

The Starting Line: Media Coverage of the Faith-Based Initiative in the First Six Months of 2001 and 2009

When he took over the White House in January 2009, President Barack Obama quickly adopted much of the “faith-based initiative” put into place by his predecessor, President George W. Bush. The initiative was designed to expand the role of faith-based and community organizations in the delivery of social services.

But a new study by the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism and the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life finds that Obama’s faith-based initiative has so far generated little of the contentious press coverage associated with Bush’s effort. And the program is not as closely associated with the current president as it was with the man he succeeded.

The new study examines newspaper coverage of the faith-based initiative during the first six months of the Obama and Bush administrations and finds that the topic received nearly seven times more coverage in the first six months of 2001 than it did during the same period in 2009.

The faith-based initiative was an early priority of the Bush administration – “one of the first items on his agenda as president,” as described by *The Washington Post*.¹ But the program met resistance from both religious and nonreligious leaders, who voiced concerns that the effort was being politicized and fears that the initiative would undermine church-state boundaries. The controversial nature of the initiative became the focus of much of the early 2001 press coverage.

But when Obama established his own faith-based initiative, the press coverage focused primarily on procedural matters – including the renaming of the office as the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships; its new director, Joshua DuBois; and a new, 25-member faith-based advisory council – as well as questions about

¹ “God’s place on the dais,” Bill Broadway, *The Washington Post*, Jan. 27, 2001

how Obama would address issues that arose during the eight years of [Bush's faith-based initiative](#). The one controversy that generated a relatively significant amount of coverage in the first six months of the Obama administration concerned whether faith-based groups that receive federal funds should be able to consider a potential employee's religion when making hiring decisions.

These are some of the key findings of the study, which analyzed 331 newspaper stories from January-June 2001 (281 stories) and January-June 2009 (50 stories) in eight national and regional newspapers.² Using Nexis keyword searches, stories addressing the faith-based initiative were identified for analysis. Additional keyword searches and qualitative textual analysis were used to identify major patterns in the newspaper coverage. (A more detailed discussion of the [methodology](#) is at the end of the report.)

Also among the findings:

- Coverage of the faith-based initiative was almost 50% more likely to be on the front page of newspapers in 2001 than in 2009. In the first half of 2001, 15% of the stories—43 stories in total—appeared on the front page. In the first half of 2009, that number dropped to 10%, or only five stories.
- Issues related to the separation of church and state were the top concern in the press in 2001. Fully 40% of the newspaper coverage focused on whether the initiative violated this constitutional line. In 2009, the top controversy in the coverage analyzed was the unresolved faith-based hiring issue. More than a third of the stories (36%) dealt with this debate.
- In each year studied, Christianity was referenced nearly as often as Judaism and Islam combined. In total, the Christian faith was directly referenced in 32% of the stories. This was followed by references to Judaism and Islam, at 21% and 15%,

² The following newspapers were used in the analysis: *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, *The Boston Globe*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, *The New York Times*, *USA Today* and *The Washington Post*.

respectively.

- In both years, newspaper coverage of the faith-based initiative was often a Washington-focused story. Of all the articles analyzed, 56% carried Washington, D.C., datelines, while no other single city came close.

Accounting for Differences in Coverage

What accounts for the differences in the coverage of the faith-based initiative during the first six months of the Bush and Obama administrations?

In 2001, the faith-based initiative was a new and little-understood program. It was championed by an evangelical president who had just won a close election in large part thanks to the support of conservative Christians. The plan to make federal funds more accessible to religious groups became a source of controversy that drove the press coverage.

During Obama's first six months in office, by contrast, there were few substantive changes to the initiative. The Obama administration also took a wait-and-see approach to confronting the initiative's thornier legal issues, including faith-based hiring. This made for a relatively small news event.

Another reason for the differences in coverage relates to the political climate and national agendas of each year studied. When Bush introduced the faith-based initiative in 2001, there were fewer major issues competing for public and media attention. In the first half of 2009, by contrast, the president, Congress and the public have been occupied with numerous concerns—from the economic recession to wars in Afghanistan and Iraq—which have pushed issues like the faith-based initiative off the radar.

Scope and Timing of the Coverage

Perhaps the most striking difference in the press treatment of the faith-based initiatives of the two presidents is the amount of coverage. As previously mentioned, the study finds that Bush's plan received far more attention initially than Obama's has.³ In the coverage studied, the stories dealing with the initiative in 2001 outnumbered those in 2009 by nearly seven to one. The 2001 coverage was also more prominent; in the first half of 2001, 15% of the stories analyzed, 43 in total, appeared on the front page while in the first half of 2009, that number dropped to 10%, or only five.

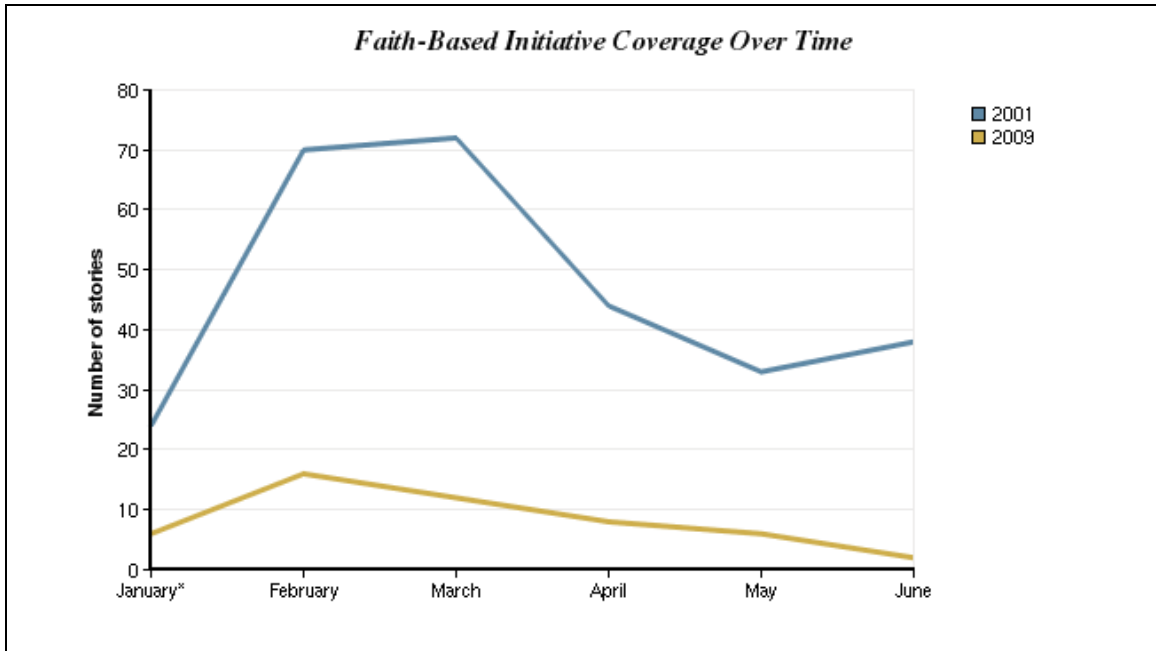
Overall, Bush has been more closely linked to the initiative than Obama. While both men were mentioned frequently in news reports from their respective first months in office (Bush's name appeared in 95% of stories about the initiative from the first half of 2001, and Obama's name appeared in 92% of stories from the first half of 2009), Bush also was referenced in nearly two-thirds (64%) of the stories analyzed from the beginning of Obama's term. For instance, a *Boston Globe* story described the initiative in 2009 as a "Bush-era program."⁴ By contrast, Bush's predecessor, President Bill Clinton, appeared in only 32% of the stories analyzed from 2001.⁵

One common feature of the coverage during the presidents' early months in office is the timing of the press attention. In both cases, the bulk of the stories analyzed were published in the first full month or two, after which the coverage subsided. For Bush, the stories clustered around February and March 2001, following his Jan. 29 signing of two executive orders creating the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives and five satellite centers. In Obama's case, coverage peaked in February 2009, sparked by his Feb. 5 signing of an executive order renaming the office and announcing the advisory council and other plans for the initiative's expansion.

³ In the eight years between the periods studied, much has changed in religion coverage. More and more reporting has migrated to magazines, blogs and other niche media. This could be one factor in the decline of newspaper attention to the faith-based initiative in 2009.

⁴ "Hub pastor will head president's faith effort," Joseph Williams, *The Boston Globe*, February 6, 2009

⁵ While Clinton did not have a program as far-reaching as Bush's and Obama's faith-based initiatives, his administration had expanded federal funding for faith-based social service programs.



* January analysis did not include the entire month, only from Inauguration Day through the end of the month.

Both presidents had spoken about the initiative while on the campaign trail, creating some anticipation in the religious community about what they might do. In the 2008 campaign, however, issues like the faith-based initiative were often drowned out in the coverage. With the exception of the economy and the Iraq war, all of the top 10 media topics were political or horse-race focused, according to a [report](#) by the Project for Excellence in Journalism.

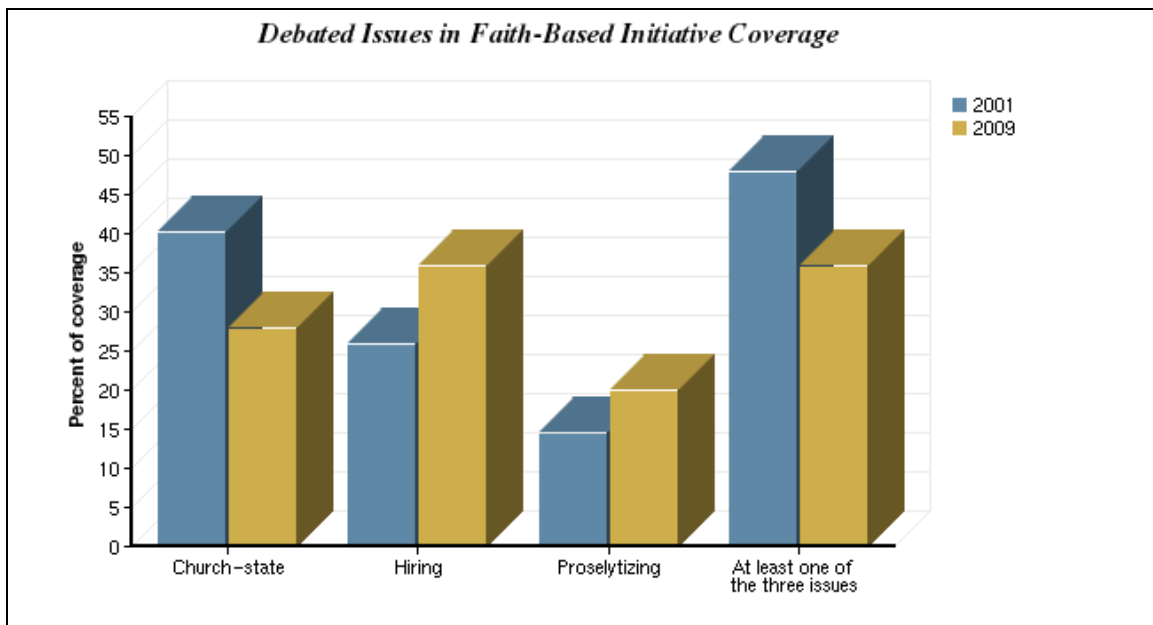
Response to the Initiative Becomes the Narrative

Bush received far more press attention than Obama for his faith-based initiative, spurred primarily by concerns raised by religious as well as nonreligious leaders. The negative response of some evangelical Christians to Bush’s initiative seemed to surprise many inside and outside the administration. This made evangelical leaders and the churches they represent a significant part of the 2001 narrative. A *Chicago Tribune* story from April noted the irony: “Many white evangelicals—the very people Bush has been accused

of trying to appease with his plan to fund religiously based social services—rejected the idea, saying it would hinder the expression of their beliefs.”⁶

Overall, 48% of the coverage of Bush’s initiative touched on at least one of three areas of controversy: the issue of church-state separation, the debates over faith-based hiring practices, and the question of whether faith-based organizations would compromise their religious identity by not being able to share their faith if they accepted government funds. “Separation of church and state” was referenced in 40% of the stories. The hiring debate (26%) and the proselytizing debate (15%) appeared less frequently.

By 2009, references to these three controversial areas had dropped off somewhat, from 48% to 36%. This time, the hiring issue appeared more frequently than the others, at 36% of the stories; in fact, every story in which at least one of the controversial areas was mentioned included a reference to the hiring issue. The church-state issue appeared in 28% of the coverage and proselytizing was mentioned in 20%. In many cases, when these controversies were mentioned, it was in reference to controversies remaining from the Bush years.



⁶ “Black clerics open arms to Bush’s funding plan,” Julia Lieblich, *Chicago Tribune*, April 6, 2001

Covering controversies: 2001

The Bush administration's plans to make federal funding more accessible to faith groups ran into opposition early on. The opposition, often from disparate sources, played out in the headlines.

A *Boston Globe* story reported, "Nothing put forth in the first 100 days of his administration has sparked as much passion, discord, and suspicion as President Bush's proposal to make it easier for faith-based groups to get federal dollars to deliver social services to the nation's needy."⁷ A *Chicago Tribune* article characterized Bush as "embroiled in battles" over the faith-based initiative.⁸

The unanticipated reaction from the Christian community often became a story itself and helped account for much of the coverage. A *Boston Globe* headline read, "Christian leaders pan Bush's faith plan."⁹ A *Boston Globe* piece described some of the core concerns of these leaders: "the initiative could fund bigoted groups and foster government interference with churches."¹⁰

Some groups, including civil libertarians and public interest watchdog organizations, were concerned that federal funding of religious programs would result in the government subsidizing religion. The headline of a March *New York Times* article in the "A" section read, "Bush visit sets off church-state debate."¹¹

The legality of faith-based hiring appeared in much of the 2001 coverage. In this case, it was often religious leaders who expressed concerns that accepting federal funds might limit their ability to hire only employees who share their moral and religious beliefs. A January 2001 *New York Times* article illustrated this concern by citing a Kentucky

⁷ "The real issue is trust," Mary Leonard, *The Boston Globe*, April 29, 2001

⁸ "Spotlight, pressure firmly on Bush," Naftali Bendavid and Tim Jones, *Chicago Tribune*, April 20, 2001

⁹ "Christian leaders pan Bush's faith plan," Mary Leonard, *The Boston Globe*, March 13, 2001

¹⁰ "Faith-based office chief under fire," Mary Leonard, *Boston Globe*, March 17, 2001

¹¹ "Bush visit sets off church-state debate," Maria Newman, *The New York Times*, March 13, 2001

religious charity that received state funding for its work; the charity was sued for firing an employee who was photographed at a gay rights parade.¹²

Also at issue was whether faith-based organizations would compromise their religious identity by receiving government funds. Some religious advocates worried that faith-based organizations and churches would be straight-jacketed in their ability to proselytize if they accepted government funds. As a religion columnist for the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* put it, “Our cherished freedom of religious expression was bought with blood and should not be threatened by a few dollars.”¹³

Covering controversies: 2009

In early 2009, the opposition that confronted Bush’s faith-based initiative was still reflected in the news coverage but to a lesser degree. References to church-state separation, faith-based hiring and proselytizing dipped from 48% in 2001 to 36% of the stories analyzed in 2009.

The hiring issue was the main controversy addressed by the press in 2009, and it appeared more often in Obama’s coverage (36% of the stories in 2009) than it did in Bush’s (26% in 2001). News stories indicated that Obama was expected to address this legal knot by directly challenging the Bush administration’s faith-based hiring position, as he indicated he would do during the campaign. But the president announced plans to work with the White House legal counsel and the Department of Justice to fully explore the hiring issue and make decisions on a case-by-case basis rather than adopting a blanket policy change. This somewhat defused the issue, though it still received wide coverage. A *Chicago Tribune* article said, “Critics of Bush’s faith-based initiative thought Obama had promised to end religious discrimination among social service groups taking federal money. But Obama, in announcing his own faith-based program, said only that the

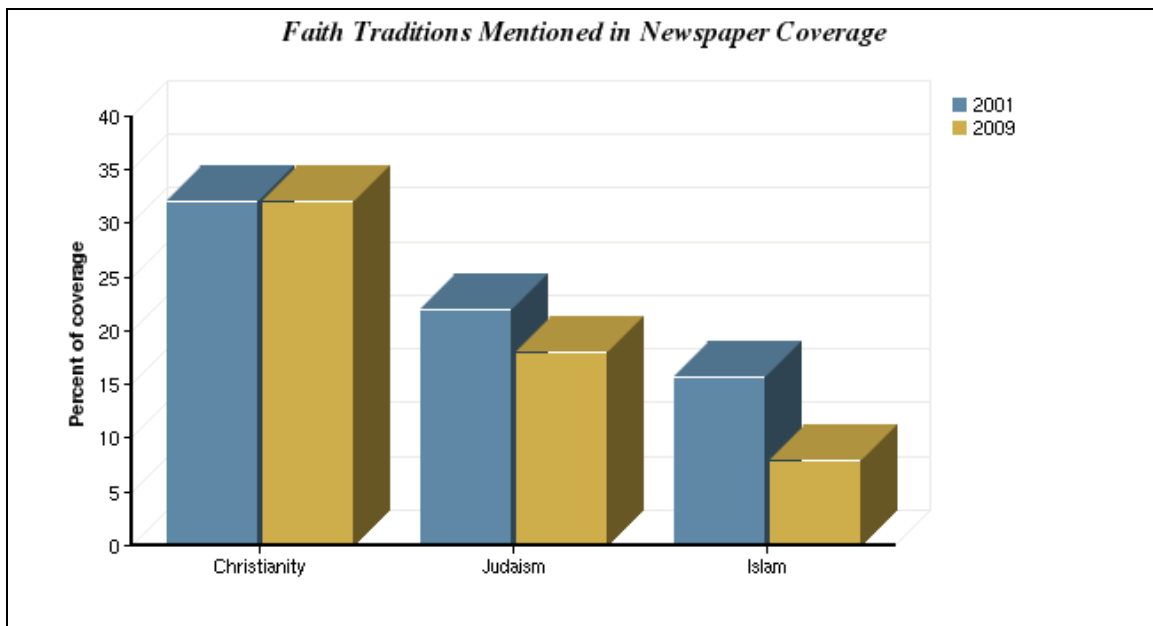
¹² “Nudging church-state line, Bush invites religious groups to seek federal aid,” Laurie Goodstein, *The New York Times*, Jan. 30, 2001.

¹³ “Faith-based initiatives are fraught with danger,” Rex Horne, *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, Feb. 10, 2001

discrimination issue might be reviewed.”¹⁴ *The New York Times* called the hiring issue the “biggest question” surrounding faith-based initiatives, and one that Obama “did not settle.”¹⁵

Faith Traditions Highlighted in 2001 and 2009

Of all the religious traditions referenced in the newspaper coverage of the faith-based initiative, Christianity received the most attention in both 2001 and 2009. Christianity was referenced in nearly one-third of the stories each year (32% in both 2001 and in 2009). In each year, Christianity was referenced nearly as often as Judaism and Islam combined.



A significant focus of the 2001 coverage was on black Protestants, specifically the Bush administration’s attempts to reach out to black voters and black churches with the promise of faith-based funding. There was a sense in Washington after the 2000 election that Bush had work to do when it came to building trust among black voters. In the press,

¹⁴ “Stalwarts go from ‘Yes we can’ to ‘Will he?’,” Peter Wallsten, *Chicago Tribune*, Feb. 17, 2009

¹⁵ “President revamps Bush office on religion,” Jeff Zeleny and Laurie Goodstein, *The New York Times*, Feb. 6, 2009

this sometimes translated to the view that his faith-based initiative was a means of increasing this trust.

A *Boston Globe* story said: “The White House, fearful that African-American voters will cost Republicans control of Congress in 2002, is executing a carefully choreographed plan that uses the new Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives to engage black clergy and build support for the party in their congregations and neighborhoods.”¹⁶

Another *Globe* piece, titled “Bush looking for black votes, but not earning them,” echoes this theme: “Bush, with his direct appeal to black ministers in recent weeks, apparently is making a concerted effort to change the negative perception that the vast majority of black voters have of him.”¹⁷ News reports characterized the response of black churches to the initiative as generally positive. A *Los Angeles Times* article reported that “many African American churches and advocates of urban areas have expressed their support, seeing in it a new source of funding for their social initiatives.”¹⁸

Other religious traditions—some lesser known, some with few U.S. adherents—were scattered throughout the newspaper coverage in both 2001 and 2009. Of these, Scientology received the most mentions with 23, followed by Hare Krishna (15), Buddhism (8), the Worldwide Unification Church (5) and Wicca (1). In some cases, these traditions appeared in news analysis about the debate over whether some groups should be eligible for faith-based funding.

When non-Christian faiths were mentioned in 2009, it was often in the context of Obama’s new advisory council. A *Los Angeles Times* article described the council as “featuring Christian, Muslim and Jewish representatives.”¹⁹ The press picked up on the White House line about interfaith cooperation: “The office will also cooperate with the

¹⁶ “Bush targets support of blacks,” Mary Leonard, *The Boston Globe*, March 11, 2001

¹⁷ “Bush looking for black votes, but not earning them,” Robert A. Jordan, *The Boston Globe*, April 1, 2001

¹⁸ “Bush seeks support of mayors for his faith-based initiative,” Jonathan Peterson, James Gerstenzang, *Los Angeles Times*, June 26, 2001

¹⁹ “White House panel will guide faith-based programs,” Duke Helfand, *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 5, 2009

National Security Council to foster an ‘interfaith dialogue’ worldwide, particularly with Islam,” reported *USA Today*.²⁰

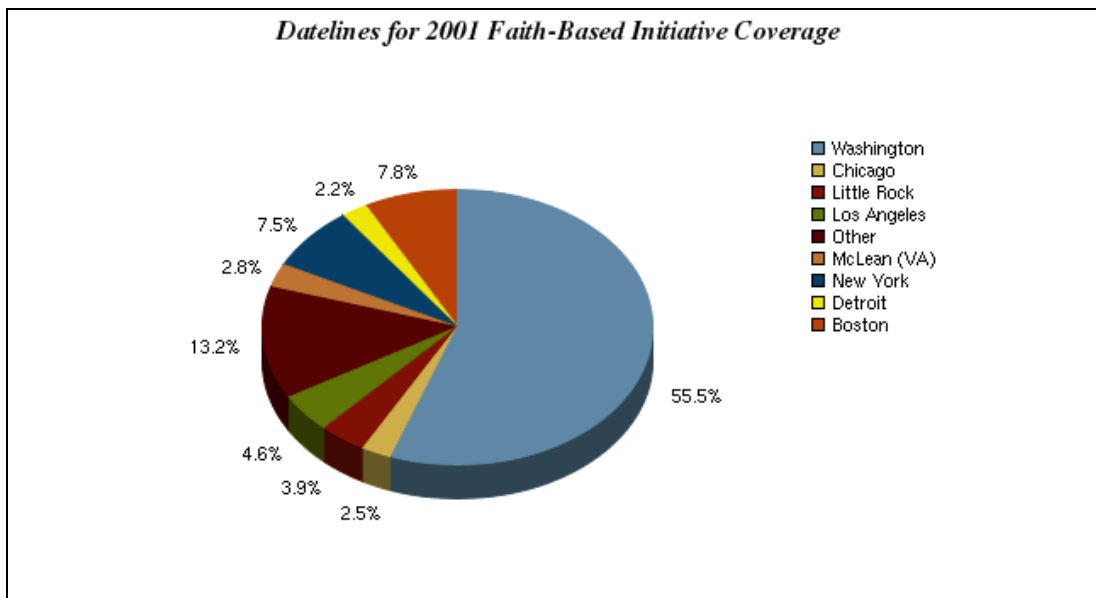
An Inside-the-Beltway Story

In both 2001 and 2009, newspapers often covered the initiative from Washington and with a largely political perspective rather than from the angle of cities and citizens across America who might be affected by the policies. This was evident both in the location of the journalists filing the stories and in the focus of the reports.

Geographic perspective

In both the 2001 and 2009 coverage, more than half of the stories were reported from Washington, D.C., with an inside-the-beltway perspective. In the remaining coverage, though, the press in 2001 offered a broader geographic range.

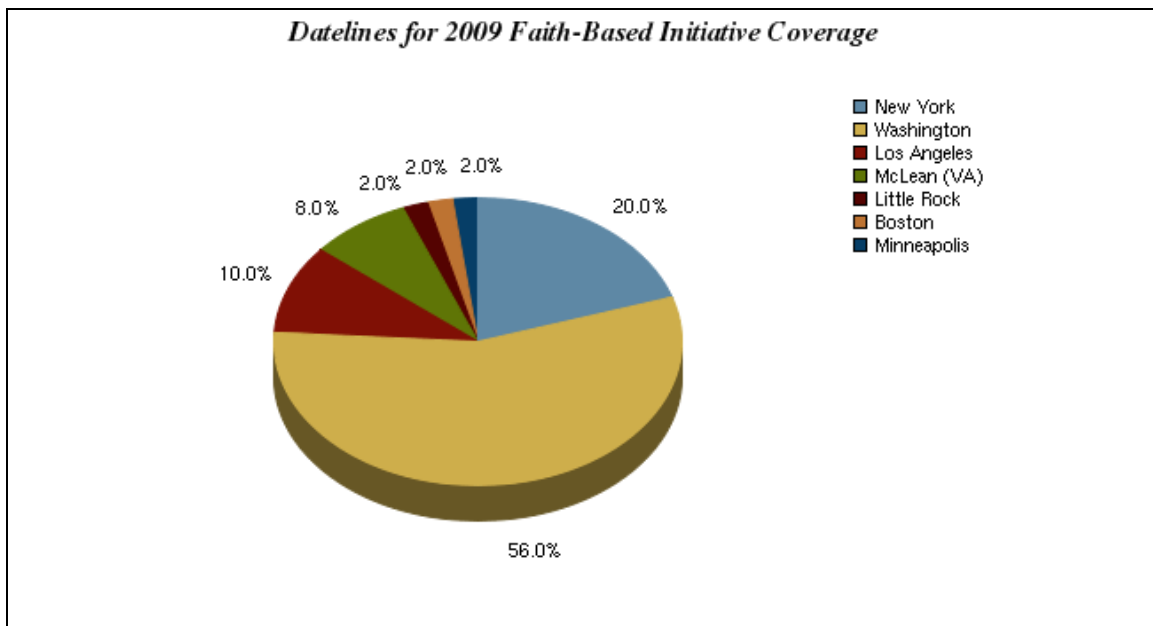
Though a slight majority of the 2001 stories were filed in Washington (56%), the rest were reported in a wide array of cities—29 different locations, according to the datelines.



²⁰ “Obama’s faith-based office to emphasize neighborhood work,” David Jackson, *USA Today*, February 6, 2009

Apart from the stories filed in the cities of origin for the newspapers studied, Detroit and Philadelphia appeared most frequently. In Detroit (2% of total 2001 datelines), Bush promoted the faith-based initiative at the annual Conference of Mayors held there in June 2001. Stories were also written from Philadelphia (2%), the hometown of John DiIulio, the first director of the Bush administration’s Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives.

In 2009, Obama’s faith-based initiative coverage was about as Washington-centric as in 2001. Of all this year’s stories analyzed, 56% had Washington datelines. But in the remainder of the stories analyzed, not one contained a dateline from a city apart from the paper’s hometown.



Washington-centric

The faith-based initiative has, at its core, significant implications for local communities, yet few of the stories looked at current or proposed local faith-based funding. In 2001, only 19 out of 281 stories focused on individual neighborhoods, towns or cities where specific faith-based programs make use of government money to accomplish their goals.

Some of these profiles illustrated the potential benefits of the faith-based initiative. One case was described in the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*. Then-Governor Mike Huckabee had introduced a provision into state law that released religious groups from the demand that they hide or mask their religious décor while using government funds.²¹

Often, though, these profile pieces brought to light the nettlesome issues that can arise when religious institutions and the government form partnerships. One story described a Newton, Iowa, prison program that helps inmates turn their lives around by turning to God. The *New York Times* piece described it as an evangelical prison ministry that illustrates “the promise and the challenges” of the faith-based initiative.²²

The Obama administration’s faith-based initiative was covered by the press as a beltway story, with not a single in-depth story profiling a local program. For coverage of this nature, news consumers would need to turn to magazines, blogs and other niche media.

As noted earlier, many of the stories dealt with process, some simply noting Obama’s expansion of the faith-based initiative: “The Obama administration is expected today to unveil a council of religious and secular advisors that will guide decisions on faith-based programs for a broad range of domestic and foreign policy issues,” according to the *Los Angeles Times* in February 2009. *USA Today* reported in the same week that “President Obama revamped the White House headquarters for faith-based initiatives Thursday.”²³

Future news coverage of the faith-based initiative may depend on what is happening on the national and global stage as well as the extent to which the Obama administration decides to make major substantive changes to the initiative.

²¹ “Under Huckabee administration, faith groups vie with business for government contracts,” Mark Minton, *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, March 25, 2001

²² “Promise and pitfalls seen in taking religion to prison,” Gustav Niebuhr, *The New York Times*, April 12, 2001

²³ “Obama’s faith-based office to emphasize neighborhood work,” *USA Today*, David Jackson, Feb. 6, 2009

Methodology

This analysis examines U.S. newspaper coverage of the faith-based initiative in the early months of the G.W. Bush and Obama administrations.

The time periods examined were from January 20, 2001—Inauguration Day—until June 30, 2001, and from January 20, 2009 until June 30, 2009. In total, the analysis period comprised 10 months and 24 days of coverage.

The Sample: The selection criteria for newspapers began with national and regional papers that are archived in the LexisNexis database. From this list, newspapers were chosen from among the top 50 U.S. newspapers by circulation, according to the Audit Bureau of Circulations, and for a geographic mix of regions around the country. Those included were the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, *The Boston Globe*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, *The New York Times*, *USA Today* and *The Washington Post*.

Story Selection: The goal of the study was to examine coverage of the faith-based initiative. To identify stories that addressed the faith-based initiative, keyword searches were conducted using Boolean search logic in the Nexis database. For the 2001 coverage, the following search terms were used: “White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives” OR “faith-based initiative.” For the 2009 coverage, the terms were altered slightly to reflect the office’s new name: “White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships” OR “faith-based initiative.”

In total, these search terms rendered 331 stories that in some way addressed the faith-based initiative (281 in 2001, and 50 in 2009).

At this point, a qualitative textual analysis was conducted. This analysis consisted of a close reading of all the newspaper stories identified in the sample. This reading enabled the key themes, controversies, and patterns of press coverage to emerge. It also served two other specific purposes.

First, was to identify certain frames in the stories. Newspaper stories devoted to profiling a community affected by the faith-based initiative were noted and tallied. If the majority of the story was focused on the community angle, it was considered a profile piece.

This other main purpose was to inform the second level of keyword searches.

Additional search terms were used within this sample to quantify specific patterns in the coverage, as well as the appearances of key figures and groups in the coverage.

Names were searched using the following keywords: “Bush,” “Clinton,” “DiIulio,” “DuBois,” and “Obama.” Stories were checked to ensure the intended subjects were the ones that appeared in the search.

Individual religious traditions were also searched, using the following terms: “African-American church” OR “black church,” “Baptist,” “Buddhist OR Buddhism,” “Catholic,” “Christian OR Christianity,” “evangelical,” “Hare Krishna,” “Jew OR Judaism OR Jewish,” “Muslim OR Islam OR Moslem,” “scientology OR scientologist” and “Wicca” OR “Wiccan.”

Finally, keyword searches were used to identify the presence of controversial topics that emerged during the time periods studied. The terms used were “Hiring” AND(discrimination OR discriminate OR discriminatory), “proselytize OR proselytizing OR proselytization,” and “separation of church and state” OR “church-state.”

Following the second level of keyword searches, a second reading of all the stories in the sample was conducted to ensure that no significant patterns or storylines had been missed in the analysis.