC (%)	CBS (%)	Fox News (%)	Total (%)
Negative	18 (25.4)	11 (14.9)	15 (18.5)	53 (33.3)	97 (25.2)
Non-negative	53 (74.6)	63 (85.1)	66 (81.5)	106 (66.7)	288 (74.8)
Total	71 (100)	74 (100.0)	81 (100.0)	159 (100)	385 (100.0)

Note: $\chi^2(df 3) = 11.69, p = .009$.

empirical support for this hypothesis ($\chi^2(df 3) = 11.69, p = .009$), as the 33.3 percent of negative coverage on FOX was clearly greater than that of the other networks. Following in descending order, 25.4 percent of coverage on NBC was negative, compared with 18.5 percent on CBS, and 14.9 percent on ABC. Considering that this hypothesis was supported, and there was a significant relationship between negative coverage and networks (Cramer's $V = 0.17, p = .009$), it is still quite informative to observe that negative coverage on the repeal of DADT was no greater than a third of all coverage presented, which is also summarized in Table 1, where it is also worth pointing out that in terms of the raw volume of stories, Fox News had approximately twice the coverage of any other network.

In testing a well-established aspect of indexing, Hypothesis 3 predicted that negative coverage of the DADT repeal was *more* prevalent before President Obama signed the repeal into law than after. The distribution of negative stories over each year is summarized visually in Figure 1, where the consensus-signaling event of DADT's repeal on 22 December 2010 is also indicated. From that depiction, it is not readily apparent that shifts in negative coverage are related to increased levels of official consensus as identified in this study. A cross tabulation and an independent samples *t*-test were performed to measure specific differences in the average levels of negative coverage over time. Interestingly, a chi-square test indicated that the relative frequency of negative coverage actually *increased* from 16.8 percent of coverage before the repeal of DADT, to 37.1 percent afterwards, which was a difference that was shown to be statistically significant ($\chi^2(df 1) = 20.39, p = .000$).

These results, which are odds with H3 are summarized in Table 2 and were also mirrored by a statistically significant difference ($t(68.19) = -2.26, p = .027$; equal variances not assumed) in mean levels of negative coverage before and after the repeal of DADT that was contrary to expectations. On and before 22 December 2010 (when the repeal of DADT was signed into law), there were, on average, 0.49 negative stories per day ($SD = 1.01$). From that point onward through the end of 2011, there was an average of 1.16 negative stories per day ($SD = 1.93$) on all networks.

This study thus found no clear evidence that negative coverage was indexed to levels of official consensus, at least in the conventional sense, when analyzing the consensus-signifying event applied here. Interestingly, these findings suggest negative coverage actually *increased* after official governmental consensus was achieved with the repeal of DADT and further suggested by the decline in activity in the *Congressional Record*. This finding counters a fairly long pattern of support for indexing research on coverage of

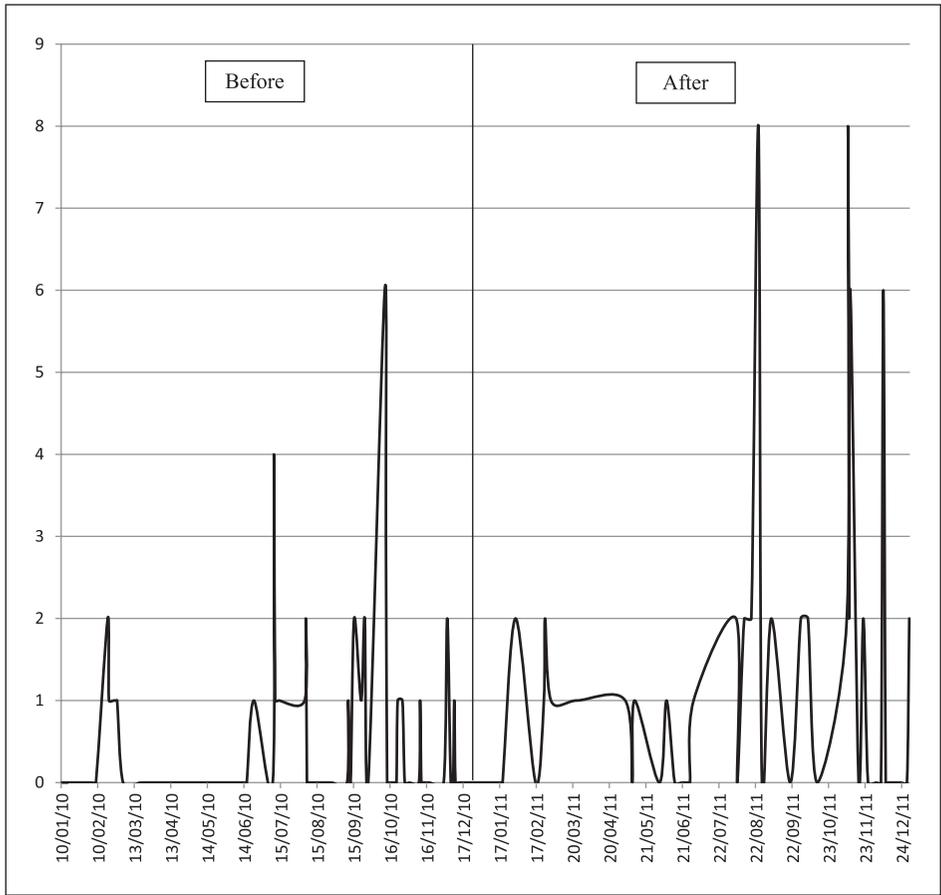


Figure 1. Negative stories in broadcast news coverage per day before and after the DADT repeal.

Note: On 22 December 2010, President Obama signed the repeal of DADT from military policy into law. On and before this date, there were, on average, 0.49 negative stories per day (SD = 1.01). From that point onward through the end of 2011, there were an average of 1.16 negative stories per day (SD = 1.93) on all networks. These differences were statistically significant ($t(68.19) = -2.26, p = .027$; equal variances not assumed).

military issues (Aday, 2010; Bennett, 1990; Bennett et al., 2006; Hallin, 1986; Livingston and Eachus, 1996) and so suggests additional considerations.

As brought forward in Hypothesis 4, there was an interaction between consensus and networks such that negative coverage from Fox News increased after the repeal of DADT resolution passed to an extent greater than other networks. While this hypothesis was actually *not* supported in that all networks showed a modest increase in negative coverage after the repeal than before, it was on Fox News where that increase was most pronounced – from 22.1 percent negative coverage before the DADT repeal to 50.0 percent negative coverage afterwards ($\chi^2(df 1) = 13.39, p = .000$). The only other network where coverage was significantly more negative after than before the repeal of DADT was on

Table 2. Relationships between tone of coverage, official consensus, and networks.

Network		On/before repeal (%)	After repeal (%)	Total (%)
NBC	Negative	7 (18.4)	11 (33.3)	18 (25.4)
	Non-negative	31 (81.6)	22 (66.7)	53 (74.6)
ABC	Negative	7 (13.7)	4 (17.4)	11 (14.9)
	Non-negative	44 (86.3)	19 (82.6)	63 (85.1)
CBS**	Negative	3 (7.1)	12 (30.8)	15 (18.5)
	Non-negative	39 (92.9)	27 (69.2)	66 (81.5)
Fox News***	Negative	21 (22.1)	32 (50.0)	53 (33.3)
	Non-negative	74 (77.9)	32 (50.0)	106 (66.7)
Total***	Negative	38 (16.8)	59 (37.1)	97 (25.2)
	Non-negative	188 (83.2)	100 (62.9)	288 (74.8)

Note: Mantel-Haenszel $\chi^2(df 1) = 19.32, p = .000$.

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

CBS ($\chi^2(df 1) = 7.48, p = .006$) while the observed percent increases in negative coverage on NBC and ABC did not achieve statistical significance.

It was thus clear that there were statistically significant differences in negative and non-negative coverage after the repeal of DADT than before, and those differences were significantly moderated by network (Mantel-Haenszel $\chi^2(df 1) = 19.32, p = .000$). When considered together, these findings not only suggest that coverage became more negative after official consensus was achieved with President Obama signing the repeal of DADT into law but also that the increase in negative coverage was driven by a sharp uptick in negative coverage on Fox News after the repeal.

Discussion and conclusion

This study was conceptually based on indexing as a model of media and government interactions, where previous work has consistently demonstrated that once official governmental consensus has been achieved on military policy, media coverage serves to publicly reinforce that consensus, diminish outside voices, and thereby cultivate public opinion favorable to that official consensus (Bennett, 1990; Groshek, 2008; Mermin, 1999). In short, indexing suggests that news organizations and journalists take their cues from public officials, and once those officials reach an agreement, negative media coverage drops away because official actors are no longer openly debating pros and cons of proposed legislation or military action. With this in mind, the intent of this study was to examine the degree to which the media coverage followed the shift to official consensus regarding the repeal of DADT, thus positioning contemporary indexing in a similar military context but relatively untested domestic arena.

Considered on the whole, the findings reported here suggest some more similarities in the criticality of network news coverage than has been previously suggested (Aday, 2010; Kull et al., 2003; Wolff, 2004), but also signals some vital differences on this particular issue. For example, while Fox News' coverage of gay rights issues was shown to be more negative than any other broadcast network, the overall differences were not

drastic and a relatively moderate 33.3 percent of Fox News coverage was found to be negative. However, when examined before and after the repeal, the increase in negative coverage found on Fox News reached 50.0 percent afterwards, which was significantly more than the increases (not decreases) observed on all other networks. Of course, indexing does not amount to blanket censorship or viewpoint discrimination but is more the result of time constraints and journalistic norms of collecting information from established official sources (Bennett, 1990). While stories can be told from a myriad of perspectives with various expenditures of both money and time, indexing constitutes a 'quick and ready guide for editors and reporters to use in deciding how to cover a story' (p. 108) and reflects more the symbiotic relationship between source and media.

Paradigmatically, indexing explains the role official forces can be expected to play in winnowing a plurality of voices to a more uniform position that becomes the prevailing message to the public, yet the findings observed here suggest otherwise. Rather than coverage shifting to reinforce and normalize the official consensus on the legal repeal of DADT, the results reported here indicate that even relatively few dissenting official political actors, such as Rick Santorum can effectively break official consensus. In such cases, media coverage that is normatively defined by these dissenting sources serves to amplify discord disproportionately rather than to reify agreement and engender cohesion. When examining the relatively low levels of negative media coverage of DADT coupled with the rather dramatic increases after the repeal of DADT, it can be observed that critical coverage may not be as directly sensitive to official consensus in the contemporary political environment as has been previously reported.

Altogether, from the results observed in these analyses, there was no evidence of media coverage being indexed to official consensus on this topic on any network – coverage may have indeed been indexed to officials speaking out against the repeal of DADT to curry political favor among their presumed supporters. That coverage, however, was not indexed to official consensus itself, which had been overwhelmingly established following the DADT repeal by nearly all accounts reported in the *Congressional Record* through the timeframe considered here. Somewhat surprisingly, this finding casts doubt on the notion that the tone of media coverage results from journalists' reactive decisions that imitate high levels of agreement among official policymakers. In some instances, as shown here, contentious political issues (Tarrow, 2013) can generate a dramatic departure from the key performances of indexing, particularly in a polarized political environment where actors may dissent for the sake of media coverage but not in Congressional sessions.

At the very least, the findings reported here indicate that, on certain topics that may be both contentious and also sensitive and crucial for politicking, traditional conceptions of indexing may not hold neatly in the contemporary media and political environment. Indeed, policies such as DADT and Obamacare, for example, may provide expansive space for 'official' criticism that may augment negative coverage, even long after official consensus has been reached. While the rationale of indexing can be applied in these situations by virtue of newsworthy dissent among policymakers even where consensus has generally been established, the overall conceptualization of official consensus as being the principal driver of uniformity in indexed coverage simply did not fit here.

As has been established, there was almost no support for conventional notions of indexing following official consensus in this study. There are several possibilities that

are worth exploring to further examine this finding. To begin with, the actual repeal of the DADT policy was not implemented for nearly 9 months (on 20 September 2011) after the repeal was signed into law by President Obama. By this point in time, 2012 Republican presidential primary/caucus campaigns were in full swing and a number of candidates in that race, including Michele Bachman, Rick Perry, and Rick Santorum openly ran on reversing the decision to repeal DADT as a prominent feature of their respective platforms. Thus, the most obvious reason for the resurgence of negative coverage of the DADT repeal nearly a year after it was approved was likely the efforts of certain candidates to appeal to voters that may have opposed the repeal along with other issues related to LGB rights.

An important note is that, as these events unfolded, media developed alternative frames that were advanced in the process of covering visible political actors that – for one reason or another, such as rulings on legal cases or running for public office – intersected with journalistic norms and thereby also commanded media attention. To be clear, these offerings are by no means conclusive and further examination of which additional factors may have contributed to the increase of coverage after repeal of DADT remains warranted, and would perhaps benefit from a more qualitative approach. Altogether, though, it seems that while there are useful tenets to be gleaned from indexing, this study suggests that unique events (Lawrence, 1996) and outspoken political actors can trigger different forms of coverage and, even after roundly achieved official consensus, broadcast news can still present relatively *lower* levels of perceived agreement, even in instances where public opinion and actual official consensus are unchanged.

Here, it is crucial to note that a Pew report from approximately the same time as the starting point of data collection for this study (February 2010) found that 61 percent of Americans were in favor of repealing DADT. While public opinion varied somewhat over the course of the two years considered in this study, it generally became more supportive over time – reported at 80 percent in favor just days before Obama made the repeal official (60 Minutes, Ipoll Databank, 2010) to 68 percent in favor in the month after the repeal was implemented (CBS News, 2011) and rounding out at 69 percent in favor approximately 18 months after the DADT repeal (*United Technologies*, Ipoll Databank, 2012). As it relates to indexing, it must be noted that media coverage, specifically on Fox News, highlighted candidates that campaigned on oppositional, minority viewpoints of reinstating DADT, thereby raising the appearance of official dissensus rather than normalizing coverage, and reifying the official consensus by marginalizing such viewpoints.

Thus, as evidence from this study has shown, critical coverage is not necessarily diminished by official consensus or even moderated by public opinion, particularly on sensitive issues where the opposition may galvanize after formal official consensus has been realized. Although the DADT debate provided nearly ideal conditions – as a military issue that was highly charged with fractious opinions on multiple sides – for indexing, we found uniform results showing that the *opposite* of what could be predicted by indexing actually occurred. Indeed, these findings tilt against most studies in indexing research, which have by and large found regular support for official consensus translating into decreases in critical media coverage (see Aday, 2010; Bennett, 1990; Bennett et al., 2006; Groshek, 2008; Hallin, 1986; Livingston and Eachus, 1996; Powlick and Katz, 1998).

Yet, in the study reported here, negative coverage increased greatly after the repeal, particularly as the one-year anniversary of the repeal approached and in the months afterwards. These findings speak to the potential limits and reshaping of indexing in the contemporary political climate in that previously expected media outcomes are not uniform across all issues, particularly those that are not explicitly related to military conflict between nations. In fact, we consider that these contradictory findings are especially important not only because they do not neatly align with the prevailing indexing model but also because this departure takes place in another contextual setting that is not exclusively in the domains of foreign policy and military conflict but it is not unrelated to those areas either.

In conclusion, while we do not dispute that fractious elite opinions on a widely contested issue may be contributing factors in shaping indexed media coverage, these features do not always fit neatly into existing theoretical models. As issues wax and wane in terms of public salience, or re-emerge with extant factors and influential actors, as was the case with DADT, the capacity for officials to speak in opposition may also cultivate additional space for elite opinions to splinter within the sphere of consensus and engage dissatisfaction over the prevailing opinion, which may be further cultivated by appealing to audience segments of one network or another. Still, regardless of the reason, the results of this study demonstrate that the unique complexities of the DADT issue obfuscated an 'index' of ideologically cohesive media coverage on the topic along parameters identified by previous analyses.

Getting to the genesis of why this outcome was observed, particularly with attention to political polarization among official government actors, would make an excellent future study, perhaps from a more qualitative vantage point. As previous research has shown, official opinion can be fractious on any host of issues, but it is more likely to occur on contentious domestic political issues (Livingston and Eachus, 1996). Thus, and in light of the findings observed here, indexing models must be more fully considered in order to better explicate and predict shifts in coverage, particularly outside the arenas of foreign policy and military conflict. Consensus, as well as discord extending out from acts signaling official consensus, needs to be understood with greater precision, not only within journalistic routines of objectivity, but also by taking into account the interplay of journalism and national politics, which have jointly shifted from a majority-consensus model to one of increased partisanship and more dramatic polarization.

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Notes

1. The more common lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) because as a policy DADT was directed at LBG and not T service members (Bryant and Schilt, 2008).
2. The authorization to use military force in Iraq in 2002 referenced in Groshek (2008) passed with 69.0 percent of House Representatives that voted and 77.0 percent of those that voted from the Senate. While these figures are somewhat higher than those observed in the repeal of DADT, they similarly signal imperfect but reasonably attained consensus among government officials.

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