

Television drove viewers to the Web to explore Obama-Muslim rumors

September 27 2010, by Jeff Grabmeier

A study examining Americans' interest in the rumor that Barack Obama is a Muslim shows that the mainstream media - particularly television - still influences the topics that engage the public.

Researchers found that online searches about the Obama-Muslim rumor spiked on days that the topic was heavily covered on national [television](#) networks, and that searches declined on days when there was less coverage.

"With all the attention given to blogs and online news, some people have suggested that the mainstream media's role has diminished in our society," said Brian Weeks, lead author of the study, and currently a doctoral student in communication at Ohio State University.

"But we found that the [mainstream media](#), especially television, still helps place issues on the public's agenda."

Newspapers did not have as much of an effect as did television - possibly because most newspaper articles effectively dispelled the rumor, making online searches unnecessary, Weeks said.

Weeks conducted the study as a graduate student at the University of Minnesota. His co-author is Brian Southwell, an associate professor of journalism and mass communication at the University of Minnesota.

The study appears in the September 2010 issue of the journal [Mass](#)

[Communication](#) *and Society.*

The researchers studied how the media drives public interest by examining one of the most talked-about rumors of the 2008 [presidential election](#) - the rumor that Obama was secretly a Muslim. Although the rumor was quickly disproven, it still generated significant interest and even belief. In fact, less than a month before the election, the Pew Research Center found that 12 percent of the public believed Obama was indeed a Muslim.

In this study, the researchers looked at [media coverage](#) of the rumor from June 1, 2008 through Election Day, November 4.

They examined coverage on seven major television networks - ABC, CBS, CNN, Fox, MSNBC, NBC and PBS's News Hour with Jim Lehrer. They also examined coverage of the rumor in more than 25 newspapers around the country, including USA Today, the New York Times and the Washington Post.

The researchers employed a relatively new approach to determine how often Americans were using the Web to search for information about the rumor. They used Google Trends, a service of the online search company Google, which can be used to track how often particular search terms are entered into the search site.

Results showed that Google searches about the rumor increased significantly on days that television coverage rose. On the day after significant television coverage, searches declined, and by the fourth day after the report there was no association between the coverage and online searches.

"If you see coverage of the rumor on TV, you probably have a computer or laptop nearby, and you're going to try to find more information right

away. It makes sense that most people don't wait one or more days to check on the report," Weeks said.

Newspaper coverage of the rumor, on the other hand, did not strongly predict online searches. Weeks said the explanation may have to do with the nature of the coverage.

"It comes down to how much ambiguity and uncertainty that people have after reading an article or viewing a news report," Weeks said.

"Newspaper articles tended to present the facts and dispel the rumor decisively, so readers didn't have any reason to try to seek more information online."

However, the television reports, particularly on cable networks, tended to present the information very differently. Rather than dispelling the rumor, cable network shows - which did 89 percent of all television reports about the rumor -- would often present pundits who would argue both sides of the issue, and discuss whether the rumor was even a legitimate topic of discussion.

"The result is that many people were less certain after watching TV reports about whether the rumor was actually true or not," Weeks said. "We think that's why they went online."

Weeks said this may be one reason that belief in the rumor that Obama is a Muslim continues to be strong to this day.

"When people go online, they can find all kinds of misinformation and false information. To some extent, people believe what they want to believe, and they can find information online that will reinforce their prejudices," he said.

The researchers also investigated the possibility that public interest in the rumor, as evidenced by online searches, was driving media coverage. In this case, they examined whether a given day's searches about the rumor was related to media coverage of the rumor a week later.

They found no such relation, suggesting that media coverage was indeed influencing online searches, and not the other way around.

Weeks will continue studying the media and political rumors at Ohio State. In one project, he and his colleagues will examine the extent to which refutations of a rumor affect people's beliefs about the rumor.

Provided by The Ohio State University

Citation: Television drove viewers to the Web to explore Obama-Muslim rumors (2010, September 27) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-09-television-drove-viewers-web-explore.html>

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