Editorial Response to President Obama’s School Speech

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Abstract. This study seeks to determine if editorial coverage was supportive or critical of Obama’s September 8, 2009 school speech. Newspapers serve as the government’s “Fourth Estate” by shining a spotlight on politicians and commenting on their activities. History proves that the public and the government are influenced by opinions printed in newspapers, and the content of the proposed speech was altered following the outcry from parents and the media to address what some called, “an invasive abuse of power.” Understanding the position of the editorial boards could be an indication of support Obama will have for his policies. The subject was hotly debated in the media and extreme interests were noisily presented, however, the newspapers did perform their role.

Introduction

“In the old days men had the rack. Now they have the press,” writer Oscar Wilde commented in 1891 about the role of newspapers in society [1]. Newspapers continue to maintain a vital role in protecting the integrity of the American government, acting as the “Fourth Estate” and keeping government officials in check. In the first year of Barack Obama’s presidency the press has been closely monitoring and reporting on the nation’s first African-American leader’s every word. In fact, during the first 50 days in office, the three broadcast network evening news shows devoted 1021 stories lasting 27 hours, 44 minutes to Barack Obama’s presidency, five hours more than the combined totals devoted to George W. Bush and Bill Clinton during their first 50 days [2]. When Obama announced that he would be giving a back-to-school address to the nation’s school children, the press pounced with voracious vigor on the news.

Splashed across the media were outrageous claims of Obama’s audacity to enter the classroom. Newspaper headlines claimed that “Parents see sinister goals in Obama’s school speech,” [3], and warned the public to get ready for “All Barack’s Children”[4]. Other newspapers put a positive spin on the speech. “Work Hard and Dream Big, Obama Tells Students,” [5], and “Bi-Partisan Praise For School Speech,” [6]. The coverage included cries of racism, threats of socialism and reminders that the Democrats had been similarly outraged over George Bush’s school speech in 1991. The public reacted by announcing their plans to keep their children out of school and refusing to let them hear the speech, claiming the speech was political in nature.

Considering the role of the press to provide the public with information sufficient for use in the evaluation of matters of policy and governance [7], it is important to truly understand the press’ response to the uproar. Separate from the news coverage, editorials have a duty to offer readers clarification on the truth or fairness of the claims and to present vigorous commentary on the choices facing voters [8]. This research examines the editorial response to President Obama’s school speech and to determine if the newspaper editorials were supportive of his speech or critical. Understanding the position of the editorial boards could be a likely indication of what type of support Obama will have for his policies.

Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance

Method

Focusing on the nation’s top ten newspapers for circulation, the papers with the broadest reach to the public, the study relied on a data set collected via the LexisNexis database and the ProQuest database to examine the supportive (positive) position and the non-supportive (negative) position of the newspapers, and if there are any neutral comments. The phrase “Obama School Speech” was used as the search parameter and a population of articles was created. The final population was eight editorials. Each editorial served as a unit of analysis. Each editorial was studied and coded from printouts from the Lexis-Nexis database.

The Los Angeles Times and the New York Daily News both printed two separate editorials, followed by one editorial from each The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, The New York Post and the Philadelphia Inquirer. No editorials covering the speech were found in USA Today, The New York Times, The Chicago Tribune, Houston Chronicle and Philadelphia Inquirer. Following previous studies, the method used to determine the supportive or critical nature of the editorials was to examine for the use of evaluative adjectives describing the speech [9]. Terms such as ‘foolish’, ‘fretting’, ‘important’, ‘ridiculous’, ‘worthy’, ‘lunatic’, and ‘petrified’ were
some of the words used to judge the nature of each editorial.

Results

Of the eight editorials, five were coded as supportive, two were coded critical and one was neutral. With 62% of the results being supportive of Obama, these findings express that the president’s choice to give a pep-talk to school children is not considered a negative thing by newspaper editors. 25% of the results were critical and 12.5% were neutral of the speech.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to see if the editorials that commented on President Obama’s school speech were supportive of the speech or critical. Editorials are focused on commenting on issues of merit, and this issue did warrant some comment, but not as much as all the media fuss would imply. The event may not have a significant impact or meaning in the broad look at Obama’s presidency, but it does provide a snapshot of the public’s view of Obama and also an indication of changes afoot in the way the media behave.

Further study of Obama and the media is needed. The first African-American president does create a new paradigm that begs to be explored in depth. The issue of race could retard America at establishing a foundation for helping to shape America’s global competitive strategy, and for reaffirming America’s leadership as a balanced and reasonable world power; one that retains the moral authority throughout the world [10]. Studies need to be conducted to determine just what role race has regarding Obama and to see if the problem is growing or lessening with his presidency. It would be useful to use a similar method to check editorial reaction to additional Obama events and to watch for trends. In a similar study by Druckman&Parkin [11] it is pointed out that, “we see our methodology as one that can and should be replicated in different markets with different campaigns at different times.”

The changes in media coverage for events, such as the school speech, shows that in the era of Facebook and cell phone cameras, newsrooms are adopting a siege mentality as they further circumscribe what is acceptable behavior for their editorial employees [12]. Creating stories about the story is bigger than ever and the public is growing to prefer a strong point of view in their news. A Pew Research Center project shows a 20 year long decline in the public’s esteem for the press and the reason cited is that journalists are too involved personally. This study shows that in the news there is a great deal of personal involvement from the press, but the editors decline to get too involved [13]. In the future it seems that reporters will be disclosing their points of view and explaining where that perspective comes from, which could impact the educated viewpoint that we expect from the editorials in the newspaper.

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