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Intermedia Influence and the Drug Issue: Converging on Cocaine

Stephen D. Reese
Lucig H. Danielian
University of Texas at Austin

In recent weeks, as the intense attention to drugs has faded, some have asked if the reaction to drugs was appropriate, and how it is that the press and Congress sometimes suddenly discover and then dismiss a major national problem.

—Kerr, 1986, p.1

Kerr was talking about drug coverage in the media, but the same could be said for many other national issues that rise and fall in prominence with each passing month. Many issues, such as the nuclear threat and the national debt, endure from year to year, but others seem more fleeting.

Big events drive many big stories and draw general attention to the problems they represent. Rock Hudson's death spurred national attention to the AIDS crisis. Spy arrests led to other questions about the quality of national security safeguards, and three major airline crashes in 1985 produced a rash of stories on air safety.

Other stories are less tied to specific events yet become big nevertheless. In the last couple of years such stories have included the famine in Ethiopia, Mideast terrorism, and the farm crisis. The problems behind these stories existed before the media "found" them and continued to exist after attention waned.

Each of these stories was characterized by a rapid convergence of media attention, during which it seemed that all media channels as well as conversations on the street are filled with the story. Although this bandwagon tendency among the media is not new in the press, one

wonders if it has become more pronounced in recent times. This study is a first attempt to explore what is now a rather impressionistic notion of how the big media converge on a big story, especially those not directly tied to big events. The drug issue, particularly the "cocaine summer" of 1986, is a perfect example of such an issue and one explored in depth in this chapter and the next. Lacking any objective evidence of a drug epidemic or crisis (Kerr, 1986), we must look to the media themselves to determine why the drug issue received such a concentrated amount of coverage in such a short time. Such a systematic analysis is required before we can say much more about the impressionistic and anecdotal notion of media "convergence." Convergence may be considered the observed manifest similarities in media coverage—in timing, emphasis, and source selection. Several interrelated processes underlie this convergence, including intermedia influence.¹

MANY MEDIA, FEW VOICES

For many stories, convergence of media coverage may be harmless—a natural result of organizations covering the same "reality." Similarities in coverage may simply result from equally accurate news judgments. If convergence occurs in stories that are not purely event-driven, however, media organizations may be looking to each other for guidance in an ambiguous situation (as, we argue, was the case for the drug issue). It has been suggested that, because the drug issue (particularly crack and cocaine) was a problem for New York City, it became a problem for the rest of the country by virtue of the coverage received in papers like *The New York Times*.

Although perhaps functional for the organizations themselves, such a tendency to follow the leader and each other could have serious societal implications. Too much sameness in media content conflicts with a key

¹The concept of intermedia "convergence" is introduced here, although in the next chapter the term *mutual agenda setting* is also used. Convergence better describes a process whereby the media discover issues, respond to each other in a cycle of peaking coverage, before largely dismissing the issues. This narrower term is preferred initially because the agenda-setting metaphor has come to be used so broadly that it might describe almost any influence process having to do with prioritizing public issues. Agenda setting may more properly describe the day-to-day cross-checking of story lineups that newswriters engage in to check their decisions about the relative emphasis to be given various issues. Also, as a methodological distinction, we look at a single "story" here rather than an "agenda" of issues, and do not conceive the process as necessarily an orderly transmission of "salience," implying a relatively greater attention to some issues at the expense of others. Finally, we eventually hope to go beyond examining not only the quantity of attention given an "issue," as most agenda-setting studies have done. Indeed, our main concern is the extent to which the media converge, not only on similar topics, but also similar themes, interpretations, and sources.

value of American pluralistic society, that the press should present a diverse set of views and voices.

In recent years, technological advances have helped expand the number of available channels of information for the audience and enhanced the ability of news organizations to cover stories, but it is not clear whether this has done anything to diversify content. There may be more newswriters now than 15 years ago (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986), but they do little to further diversity if they all cover the "big" stories. Parenti (1986), for example, noted that the few Washington journalists working for progressive publications run into virtually no competition from the mainstream press corps in seeking their stories. In addition, the sheer volume of attention generated when the national press converges on a story, like drugs, virtually demands a political response. In their haste, these reactions may not always be carefully considered (a charge many leveled at the Congressional antidrug initiative in the fall of 1986).

COCAINE MEDIA HYPE

Although the mainstream news media routinely tend to cover the same stories, some stories are tackled with a vengeance. What critics call media "hype" is a visible manifestation of this phenomenon of intermedia convergence. As for the drug issue itself, Edwin Diamond (1987) and his News Study Group at New York University noted that by August 1986, television had begun to reflect on its drug coverage over the summer, questioning whether it had been exaggerated, and media treatment of cocaine became a story itself. Nevertheless, high-profile television coverage continued through early September 1986 with a CBS documentary, "48 Hours on Crack Street," on September 2, and NBC's "Cocaine Country," aired on September 5. Perhaps in response, on September 23, PBS's McNeil/Lehrer Newshour featured a lengthy discussion (22 minutes) on whether the drug problem was hyped by the media.²

No one would accuse the media of "hyped" a story if first one paper examined a story, then another, and so on. But when every news organization emphasizes the same story at roughly the same time in a "feeding frenzy," the amount of coverage often seems out of proportion to the problem at hand. ABC reporter John Quinones confirmed that this was the case with the drug issue in 1986, noting that "sometimes we [the

²Other less mainstream media have also noted the exaggerated coverage given the drug issue. Hatch (1987), for example, characterized the drug "hype" as a carefully orchestrated disinformation campaign promulgated by the Reagan administration to help pursue attacks on domestic freedoms and mask more pressing social problems. Indeed, any number of intrusive drug testing programs have been advocated in the aftermath of the drug summer of 1986.

media] have a tendency to feed on one another, and the story feeds upon itself" (Diamond, 1987, p. 10).

The drug issue is a good example of a big story that may have been blown out of proportion by the media. For one thing, the story seemed to have a distinct rise and fall of media attention. It fits our notion of media convergence and allows for relatively easy definition and measurement. In addition, any similarities in media coverage of drugs cannot be explained by "pack journalism." The story did not emerge from a special "beat," as do national political stories. The nature of pack journalism on these beats is familiar by now. If several organizations assign reporters to cover the same thing, the resulting coverage tends necessarily to be similar. It deals with similar events and is filtered through the standardizing influence of the pack.

Although specific events, like the death of Len Bias, did drive some media coverage, the drug issue was not covered by packs nor confined to a specific geographical location. Key editorial decisions were made to give greater treatment to the issue and these decisions were observed by others in the media. Furthermore, the story was not promoted by any one party, candidate, agency, or group. Rather, drugs have been a problem for years, but only recently was a significant convergence of coverage observed.

This study examines what was in many ways a media-created issue and uses that issue to compare coverage across media. That coverage may help to shed some light on the process of media convergence by providing evidence of similarities and sequences of coverage.

BACKGROUND

Elite media leadership has not been the subject of much research. No content analysis studies were found that systematically examined the extent of elite media leadership at the national level, and only one study was found below the national level. At the state level, newspapers tended to influence the broadcast agenda for statehouse stories more than the reverse (Atwater, Fico, & Pizante, 1987). Most such research, however, has examined cross-sections of content from different media and found strong similarities (sometimes called "homogeneity," "consonance," or "conformity") in their respective agendas. Newspapers have been compared and found to be similar in the topics covered and in how those topics were treated (e.g., Bigman, 1948; Donohue & Glasser, 1978; Riffe & Shaw, 1982).

Network newscasts have attracted greater attention, and their respective agendas have been found to be very similar (Altheide, 1982; Buckalew, 1969; Capo, 1983; Dominick, 1981; Foote & Steele, 1986;

Fowler & Showalter, 1974; Graber, 1971; Hester, 1978; Lemert, 1974; Meeske & Javaheri, 1982; Riffe, Ellis, Rogers, Van Ommeren, & Woodman, 1986; Stempel & Windhauser, 1984; Weaver, Porter, & Evans, 1984). More than any three newspapers, the network newscasts are functionally equivalent, to the extent that Altheide (1982) declared them a national news service.

The original agenda-setting study by McCombs and Shaw (1972) is one of the few studies to compare agendas across media. Comparing agreement on campaign issue coverage by *The New York Times*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, NBC, CBS, and four local newspapers showed a high degree of agreement across those media. These similarities have been variously explained as resulting from similar real-world events, standardized organizational structure, and similar journalist socialization experiences. These explanations do not require that news organizations know what the others are doing. They could operate independently of each other and produce similar content. All of these factors no doubt play a part, but another equally important influence on intermedia agreement is the leadership exerted by some news organizations over others. This explanation obviously does require that the newswriters know what others are doing.

Others have looked at the relationships among the mass media through case studies and participant observation. Media sociologists have documented an intermedia influence phenomenon, making it clear that looking to other media organizations for confirmation of news judgment is an institutionalized practice. Warren Breed (1980), in his classic study of the newsroom, found evidence that suggested this intermedia leadership process. He termed the phenomenon of one newspaper leading others as "dendritic" influence: "The influence goes 'down' from larger papers to smaller ones, as if the editor of the smaller paper is employing, in absentia, the editors of the larger paper to 'make up' his page for him" (p. 195). This pattern of influence, he said, assumed a dendritic or arterial form with the flow of influence from larger papers to smaller ones. Larger papers weren't copied, but their decisions as to the value of certain stories were followed.

This tendency for newswriters to look to each other for guidance has remained in full force in more recent years. In *Deciding What's News*, Herbert Gans (1979, p. 91) noted that, when entertaining story ideas, editors will have already read the *Times* and *Post*, and will be aware of how those papers' editors have ruled on the idea(s) in question. If another paper has carried the story, it has been judged satisfactory, "eliminating the need for an independent decision" (p. 126). Gans noted that this prior publication is also taken as evidence of audience appeal, a particularly important element in "trend stories" (like cocaine). Gans said that when it comes to

"trend" stories, "the prudent story suggester waits for another news medium to take the lead, then sells the idea partly on the basis that it has been reported elsewhere" (p. 170).

Until other media are onto a story it may have difficulty emerging, but once they are, a story can build exponentially. In *Reporters and Officials* Leon Sigal (1973) observed the importance of intermedia processes: "The consensible nature of news may even impede the breaking of stories that lack corroboration from opinion-leading newspapers. Once they do break, however, big stories will tend to remain in the news as first one news organization and then another uncovers additional information or a new interpretation" (p. 40).

After a story has reached a "critical mass" it may continue in this way, floating loose from any moorings to actual newsworthy events. Why is it so important for news organizations to look to each other for confirmation of news judgment? Sigal is among others who have noted that adherence to routine channels provides a way of coping with uncertainty. The similarities of newswriters' stories reassures them that they know the "real news." Following the lead of another organization serves the same function. Consistency is accuracy.

Certain media are followed on certain types of issues because they are thought to have special expertise and resources. Miller (1978; pp. 16-17), for example, noted that *The New York Times* is regarded as the leader for how to treat international stories, *The Washington Post* is looked to for leadership for national domestic issues, and *Rolling Stone* is regarded as the leader for counterculture antiestablishment stories. In a case study analysis, she noted how the *Stone's* coverage of Americans in Mexican prisons triggered national print and television coverage, as other media picked up the lead and attention mushroomed.

Are the networks looked to by other media for guidance? Although intermedia influence has been assumed to always flow from print to electronic media (e.g., Massing, 1984), recent developments may have altered this equation. When Gannett designed its national newspaper, *USA Today*, it was with television in mind. From the shape of the paper dispensers to the colorful graphics, the publication was pitched to an audience of television viewers. This includes using the television networks to help guide story decisions. Prichard (1987) described how a December 1982 story about a man attempting to blow up the Washington Monument was bumped from page 1A of *USA Today*, having been deemed a local story. It was reinstated after Dan Rather led with it on the "CBS Evening News." Now that the nation knew about the story, it had become page 1 material. The broadcast by a major network had given the story a "verification factor."

In general, however, newspapers look to other newspapers, and tele-

vision networks monitor each other, with certain "bellwethers" being tracked by all on specialized issues. But is there one general standard looked to by all the news media? Gans noted what is widely felt by many observers—that ultimately *The New York Times* is used as the final arbiter of quality and professionalism, across journalistic formats. Indeed, in the often ambiguous world of journalism, "if the *Times* did not exist, it would probably have to be invented" (Gans, 1979, p. 181).

THE CASE OF COCAINE

This study examines coverage by several national media of the drug issue over a period of time to determine the extent to which they converged on the drug issue and whether one medium can be said to have led the others. Specifically, the major elite newspapers are examined: *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *The Christian Science Monitor*. In addition, two major news magazines are examined—*Time* and *Newsweek*—along with the three major network newscasts from ABC, CBS, and NBC.

If intermedia agenda setting took place in the drug issue, we would expect to find substantial similarities in when the various media gave the issue most attention. The rise and fall in attention would be expected to occur at about the same times. The intermedia leadership explanation for that similarity would be strengthened if rises in one organization's coverage could be seen to precede a rise in another's. Of particular interest is the relationship between print and television news, often criticized as merely following the lead of the elite media (Massing, 1984). Finally, this study determines which of the elite newspapers played the largest role in covering the drug issue.

METHOD

The DIALOG information service was used to electronically access newspaper and magazine data bases containing summaries of stories appearing in 1985 and 1986. Any number of search words could have accessed stories related to the drug issue (e.g., drugs, narcotics, drug abuse). Given that the purpose of this study was not to provide a comprehensive evaluation of drug coverage, it was decided to narrow the scope of the search so as to have a manageable, yet comparable, sample of stories

across media. Because cocaine was at the center of the drug issue in 1986, the term *cocaine* was used and it elicited a workable number of stories (listed in Tables 5.1 and 5.2). Bibliographical information and a short story summary were obtained for each "cocaine" story.

A similar search strategy was used in seeking network news stories. The Vanderbilt University Television News Index and Abstracts were obtained and searched for stories indexed under "cocaine." All such stories (identified in the Abstracts with an underlined heading) in 1985 and 1986 were coded for date and length in seconds. The searches resulted in 465 newspaper stories, 231 network news stories, and 44 news magazine stories.

Using the Abstract and DIALOG summaries, each story was coded with high intercoder agreement ($cr = .95$) into one of 10 categories (Table 5.1): (a) deaths of prominent people and events surrounding them; (b) specific crimes involving cocaine, such as trials and arrests; (c) efforts by schools, communities, and national figures to discourage the use of cocaine; (d) general reports on the use and abuse of cocaine and the various medical and social implications; (e) policy responses to the drug problem by national, state and local, international, and private sectors; (f) problems encountered by foreign countries in combating drugs (without reference to direct U.S. involvement); and (g) general drug crisis stories (a category reserved for more extensive reporting on the issue).

TABLE 5.1
Nature of Cocaine Stories in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *The Christian Science Monitor*

Story Category	Medium				
	<i>New York Times</i>	<i>Wall St. Journal</i>	<i>Wash. Post</i>	<i>LA Times</i>	<i>Chr. Sci. Monitor</i>
Deaths	7%	0%	24%	1%	0%
Crime	39	39	28	48	35
Antidrug movement	5	0	3	4	0
Use and abuse	26	39	24	17	30
Policy Response					
National	2	4	3	3	4
State/local	5	0	0	1	0
International	6	9	12	11	17
Private sector	2	4	1	0	0
Foreign	5	4	6	14	9
General crisis	2	0	0	0	4
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
N	(250)	(23)	(98)	(71)	(23)

TABLE 5.2
Nature of Cocaine Stories Transmitted by the Television Networks and News
Magazines

Story Category	Medium				
	ABC	CBS	NBC	Time	Newsweek
Deaths	14%	9%	14%	13%	5%
Crime	37	41	40	26	19
Antidrug movement	3	4	3	4	0
Use and abuse	27	21	24	22	43
Policy Response					
National	17	8	10	13	0
State/local	1	3	1	0	0
International	4	8	5	9	14
Private sector	3	3	6	9	0
Foreign	3	5	5	0	14
General crisis	0	0	0	4	5
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
N	(70)	(30)	(81)	(23)	(21)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Tables 5.1 and 5.2 show how the stories in our sample broke down into the study categories, compared by the 11 news sources. These sources are combined by medium in Table 5.3. The major types of newspaper cocaine stories were crime and "use and abuse," accounting for 62% of the total. Comparing across the five newspapers shows that the proportions of coverage are roughly similar. *The Washington Post* featured cocaine deaths more prominently than the others, due largely to the great amount of coverage given the death of hometown basketball star Len Bias. Table 5.2 shows a similar pattern. Television newscasts and the news magazines give their greatest coverage of cocaine to crime and use and abuse stories. Television gives greater attention, however, to deaths and national policy responses. The three networks show more similarity in their coverage than do the newspapers.

Table 5.3 provides a combined look at the three media. Newspapers, news magazines, and television newscasts show similar amounts of coverage in the study categories. The major difference (enough for a statistically significant chi-square value) was found in the tendency of newsmagazines to focus less on crime and more on the use and abuse of cocaine. The week-to-week nature of the newsmagazines' coverage appears to suit them better to more evaluative trend-type stories than to specific day-to-day crime coverage.

TABLE 5.3
Overall Nature of Cocaine Stories in Newspapers, News Magazines, and
Television Networks

	Medium		
	Newspapers	News Magazines	Television Networks
Deaths	9%	9%	12%
Crime	38	23	39
Antidrug movement	4	2	3
Use and abuse	25	32	24
Policy Response			
National	3	7	6
State/local	3	0	2
International	9	11	6
Private sector	1	5	4
Foreign	7	7	4
General crisis	2	5	0
Total	100%	100%	100%
N	(465)	(44)	(231)

Chi square (18) = 29.9, $p < .05$

Figures 5.1 through 5.4 take a closer look at media coverage over time by newspapers and the television networks (*The Christian Science Monitor* gave cocaine relatively little coverage and was omitted from the newspaper comparison charts). During 1985 it does not appear that there was a distinctive media convergence, but 1986 does show evidence of this phenomenon. *The New York Times* covered the baseball trials, involving cocaine use by some Mets players, heavily in August and September 1985. That was largely a local issue, however, and the other papers did not pay much attention to that story or cocaine generally, until *The Los Angeles Times* printed a major multipart series at year's end. The network newscasts showed a similar pattern in 1985. ABC carried the most coverage early in the year with CBS and NBC picking up the pace later on. Again, the coverage is diffused, and no internetwork agenda similarity is observed. Great similarities are seen in 1986 where both the volume and concentration of coverage increased substantially. The peak of coverage shown graphically in Fig. 5.2 and 5.4 in the summer of 1986 hints at the media convergence phenomenon suggested earlier.

Comparisons among combined media are shown in Fig. 5.5, 5.6, and 5.7. Two different processes are suggested by media coverage in 1985 (Fig. 5.5). One process is the leading of one medium by others. For example, television stories show a marked rise in March following a similar increase in the number of *New York Times* and news magazine stories the month before. February 1985 saw two cover stories in *Time* and

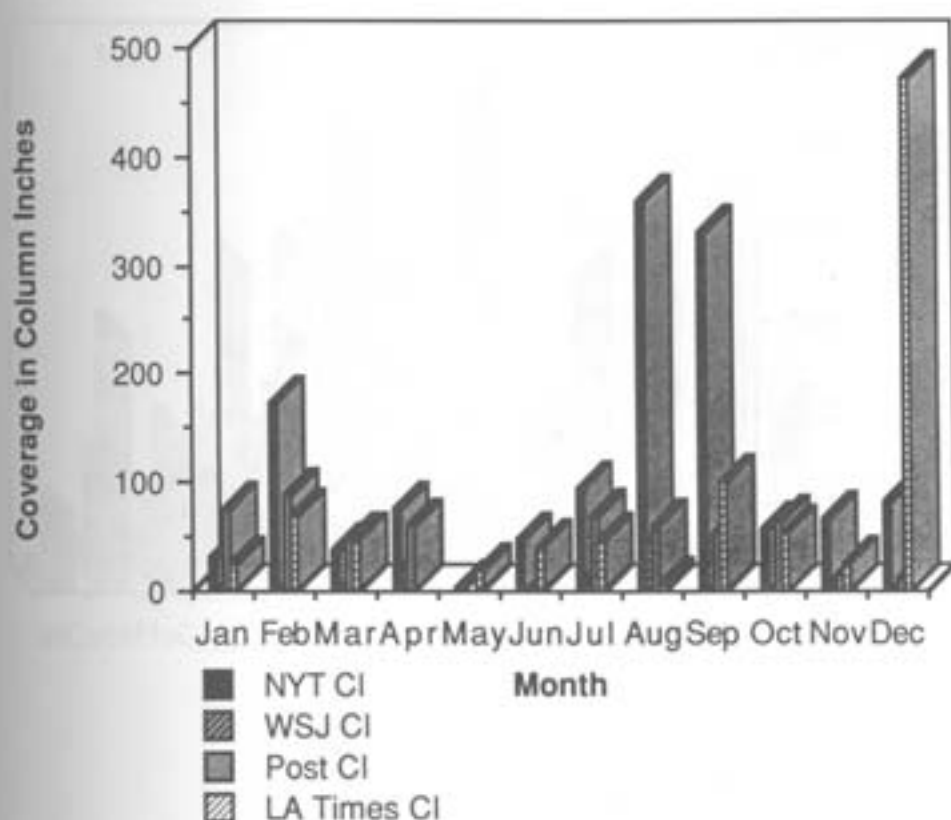


FIG. 5.1. 1985 newspaper coverage of cocaine issues.

Newsweek on cocaine trafficking. The television networks followed this emphasis with stories of their own. Later in the year another process seems to take place. A major event, the baseball drug trials of September, drives the coverage of all three media resulting in a simultaneous peak in coverage.

Figure 5.6 suggests a combination of these processes occurring in 1986. The death of athletes Len Bias and Don Rogers in June of that year drew a significant amount of media attention. But that coverage built on previous attention to the cocaine problem. Evidence for media leadership may be found in the fact that three of New York City's major newspapers carried extensive articles on cocaine and crack on May 18. These stories were followed by a rush of coverage in other media in the following months, climaxing in the peak of media attention seen in July. So although the death of the athletes may be considered prominent events driving each medium's agenda, these events probably had the effect of

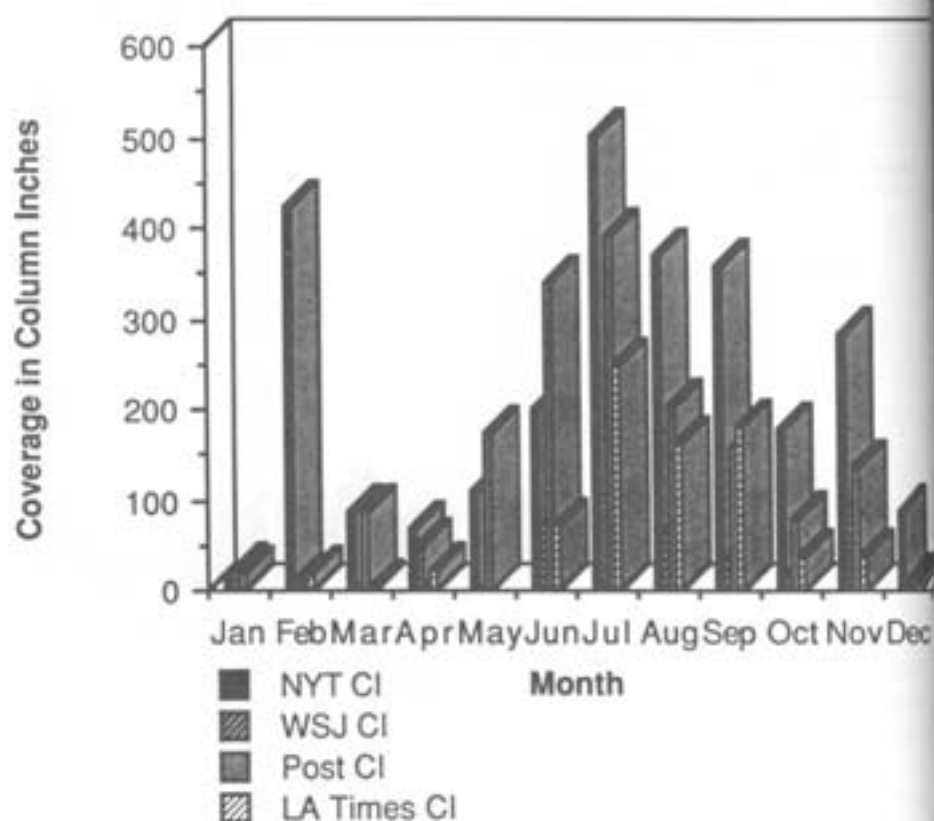


FIG. 5.2. 1986 newspaper coverage of cocaine issues.

focusing press attention on an issue already set in motion. They provided a hook, or newspeg, on which to hang the cocaine story.

Judging from Fig. 5.2, *The New York Times* took the lead in covering the cocaine issue. The other papers quickly fell in line, though, around mid-year. *The Wall Street Journal* was least likely to follow the others, playing the cocaine story up and down throughout the year, with a slight rise in mid-year. The *Journal* has a specialized audience, however, and tended to run cocaine stories when a major business was involved. After the three New York papers covered the crack/cocaine story in the middle of May, the *Post* ran a long "use and abuse" story of its own a few days later. After the *Times* and the *Post* devoted major attention to the issue in June, *The Los Angeles Times* jumped on and stayed with the issue through September. A loose interpretation of Fig. 5.2 suggests that the *Times* laid the groundwork for the story, which gathered strength when the *Post*

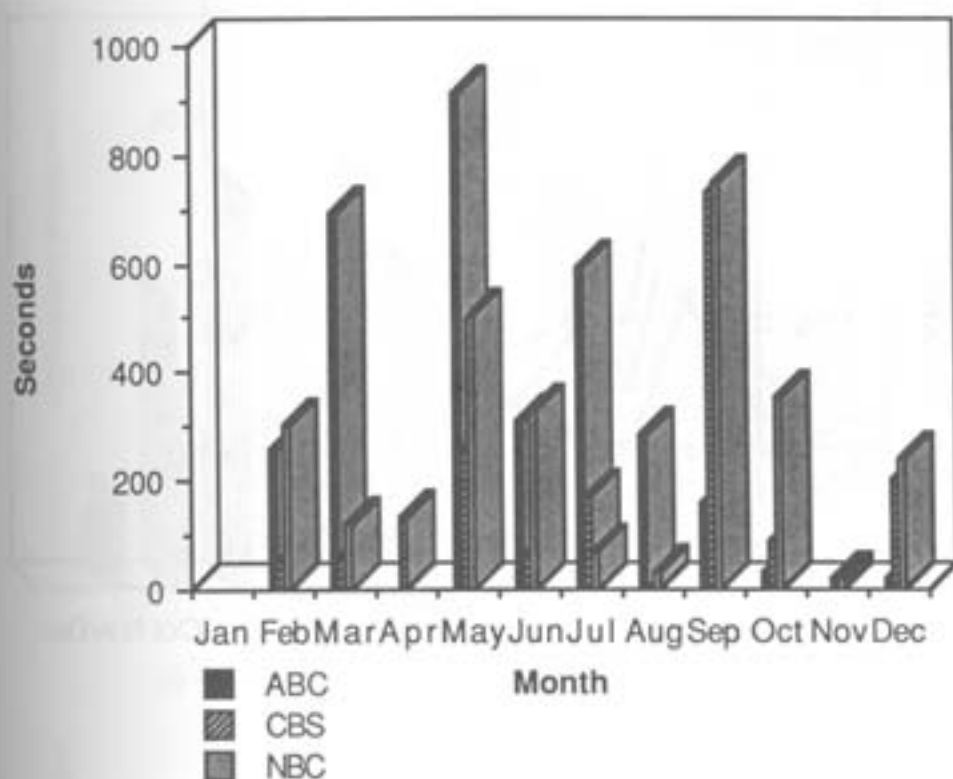


FIG. 5.3. 1985 network news coverage of cocaine issues.

picked up the story and expanded it with a heavy focus on the Len Bias death. With two elite papers running with the story, *The Los Angeles Times* was obliged to join in.

It appears that the print media, and specifically *The New York Times*, set the agenda for the television networks. Network coverage peaked in September with dual documentaries on CBS and NBC on the cocaine problem, while attention by the print media had already begun to wane. This process is seen more clearly in Fig. 5.7, which shows all news stories combined. Interestingly, the television networks dropped the issue completely in December while newspapers continued coverage at a lower level. Television news, more than newspapers, appears to follow a smooth attention curve, discovering an issue, playing it strongly, and then moving on to other stories. This tendency may contribute to the notion that the media converge on issues, resulting in a short national attention span.

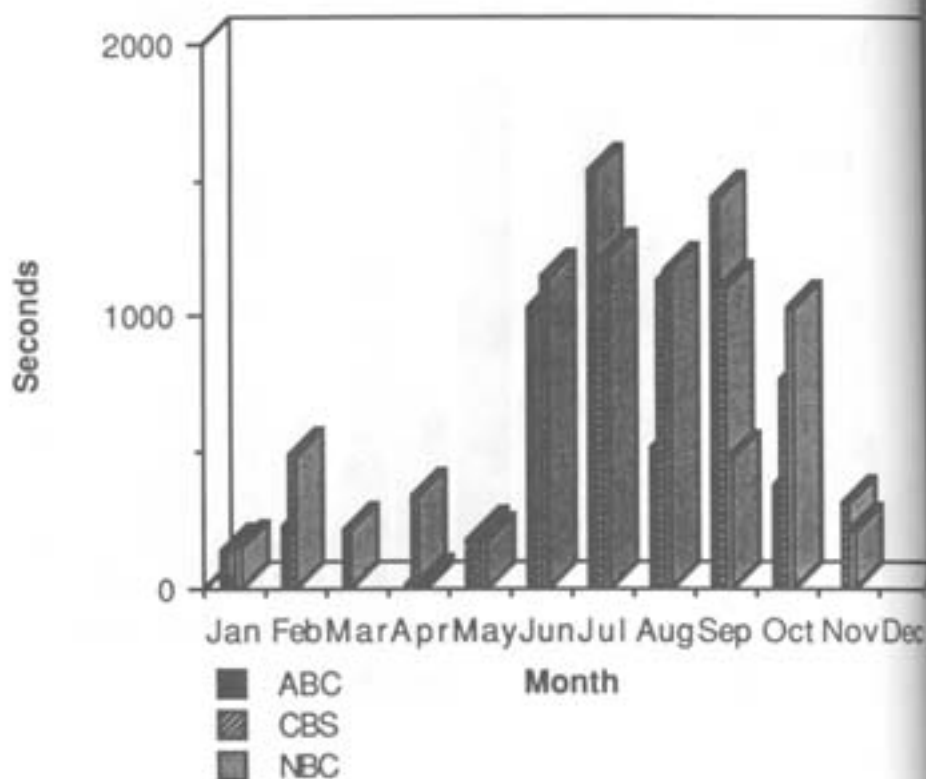


FIG. 5.4. 1986 network news coverage of cocaine issues.

This study has presented a preliminary look at intermedia coverage similarities, and media leadership. The results support the view that the major media cover issues in a similar fashion and at roughly the same time. These similarities seem more pronounced during periods of intense media attention. Support was also found for the notion that the print media lead the television networks rather than the reverse. More specific analyses are conducted in the next chapter, viewing this leadership process from day to day and from week to week. This study was confined to examining manifest media content, which can only imply the processes of leadership suggested above. More in-depth studies of these actual processes and the newsmen involved would help shed more light on the role of intermedia influence in the media convergence process. Given the value traditionally attached to diversity in American society, it is important to fully understand such processes which directly affect the extent of that diversity.

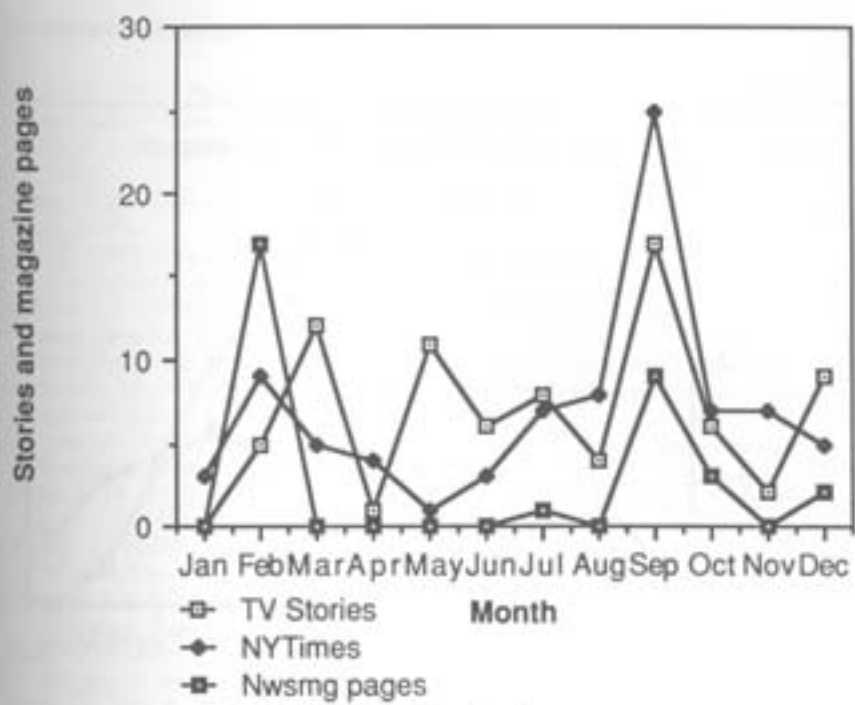


FIG. 5.5 1985 cross-media cocaine issue coverage.

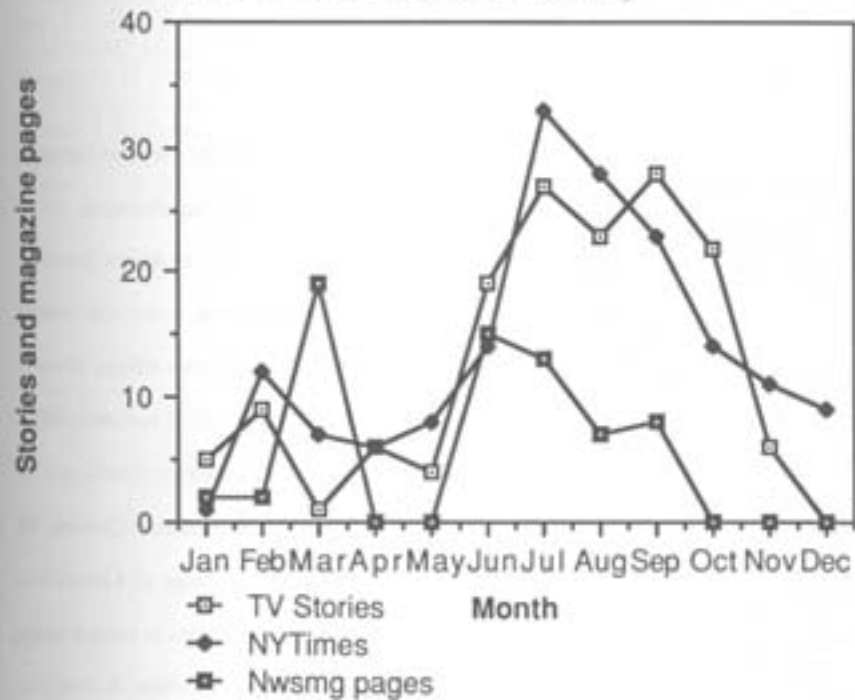


FIG. 5.6 1986 cross-media cocaine issue coverage.

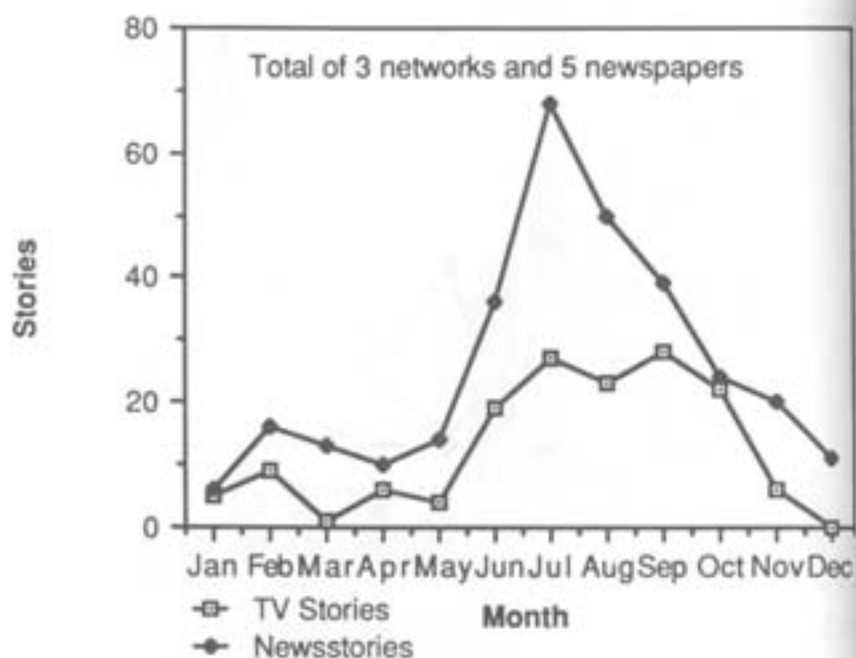


FIG. 5.7. 1986 cross-media cocaine issue coverage.

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