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Framing same-sex marriage in U.S. liberal and conservative newspapers from 2004 to 2016: Changes in issue attributes, organizing themes, and story tones

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ABSTRACT

Based on a content analysis of 326 news stories from three liberal and three conservative U.S. newspapers, this study explored how the newspapers framed the same-sex marriage issue from 2004 to 2016. "Human rights," "access to benefits," and "public support" were the three dominant issue attributes newspapers used to support same-sex marriage, while "protection of traditional marriage," "public objection," and "securing of conservative voters' support" were the three major issue attributes newspapers used to oppose same-sex marriage. The policy theme was employed most often to organize stories reporting same-sex marriage, followed by the morality and economic themes. From the perspective of same-sex marriage supporters, the general tone of news stories improved over the years. There were minor differences on the issue attributes and organizing themes used between liberal and conservative newspapers. Newspaper practice and practical implications were discussed.

1. Introduction

In the United States, same-sex marriage evolved from being criticized by most people to becoming a right under the Constitution within only three decades. In 1988, about 72% of Americans opposed the legal recognition of same-sex marriage (Baunach, 2012). Around 2010, supporters surpassed opponents, whose numbers keep shrinking since the federal government ruled that same-sex marriage is a constitutional right in 2015 (Baunach, 2012; Gallup, 2017). What pushes the rapid movement of the public opinion? Prior research found that people's attitudes toward same-sex marriage were related to a range of factors including religious predisposition, race, age, gender (e.g., Brumbaugh, Sanchez, Nock, & Wright, 2008; Olson, Cadge, & Harrison, 2006; Sherkat, De Vries, & Creek, 2010), and the way news media present the same-sex marriage issue (Price, Nir, & Cappella, 2005).

News media draw people's attention to same-sex marriage by increasing the amount of media coverage on this issue (Hester & Gibson, 2007; Sayre, Bode, Shah, Wilcox, & Shah, 2010). Moreover, news media influence people's perception of this issue by "framing," which is the procedure of "selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). In other words, media extract the key attributes of news content and present them in a variety of frames reducing the complexity of issues. Media content thus suggests meanings of an issue by using a set of frame-centered interpretive packages (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). For example, Johnson (2012) analyzed the relationship between public opinion and Associated Press' news coverage on same-sex marriage from 2004 to 2011. He found that framing same-sex marriage as an equality issue led to a decrease in public opposition to same-sex marriage while framing it as a morality issue had a short-term effect in boosting public opposition.

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It is thus important to know how news media framed same-sex marriage in past years. While plentiful literature has examined this topic, most studies focused either only on a couple of media outlets (Fetner, 2001; Hackl, Boyer, & Galupo, 2013; Hull, 2001) or covered a relatively short period (Liebler, Schwartz, & Harper, 2009; Moscowitz, 2010; Pan, Meng, & Zhou, 2010; Rodriguez & Blumell, 2014; Warren & Bloch, 2014). They did not present a longitudinal trend of news frames and were unable to examine the variety of news frames among different media outlets. The current study aims to fill this gap by quantitatively analyzing 326 news stories mentioning same-sex marriage from 2004 to 2016. Because of television's limited influence on people's opinions toward same-sex marriage (Becker & Scheufele, 2009), this study focused only on U.S. newspapers. The results identified six issue attribute frames used most often by newspapers to support and oppose same-sex marriage and three prominent themes employed to organize these stories. This study also analyzed how the news frames and story tones varied from 2004 to 2016 and between the three liberal newspapers and three conservative newspapers.

2. Literature review

2.1. *Issue attribute, organizing theme, and story tone*

News media suggest meanings for an issue by extracting key aspects of the issue and presenting these aspects as news frames to an audience (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999). The most common type of frame used by news media is the issue attribute frame, which covers the particular characteristics of an issue (Kim, Scheufele, & Shanahan, 2002). The concept of "issue attribute" originates from attribute-agenda setting theory: In addition to telling people what to think about, news media also tell people how to think about it by making certain attributes of an issue more salient (Coleman, McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 2009; McCombs, 1994; Moon, 2011). News media often discuss an issue's attributes such as the reasons to support or oppose that issue (Kim, Besley, Oh, & Kim, 2014).

News media also frame an issue by employing an organizing theme, which is the central organizing idea to define an issue (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Unlike the issue attribute frame that refers to the specific properties of an issue, an organizing theme provides an overarching viewpoint from which a sequence of events can be interpreted (e.g., Bowen & Zheng, 2015; Kim et al., 2014).

Compared with the issue attribute frame and the organizing theme that deal with the cognitive aspects of an issue, a story tone—also known as valence—refers to the affective quality attached to that issue. A story tone can be positive, negative, or neutral (e.g., Kim et al., 2014).

2.2. *Framing same-sex marriage*

U.S. news media have been framing same-sex marriage by discussing the reasons to support or oppose this issue. News media often framed the reasons to support same-sex marriage as: Same-sex marriage is a civil right as is traditional heterosexual marriage; legalizing same-sex marriage could help reduce prejudice and discrimination toward same-sex couples; same-sex people should be protected as a threatened minority; tolerance should be part of our culture; and same-sex marriage is inevitable as a concession to equality (Hull, 2001; Liebler et al., 2009; Rodriguez & Blumell, 2014; Warren & Bloch, 2014).

Regarding the reasons to oppose same-sex marriage, news media employed frames such as: Same-sex marriage is unnatural and offends God; the definition of marriage should be between a man and a woman; most people do not like same-sex marriage; same-sex marriage violates current law; same-sex marriage is bad for raising children; Republicans tried to win the election by opposing same-sex marriage; encouraging homosexuality would fuel AIDS epidemics; and same-sex marriage is a gateway to future moral atrocities (Hull, 2001; Liebler et al., 2009; Pan et al., 2010; Rodriguez & Blumell, 2014; Warren & Bloch, 2014).

U.S. news media also use various organizing themes to cover the stories related to same-sex marriage such as the themes of democracy, morality (Hull, 2001; Johnson, 2012), justice and equality

(Fetner, 2001; Johnson, 2012; Rodriguez & Blumell, 2014), civil rights, legislation, religion (Pan et al., 2010), threat and progress (Johnson, 2013). These organizing themes usually varied across the U.S. media outlets: Liberal newspapers were more likely to use the equality frame to support same-sex marriage, whereas conservative newspapers were more likely to use the morality frame to oppose it (Pan et al., 2010).

Additionally, the story tones of U.S. news articles changed due to historical events. For example, the tone slightly changed after an anti-gay movement group was founded (Fetner, 2001). Also, after Massachusetts enacted same-sex marriage legislation in 2004, *The New York Times* significantly improved the positive tones in same-sex marriage stories (Pan et al., 2010).

In the United Kingdom, the Discourses of Marriage Research Group, employing a series of critical discourse analyses, found that U.K. media either used a religious definition of marriage to oppose same-sex marriage or used a renewed definition of marriage to support same-sex marriage; however, they rarely accepted both definitions and "left no room for neutrality" (Paterson & Coffey-Glover, 2018, p. 32). U.K. media also employed the legal theme, conflict theme (Jowett & Peel, 2010; Paterson & Coffey-Glover, 2018), and victim theme (Turner et al., 2018) to organize same-sex marriage stories. However, scholars found more similarities than differences among the U.K. media outlets in terms of the keywords used to describe same-sex marriage (Paterson & Coffey-Glover, 2018).

While prior studies have contributed insightful findings mentioned above, they either explored only a couple of media outlets (Fetner, 2001; Hackl, Boyer, Galupo, 2013; Hull, 2001; Johnson, 2012), or examined the media coverage in a short time such as November 2002 to November 2004 (Pan et al., 2010), February 2004 and February 2005 (Liebler et al., 2009), May 2008 to August 2010 (Warren & Bloch, 2014), or January 2013 to December 2013 (Rodriguez & Blumell, 2014). To date, no research has documented the trend of news frame changes from multiple U.S. newspapers in the past decade. To fill this gap, this study explored the changes of news frames on same-sex marriage from 2004 to 2016 by examining three liberal and three conservative newspapers in the U.S. The analysis started in 2004 when Massachusetts pioneered legalization of same-sex marriage, and ended in 2016, a year after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that same-sex marriage is a constitutional right. This study thus developed the following research questions:

RQ1: How did U.S. newspapers frame the issue attributes of same-sex marriage?

RQ2: How did U.S. newspapers frame the organizing themes of same-sex marriage?

RQ3: How did U.S. newspapers frame the story tones of same-sex marriage?

RQ4: Did U.S. newspapers frame the issue attributes, organizing themes, and story tones of same-sex marriage differently from 2004 to 2016?

RQ5: Did U.S. liberal newspapers and U.S. conservative newspapers frame the issue attributes, organizing themes, and story tones of same-sex marriage in a different way?

3. Method

To answer the above research questions, this study employed a descriptive quantitative content analysis.

3.1. *Sample*

To capture the frames employed by newspapers of different political orientations, the authors planned to select newspapers based on their endorsements in the presidential elections in 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016. However, in 2016, fewer than five newspapers out of the top 100 newspapers in terms of their daily circulation endorsed the Republican candidate, Donald Trump, which made

2016 an outlier year (Peters & Woolley, 2016). Therefore, the authors selected three newspapers that endorsed Democratic presidential candidates in 2004, 2008 and 2012—*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Star-Ledger*, and three newspapers that endorsed Republican candidates in the same presidential elections—*The Oklahoman*, *The Dallas Morning News*, and *The Columbus Dispatch* (Peters & Woolley, 2012; Peters, 2008).

To retrieve news articles from these six newspapers from 2004 to 2016, the authors used *LexisNexis* and *America's News* databases. The authors looked for articles with the keyword "gay marriage" appearing in the headlines and retrieved a total of 1,748 articles (Figure 1).

To ensure comparability across different newspapers, the authors used the stratified sampling technique to select the same amount of news items from each newspaper. Within each newspaper, a systematic sampling technique was then used to chronologically arrange the articles and sample 60 items from the article list, making sure that items from different periods could be selected. A total of 360 items were initially selected. After excluding invalid cases (such as weekly summaries, letters to the editors, opinions, and corrections), 326 articles remained for the data analysis.

3.2. *News frames*

This study utilized the issue attribute frames and the organizing themes identified in previous research (Fetner, 2001; Hull, 2001; Kim et al., 2014; Liebler et al., 2009; Pan et al., 2010; Rodriguez & Blumell, 2014). Also, an "other" option was created for any newly emerging frames.

3.3. *Coding*

The entire text of each newspaper article was examined as a unit of analysis. Within a single news article, as long as one specific issue attribute or organizing theme was mentioned, the score of that frame was coded as 1 (="yes"); if this frame was not mentioned at all, the value was coded as 0 (="no"). Each news article could have mentioned more than one issue attribute frame or organizing theme.

The story tone was evaluated from the perspective of same-sex marriage supporters. It was coded as: 3 (="positive", in general the news story supported same-sex marriage), 2 (="neutral", in general the news story did not support or oppose same-sex marriage), or 1 (="negative", in general the news story opposed same-sex marriage).

Two researchers coded the articles after receiving a series of trainings and pre-tests. Intercoder reliabilities were calculated by double-coding a random subsample (12%) of the data: .90 (Scott's pi) for issue attributes, .78 for organizing themes, and .83 for story tones. These statistics are higher than .67 and thus considered adequate for exploratory studies and reliable (Zhou & Sloan, 2015).
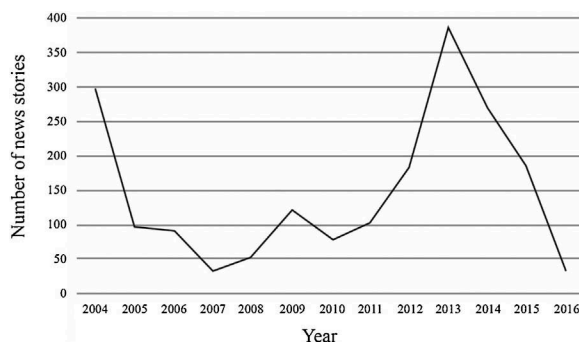

Figure 1. Total number of news stories with "gay marriage" appearing in the headlines (*N* = 1748).

4. Results

4.1. RQ1: issue attribute frames

4.1.1. Supportive issue attributes

Table 1 shows that, 56.4% of the news articles used "human rights" as a reason to support same-sex marriage. Some earlier news articles mentioned that marriage is an "entitlement" for gay men and lesbians (Jackson, 2004). In more recent news articles, advocating same-sex marriage was compared to the civil rights movement in the 1950s (Apuzzo, 2014). The second most-used supportive issue attribute was "access to benefits," accounting for 38.3%. The attribute is about same-sex marriage allowing same-sex couples to have benefits that heterosexual couples can access, ranging from inheritance to various government benefits (Cattanach, 2009; Mansnerus, 2006). Thirdly, 32.5% of the news articles cited "public support" for same-sex marriage as a reason to legalize it. Some articles quoted surveys that indicated increasing acceptance of gay men and lesbians (Jackson, 2004; Yardley, 2012). Newspapers also used other attributes (less than 10%): same-sex marriage does not hurt traditional marriage, same-sex marriage is actually good for raising kids, government can make more revenue, same-sex marriage is protected by the Constitution (after 2015), more and more people do not accept the Bible, and supporting same-sex marriage could win Democratic voters.

4.1.2. Opposing issue attributes

Table 1 shows that, 63.2% of the news articles cited "protection of traditional marriage" as a reason. The "one man and one woman" model of marriage was regarded as a gold standard in many Judeo-Christian societies. An article quoted then Republican Senator Rick Santorum, who said "I'm a lover of traditional families and children who deserve the right to have a mother and father" (Hulse, 2004). The second common opposing issue attribute was "public objection," accounting for 16.3%. Media reported surveys that showed a strong objection against same-sex marriage (Harper, 2013; Jackson, 2004). Lastly, 11.0% of the news articles indicated that opposing same-sex marriage might help secure voters' support in a political election. For example, a news article from 2004 said some Democrats saw Republicans' push to ban same-sex marriage as a way to "motivate conservative voters" (Hulse, 2004). Some other opposing frames showing up less than 10% included: Children could be more successful in a family with one woman and one man, same-sex couples cannot reproduce, state governments have no responsibility to follow federal government decisions, and same-sex marriage leads to future moral collapse.

4.2. RQ2: organizing themes

The most common organizing theme was the policy theme (83.1%). News articles of this kind discussed same-sex marriage in technical legal terms with a focus on equality. For example, an article started by reporting on a Connecticut Supreme Court ruling same-sex marriage as constitutional:

Table 1. Main issue attribute frames and organizing themes used by newspapers to report same-sex marriage issue ($n = 326$).

	Percentage within media sources (%)						
	NY	WP	SL	OK	DMN	CD	Average
Supportive issue attributes							
Human rights	54.5	69.8	56.6	47.3	56.4	54.5	56.4
Access to benefits	29.1	52.8	41.5	20.0	45.5	41.8	38.3
Public support	41.8	47.2	49.1	18.2	23.6	16.4	32.5
Opposing issue attributes							
Protection of traditional marriage	49.1	69.8	60.4	63.6	63.6	72.7	63.2
Public objection	12.7	30.2	11.3	12.7	16.4	14.5	16.3
Securing of the conservative voters' support	9.1	13.2	15.1	3.6	14.	10.9	11.0
Organizing themes							
Policy theme	80.0	84.9	88.7	85.5	81.8	78.2	83.1
Economic theme	21.8	24.5	18.9	23.6	12.7	23.6	20.9
Morality theme	32.7	50.9	24.5	38.2	40.0	32.7	36.5

Note: NY, *The New York Times*; WP, *The Washington Post*; SL, *The Star-Ledger*; OK, *The Oklahoman*; DMN, *The Dallas Morning News*; CD, *The Columbus Dispatch*.

"The ruling … held that a state law limiting marriage to heterosexual couples, and a civil union law intended to provide all the rights and privileges of marriage to gay couples, violated the constitutional guarantees of equal protection under the law" (McFadden, 2008). News articles also linked the same-sex marriage debate with election politics. An article pointed out that earlier presidential campaigns against same-sex marriage from both Republican and Democrat candidates were strategies to mobilize culturally conservative supporters to vote for them (Jackson, 2004).

The morality theme appeared in 36.5% of the news coverage. News articles referred to the religious definition of a marriage, framing same-sex marriage as unethical: "It violates the teachings of many religions and would upset the social order by changing the definition of marriage" (Kocieniewski, 2010). Sometimes, newspapers related same-sex marriage to other religious issues such as abortion and prayer in school (Jackson, 2004).

Finally, 20.9% of the articles employed an economic theme, contextualizing same-sex marriage in relation to financial benefits enjoyed by marriage. For example, an article reported that then President Barack Obama "had directed his administration to find ways to make sure gay couples received the benefits for which they were now eligible" (Shear, 2013). Some articles also mentioned the benefits of same-sex marriage to the community (Yardley, 2012).

4.3. RQ3: Story tones

Overall, the story tone was somewhat positive in the U.S. newspapers in 2004–2016 ($M = 2.26$, $SD = .76$). That is, news stories were generally in favor of same-sex marriage.

4.4. RQ4: Changes of news frames from 2004 to 2016

Figure 2 shows that, regressing each of the three supportive issue attributes to the year of publication respectively, "human rights" ($\beta = .12$, $p < .05$) and "public support" ($\beta = .34$, $p < .001$) were significantly predicted by the year. There was no significant relationship between "access to benefits" and year ($\beta = -.01$, $p = .81$).

Figure 3 shows that, regressing each of the opposing issue attributes to the year of publication respectively, "protection of traditional marriage" ($\beta = -.11$, $p < .05$) and "securing the conservative voters' support" ($\beta = -.20$, $p < .001$) were significantly predicted by the year. The relationship between "public opposition" and year ($\beta = -.10$, $p = .07$) was not significant.

Figure 4 shows that, regressing each of the three organizing themes to the year of publication respectively, none of them was significantly predicted by the year.

Figure 5 shows that, regressing the story tone to the year of publication, the story tone was significantly predicted by the year ($\beta = .33$, $p < .001$).
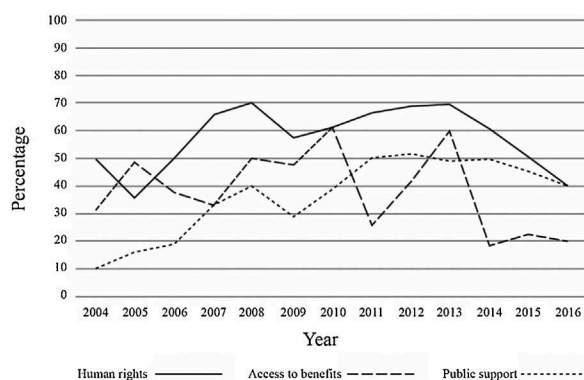

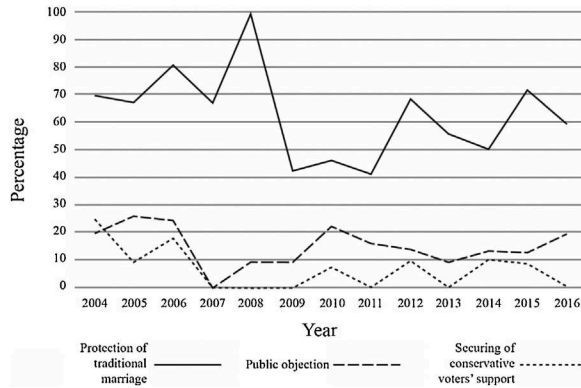**Figure 2.** Percentage of supportive issue attributes mentioned.

Figure 3. Percentage of opposing issue attributes mentioned.

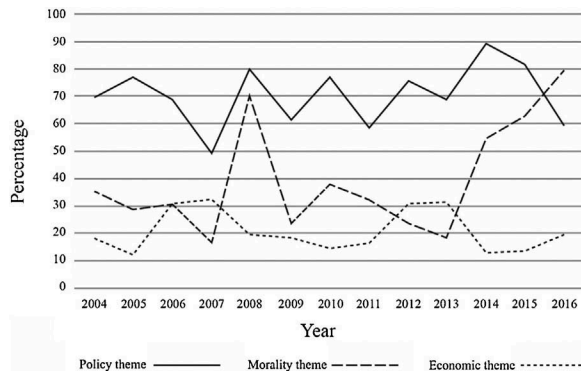**Figure 4.** Percentage of organizing themes used.
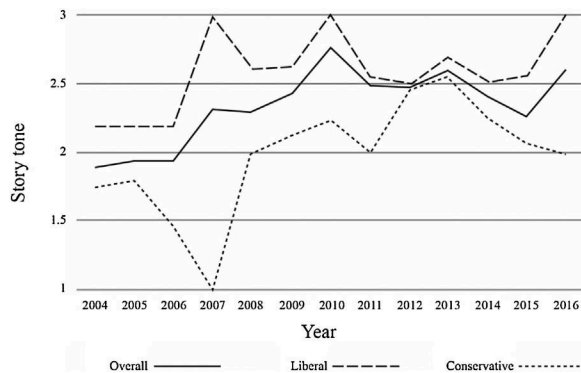
Figure 5. Overall story tone of news articles reporting same-sex marriage.

4.5. RQ5: Comparing liberal and conservative newspapers

A series of chi-squared tests indicated no significant differences between liberal and conservative newspapers in mentioning "human rights" ($\chi^2 = 1.88$, $p = .17$), "access to benefits" ($\chi^2 = .95$, $p = .33$), "protection of traditional marriage" ($\chi^2 = 1.74$, $p = .19$), "public objection" ($\chi^2 = .72$, $p = .40$), and

"securing of conservative voters' support" (χ^2 = .62, p = .43); but liberal papers mentioned "public support" more often than conservative papers (χ^2 = 26.22, p < .001).

Another series of chi-squared tests indicated no significant differences between liberal and conservative newspapers in using the organizing themes of policy theme (χ^2 = .41, p = .52), morality theme (χ^2 = .03, p = .86), and economic theme (χ^2 = .15, p = .70).

An independent-sample t test found that liberal newspapers presented a more positive tone than conservative newspapers in reporting on same-sex marriage (t = 6.16, p < .001).

5. Discussion

Employing a quantitative content analysis with 326 news articles, this study examined how six U.S. newspapers framed the same-sex marriage issue from 2004 to 2016. This study is one of the first to conduct a longitudinal analysis on how the news frames of same-sex marriage have evolved in the past decade and provided possible interpretations for the evolution patterns in respect to the milestones of same-sex marriage and relevant political events. With more countries and regions worldwide (e.g., Australia and Taiwan) legally recognizing same-sex marriage, this study provides a historical record of the issue in the USA that future scholars can use for comparative studies regarding other countries.

5.1. *The trend of newspaper coverage*

Consistent with prior studies in the U.K. that found that the number of news articles was associated with major political or legal events related to same-sex marriage (Paterson & Coffey-Glover, 2018), this study identified a similar phenomenon (Figure 1): The number of news articles covering same-sex marriage reached a peak (n = 298) in 2004, followed by a trough in 2007 (n = 31) and a second peak in 2013 (n = 386). The first peak was mostly because then President George Bush (also the Republican candidate in the upcoming presidential election) had endorsed a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage before he ran for his re-election. Later the same year, Massachusetts became the first state in the U.S. to legalize same-sex marriage. These two events together attracted plentiful media attention in 2004. The second peak could possibly be attributed to the then-President (also the Democrat candidate), Barack Obama, who had called for the repeal of the Defense of Marriage Act before he ran for his re-election. His endorsement was followed by ten states legalizing same-sex marriage in 2012 and 2013. This series of events may have pushed the amount of media coverage to a second peak in 2013, which was higher than its first peak in 2008.

It is interesting that between these two peak years, even though Bush and the other Republicans continued stressing opposition to same-sex marriage after he had won the re-election, the news coverage dropped dramatically by 67.1% from 2004 to 2005 and remained at the bottom level until 2012. Also, during this trough period, a range of same-sex marriage events happened: Proposition 8, a constitutional ban on same-sex marriage, was initially approved by California voters in 2008 and upheld by the California Supreme Court in 2009; however, it was later ruled as unconstitutional by a federal district judge in 2010 (Warren & Bloch, 2014). Also, five states legalized same-sex marriage between 2008 and 2011. And thirdly, both Republican and Democrat candidates included same-sex marriage in their presidential campaigns in 2008. In brief, while same-sex marriage went through a presidential election and experienced back and forth in different states, it seemed of little journalistic interest from 2005 to 2011.

The above observation points toward an emerging pattern in newspaper practice: In regard to the same-sex marriage issue, newspapers increased their coverage when the then-presidents, both Bush and Obama, had formally announced their positions on the issue before their respective re-elections. Perhaps, newspapers believed a re-elected president would have more commitment to a position he had endorsed, which made such an issue warrant more attention. Otherwise, much like in 2008's election, regardless of which party's candidate would win, the election would result in a first-time

president. It was thus unknown whether that president would be able to execute his plan on same-sex marriage as promised in his campaign. That might somehow explain why this issue was not appealing to newspapers around 2008.

5.2. *Competing issue attributes and organizing themes*

This study identified six issue attribute frames of same-sex marriage: "Human rights," "access to benefits," and "public support" were mentioned most often to support same-sex marriage (Figure 2), while "protection of traditional marriage," "public objection," and "securing of conservative voters" were mentioned most often to oppose same-sex marriage (Figure 3).

Regarding trends among the issue attributes, the mention of "human rights" increased from 2004 to 2016 while "protection of traditional marriage" decreased, reflecting that the U.S. newspapers had moved away from a religious lens and more towards an equality lens in dealing with the same-sex marriage issue (Craig, Martinez, Kane, & Gainous, 2005). Also, the trend indicates that "human rights" and "protection of traditional marriage" became seen as antithetical to each other: Framing marriage as a universal human right available to both cross-sex and same-sex couples conflicts with the Judeo-Christian conceptualization of marriage as a union between one man and one woman. This finding is consistent with the U.K. media's portrayal of same-sex marriage as a dichotomy of two different definitions of marriage, rather than developing an alternative definition that is compatible with both ideologies (Turner et al., 2018).

As a Gallup poll (2017) shows, public support for same-sex marriage has been increasing in the last two decades; it was thus not surprising that more and more newspaper articles cited poll data and used "public support" as a supportive attribute. Increasing public support also meant that it was more difficult for Republican politicians to use opposition to same-sex marriage as a strategy for "securing of conservative voters' support," because some conservative voters might have accepted, or at least not opposed same-sex marriage.

An examination of Figs. 2 and 3 might provide a possible explanation for the victory of same-sex marriage: Over the past 10 years, "human rights" and "access to benefits," as two primary supportive frames, showed up on newspapers 20%–70% of the time. While "public support" was rarely mentioned at the beginning, it later grew rapidly, aligning closely with the change of public opinion. Nevertheless, Figure 3 shows a big gap in percentage between "protection of traditional marriage" and the other two opposing frames. "Protection of traditional marriage" seemed to be fighting lonely by itself, since "public objection" and "securing of conservative voters' support," as the second and third mostly used frames, were never mentioned more than 30% of the time. Even before 2011 when more than half of Americans opposed same-sex marriage (Gallup, 2017), "public objection" was not mentioned a lot by U.S. newspapers. With more and more Americans perceiving same-sex marriage from an equality perspective rather than from a religious perspective (Craig et al., 2005), "protection of traditional marriage" became decreasingly effective. At the same time, there were few new, alterative news frames developed to oppose same-sex marriage. These factors might explain why same-sex marriage opponents eventually lost the war.

Figure 4 shows that from 2004 to 2016, the newspapers organized same-sex marriage stories primarily as a policy issue, unlike the news coverage before 2004 that focused on the morality theme (Brewer, 2003). This supports Gross' (2005) point that "As the 2004 presidential election season opened, the issue of civil marriage rights for gay couples was propelled onto the political agenda" (p. 519). From 2004 to 2016, the morality theme was mentioned more often only when certain political and judicial decisions were being validated, which was reflected by a surge in 2008 and a gradual increase after 2014 (Figure 4): 2008 was a presidential election year and in 2014 the Sixth Circuit Court upheld the same-sex marriage ban, which was followed by the U.S. Supreme Court ruling that declared the same-sex marriage ban unconstitutional.

Taking a closer look at the relationships between organizing themes and issue attribute frames, the newspapers used the policy theme more often when mentioning "securing of the conservative

voters' support" ($\chi^2 = 8.2$, $p < .001$), used the economic theme more often when mentioning "access to benefits" ($\chi^2 = 57.0$, $p < .001$), and employed the morality theme more often when mentioning "protection of traditional marriage" ($\chi^2 = 35.0$, $p < .001$).

5.3. *Similarities and differences between liberal and conservative newspapers*

Comparing the issue attributes of liberal newspapers to those of conservative newspapers, the data suggests the difference is minimal, which is consistent with the U.K. media (Paterson & Coffey-Glover, 2018). Out of the six issue attributes, liberal newspapers only mentioned "public support" more often than did conservative newspapers. Both liberal and conservative newspapers strived to provide both supporting and opposing reasons in order to maintain their credibility, since unbalanced reporting leads to a decrease in a newspaper's credibility (Fico, Richardson, & Edwards, 2004). Furthermore, because arguments are usually presented dialogically as a response to opposing arguments, arguments for or against same-sex marriage are likely to contain references to opposing arguments (Smith & Windes, 2000). Therefore, even if a news article aims to oppose same-sex marriage, it might also include arguments for supporting it for rebuttal. The same applies to news articles that support same-sex marriage.

Moreover, the simultaneous appearance of all three organizing themes in liberal and conservative newspapers confirms the intermedia agenda setting—a situation in which the agenda of one medium is shaped by the agenda of another medium (Sweetser, Golan, & Wanta, 2008). For example, Boyle (2001) found that both liberal and conservative newspapers were probably shaped by some dominant politicians' and presidential candidates' statements on same-sex marriage, therefore, displaying similar organizing themes.

Although newspapers seemed to be using similar patterns of issue attributes and organizing themes, they expressed their political orientations in the stories' tones (Figure 5): Liberal newspapers presented a more favorable tone than conservative newspapers. The average tone has been turning more favorable toward same-sex marriage over the years, with a milestone in 2007 when it, for the first time, became positive. The average tone hit its most favorable level in 2010, and in the following year, public support for same-sex marriage surpassed public opposition (Gallup, 2017). This means that the story tones in the newspapers and public opinion were associated somehow, supporting prior research (Johnson, 2012).

Interestingly, a post-hoc analysis found a negative association between the total number of articles and the difference in tone between liberal and conservative newspapers (Spearman's rho = −.86, $p < .001$). For example, when the total number of news articles hit bottom in 2007 (Figure 1), the gap in story tone between liberal and conservative newspapers was the biggest (Figure 5). Perhaps when there were fewer articles for same-sex marriage, editors gave priority to sources who were in line with the newspaper's political orientation, therefore creating a polarizing effect in the tone between liberal and conservative newspapers.

5.4. *Practical implications*

The above observation of newspaper practice might suggest practical implications for advocates aiming to increase awareness of a social issue like same-sex marriage and improve its newspaper publicity. For example, to attract more newspaper attention, advocates are encouraged to lobby political candidates running for re-election to endorse the issue in their campaigns, rather than putting their efforts toward candidates who are running for their first time. Also, advocates should consider pitching to newspapers of both political orientations, since newspapers use similar issue attributes in covering stories like same-sex marriage even if some issue attributes are against their political orientations.

When preparing a story or press release, instead of using a "solo" issue attribute frame to promote an issue all over the time, advocates should actively monitor the effectiveness of the issue attribute

frames used by newspapers, develop new frames based on current public opinion and the external environment, and pitch their up-to-date frames to newspapers. Besides using various issue attributes, advocates should also revise their stories based on the organizing theme and story tone currently used by newspapers, making sure the stories fit the scope and interests of the newspapers.

5.5. *Limitations and future directions*

While providing many contributions, the limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, while several correlations among news frames, political activities, and public opinion were observed, this study did not test their causal relationships. Future research should employ time-series analysis to explore how one piece of information flows from one source to another and how different sources influence each other (e.g., Johnson, 2012). Also, the newspaper practice observed and the corresponding practical implications suggested in this study were based on the same-sex marriage case only. Future research should replicate the framing research in other social issues and use other research methods (e.g., Tanner, Friedman, & Zheng, 2015) to examine whether similar newspaper practice would emerge and whether similar practical strategies would work.

Second, the six newspapers analyzed in this study cannot represent the whole newspaper industry. *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* have strong national appeal while the other four newspapers are regional newspapers. The national-regional divide might affect the framing of news stories in some ways. Additionally, this study only employed "gay marriage" as the search term in the headlines, which might exclude articles that cover same-sex marriage issue but did not have this term in their headlines. With the maturity of natural language processing and artificial intelligence in computational social science, future research should use computer-coding content analysis software to examine the entire corpus of newspaper articles on the same-sex marriage issue by using multiple keywords.

Finally, the Discourses of Marriage Research Group has accomplished many linguistic framing studies on same-sex marriage in the U.K. media (e.g., Paterson & Coffey-Glover, 2018; Turner et al., 2018). Future research should use the critical discourse analysis method to examine same-sex marriage stances in the U.S. media, providing linguistic insights in addition to this study.

Declaration of interest

None.

Notes on contributors

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