

If a Tree Falls in the Forest: COVID-19, Media Choices, and Presidential Agenda Setting | SSRN

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During a time of crisis Americans turn their attention to the news media for critical information about what to expect, who is affected, and how to behave. Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, public safety experts warned that the consequences of a misinformed population would be particularly dire due to the serious nature of the threat and necessity of severe individual collective action to keep the population safe. Thus, those elites who possess the power to set the agenda of the conversation bear a huge responsibility for the general welfare. Among the various agenda-setting mechanisms available to the president is daily press conferences which provide a unique opportunity to leverage public exposure, accelerated by the state of crisis. Yet, mainstream media's daily viewership is many times larger than the president's press conference and we explore their narratives surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic through automated text analysis of complete transcripts of national cable, network, and local news. Of particular importance, we characterize the differences in which topics were covered and how they were covered by various cable media sources. Our analysis reveals polarized narratives around blame, racial and economic disparities, and scientific conclusions about COVID-19. The media is influenced by the president's agenda, even for cable news channels that are consumed by audiences that typically do not support him, but we found strong evidence that the media's choices mediate, and ultimately dominate, the agenda-setting abilities of the president's daily press conferences.

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