

Understanding the Content of News Media

Stephen D. Reese and Jae Kook Lee

This chapter reviews the major approaches to media content as a critical variable in its own right within political communication research. By 'content' we mean the complete range of visual and verbal information carried in the media, primarily the traditional mainstream professional media, but also increasingly by smaller more interactive and targeted channels. Content is no longer relatively easy to isolate within a select group of clearly defined publications and broadcast programs. The continuous online news stream, further amplified and dissected by the various tiers of blogs and social media, make fixing a sample of news content more difficult than in the pre-digital era.

Attempting to understand something as broad and amorphous as 'content' makes it necessary to specify more clearly what we are talking about. Many studies include news content as a variable, examining, for example, how people process specific stories or their elements, but we consider specifically how news content is explored as a symbolic environment, with its own internal coherence as a system of representation, from which a range of theoretical inferences in turn can be made about the forces shaping it and the resulting effects and societal implications.

CLASSIFYING CONTENT BY FUNCTION AND EFFECT

To understand news content, we can first consider the ways in which media content may be categorized. It may be categorized, for example, by audience appeal (highbrow/lowbrow), the medium itself (television, magazine, newspaper), some presumed effects (anti or pro-social) and by its format, genre or style. Another predominant approach is to move beyond this focus on content features to consider what basic societal functions the content is intended to serve; this helps distinguish news from other content. Functionalism has a long tradition in the field, exemplified by the work of Lasswell (1948) who identified three crucial functions of communication: (1) surveillance of the environment; (2) correlation of parts of society; and (3) transmission of social heritage. To these, Wright (1986) added 'entertainment'. For a time, amid postwar confidence in society and institutions, these functions served to distinguish among surveillance-based news content, correlation-intended editorial and persuasive messages, the longer-term educational and socialization work of 'transmission', and 'entertainment' provided by-definition by the entertainment industries. A functional approach to content renders these societal needs as self-evidently true, and the meeting of those needs by media an accomplished fact.

These functions, however, no longer provide the mutually exclusive categories they once did. News has traditionally been differentiated from entertainment, but increasingly they are becoming blurred into

‘infotainment’ (Delli Carpini and Williams 2001). Media content has become a much more fluid hybrid of forms. Once relatively easily differentiated, news, politics, entertainment and marketing have undergone ‘discursive integration’ (Baym, 2005). Content categories cannot easily now isolate substance from style.

Given this hybridized environment for news, it is helpful to take a less segmented view on where news is to be found, abandoning the idea that news functions are self-evidently provided. A more modern perspective on what media do is, as Castells says, to provide the ‘social space where power is decided’ (2007: 238). News content, in particular, provides that space. The study of media content, in turn, provides indicators as to the winners and losers; those who are privileged and underprivileged by the logic of media practices. Thus, we are interested in the content that has political consequences. Hence, in news content, we are concerned with that part of the symbolic environment that lays claim to connecting citizens to the political world and providing deliberative space for political voices. Most often, of course, this has been found in the work of the mainstream news media, which arguably continues to have the most impact on the political process. Thus, the increasing importance of the Internet notwithstanding, the focus here is on news in mainstream media, and reflects our own expertise on US media.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: TAKING CONTENT SERIOUSLY

Lippmann’s (1922/1997) warning, that we act not on the ‘world outside’ but the ‘pictures in our heads’, has become a basic truism of communication research. When discussing content, there is a tendency to ask (guided by Lippmann) how ‘objectively’ media content reflects reality, expecting that it may distort but still have some correspondence with social reality. This possibility is often vigorously defended in attempts by news professionals to argue the accuracy of their work, in holding up a ‘mirror to society’. In a subtler version of the mirror idea, a pluralist view holds that media objectivity emerges from the self-regulating and balancing compromises between those who sell information to the media and those who buy it. In either case, repudiating the mirror notion has been the project of countless media critiques and led to a broader area of political communication research. The popular conception of ‘bias’ used in critiques of press performance suggests that media deviate in some measurable way from a desirable standard, which can be independently known. Of course, the very idea of a ‘reality’ out there with which to compare media is problematic. On a practical level, however, we often find it useful to compare ‘media reality’ with ‘social reality’ – that view of the world that is socially derived, what society knows about itself. Even if one were to accept the possibility of objectively portraying a ‘world out there’, the numerous studies over the years of media distortion compared to other social indicators of reality show that it is not a practical possibility. The media portray certain people, events and ideas, in ways that differ systematically from their occurrence in the ‘real world’ (see below).

Media ‘mediate’; they stand between us and the social world, such that we can no longer think about our connection to the political world without media (Livingstone, 2009). In a pioneering study of mediation, Lang and Lang (1971) compared television coverage of the 1951 MacArthur Day parade in Chicago to the experience of those at the event. They found that television made the event more exciting and gave an inflated sense to viewers of the general’s public support. The event provided an analytical benchmark to assess coverage. In the grander, more historical concept of ‘mediatization’, the world outside has adapted to that mediation, becoming more interdependent and absorbing, as a result, ‘media logic’. Thus, now, of course, planners organize political events to maximize publicity and ensure a positive image with media coverage uppermost in mind. Institutional strategies have developed that make the political world ‘part of the total media culture’ (Altheide and Snow, 1979), and this dynamic has made it all the more appealing to look within news content as the manifest carrier and crucial terrain of that media logic. However, the question remains as to the proper benchmarks against which to compare news content. We still want to know how media logic refracts some wider political reality while still recognizing that the political and the media worlds have become inextricably interdependent and more difficult to separate analytically.

A rigorous examination of news content, whether a television newscast, newsmagazine, newspaper or online blog, opens up a host of normatively charged questions, which can be examined empirically using a number of performance criteria. These include the range of voices that are given access, the quality of that content in equipping citizens to act politically, and the relative fairness of that representation to competing political interests. This includes the relative balance struck between political voices and those of journalists themselves, the extent that is to which political actors are allowed to speak without being ‘filtered’ via journalistic interpretation.

Framing News Content

Two major divisions in news content research lie in the effects tradition and the interpretive approach. The effects tradition, with a stimulus-response philosophical underpinning, relies on quantitative measures of systematic emphasis and relative frequency of elements in content. In a long tradition of content analysis, researchers have tried to find generalizable portraits of news content (Krippendorff, 2004). The interpretive approach, allowing a more critical and often qualitative perspective on content, examines the discourse and deeper narratives of news content with the goal of saying something about the broader culture in which media and publics participate. Lule (2001), for example, approaches news as a form of storytelling, analyzing the basic social myths, the archetypical stories on which news stories are based and rely for their structure. These myths include the hero, the victim, the good mother, and the trickster, and they are examined for how they re-enact a cultural repertoire that sustains social order. News content in this context

is tied to the ritual function of communication (Carey, 1989) rather than the transmission perspective of the effects tradition. Qualitative methods are particularly marked in critical analyses of underlying power relations, although of course it is entirely possible to combine qualitative and quantitative methodology. Thus, for example, the numerous case studies from the Glasgow Media Group (1976, 1980) use both quantitative and qualitative measures to critique the performance of organizations, such as the BBC, for coverage of labor relations, war and other controversies.

Both approaches to content are encompassed within the *framing* perspective, which has become a major thread in political communication research. The notion of media framing has become a widely adopted and multi-perspective research concept. Framing provides a way to tie news content to larger structures and develops new ways of capturing the power of media to define issues visually and verbally, thereby shaping audience perceptions (for example, Reese, 2001a). A widely accepted definition of news framing explains it as the communication of issues ‘in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation’ (Entman, 1993: 52). The implication of cause and effect is inherent in this definition. An alternative definition leaves the issue of effects open – it states that frames are ‘organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world’ (Reese, 2001a: 11). Thus, framing connects visual and verbal, quantitative and qualitative approaches to content, because they can all be seen as helping articulate some underlying organizing principle (Reese, 2007, 2009).

Framing, although often regarded as a close neighbor of the older ‘agenda setting’ tradition of research, is conceptually distinct. The agenda setting approach assesses content for its prioritization of various issues; but news content is of theoretical interest only to the extent that it influences public opinion priorities (Dearing and Rogers, 1996). This way of conceptualizing news content as ‘topics’ provides advantages in the analysis of public opinion, but it is less valuable for understanding content (Kosicki, 1993). Framing, by contrast, offers, in its ‘organizing principle’, a way to think about how news content itself is structured. The significance of frames, as contrasted to agenda-setting, becomes most noticeable when they take on broad over-arching properties. The War on Terror is a prime example, crucially providing the frame for mainstream news about the invasion of Iraq (Reese and Lewis, 2009).

Frames provide the basis for effects and cognitive research, the ‘how’ of framing. That is, how do frames, in manipulating certain treatments of issues and associated values, promote preference for a particular policy outcome? The more descriptive ‘what’ of framing looks more closely at the internal structure of news content and its connection with the surrounding culture. This approach can include examining latent aspects of content – linguistic structures and reasoning devices that signify underlying cultural meaning (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989). In

this way framing provides an empirically focused approach to questions of ideology, or meaning in the service of interests.

A more holistic, content-based approach to framing is advocated by Hertog and McLeod, who regard frames as ‘structures of meaning made up of a number of concepts and the relations among those concepts’ (2001: 140). Master narratives are among the devices that structure these concepts, providing rules for processing new content. When contrasted with the agenda/topic view, this gives frames a dynamic quality as they operate over time to assimilate and reconstitute new facts and concepts. Using a textual analysis of US newspaper articles during the Gulf War, Hackett and Zhao (1994) documented that interpretative news frames used in covering antiwar protest were all broadly related to a master war narrative. The narrative describes a reluctant USA, with moral responsibility to restore order, forced by enemies to go to war and defeat villains (Hackett and Zhao, 1994). More recently, a content analysis of visual images from US mainstream media revealed historic continuity in the master narrative of war reporting; a government-promoted patriotic perspective found in news content since the Civil War (Schwalbe et al., 2008).

NEWS CONTENT PATTERNS

Relationship Between News and the State

News content indirectly expresses political power, indicating among other things the important institutional relationship between press and state. Indeed, the patterns of content, although varying across media outlets, can be seen from a broader perspective to present a largely convergent institutional voice (Lawrence, 2006). Major national media are indeed similar in the way they cover major stories. Generally speaking, homogeneity of news content (for example, similar approach to issues and use of news sources) indicates support for an ‘institutionalist’ view of news production, in that content similarities point to its being produced by a single institution (Entman, 2006). This new institutionalist theoretical view of the press provides further impetus for examining news content per se within a broader theoretical context. Lawrence advocates linking news frames to their institutional context, by studying the product itself, ‘where the rubber hits the road’ (2006: 228). This perspective also supports our consideration of general patterns of news content (below), rather than highlighting differences among media.

Regarding the press as an institution leads to consideration of how it relates to the state, using news content as evidence of that relationship. Rojecki (2008), for example, examines *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* editorials, as elite voices, finding that they largely supported the George W. Bush administration within a framework of American exceptionalism. In their content analysis of the US Patriot Act news coverage, Domke et al. (2006) found that the press largely echoed the administration. Main themes emphasized by the Bush administration about the Patriot Act were found to be widely present in the press, and

further, that the coverage was highly favorable toward the administration. In a more general context, media coverage is said to 'index', be limited to, the range of views expressed in mainstream political debates about a given topic (Bennett, 1990). More controversially, and more forcefully, Herman and Chomsky (1988) applied a form of content analysis to coverage of US foreign policy to support their famous 'propaganda model' of press-state relations, in which media, embedded in politico-economic power structures, effectively serves to manufacture public consent.

News Content Bias

Much attention has been directed at the question of the media's partisan bias. D'Alessio and Allen (2000), in a seminal meta-analysis review of research, gauge the extent to which media favor one side of a political campaign. Indicators included space (for print media) and time (broadcast) but failed to show a systematic partisan bias. Other content analyses of specific coverage have considered 'tone' in candidate treatment (Aday et al., 2005; Dalton et al., 1998). Positive or negative valence has been evaluated based on the proximity in texts of candidate names to key terms (Domke et al., 1999). This approach has found no evidence of the perennial claim to 'liberal media' bias (Watts et al., 1999), and in this respect confirms previous studies that failed to find systematic press bias (Hofstetter, 1978; Hofstetter and Buss, 1978; Robinson and Sheehan, 1983).

Conceptually 'bias' brings its own standard for evaluation, assuming that content can be examined for deviation from some fixed standard (Hackett, 1984). Given the US two-party system, this standard often centers on whether content is balanced 50:50. However, because political fortunes are not always so equally balanced, other research has taken the view that bias claims require the examination of equivalent political behavior. Niven's (2003) study, for example, compared media coverage of party switchers. No differences were found in the tone of stories dealing with Republican compared to Democrat figures switching from one to the other. In campaign coverage of the 1996 presidential race, newspaper photograph selection did not suggest liberal bias but rather a strategic bias in favor of the front-runner (Waldman and Devitt, 1998). Groseclose and Milyo (2005) adopted a more sophisticated measure of bias outside of the election context by measuring news content against the institutional distribution of political leanings within Congress.

The numerous watchdog interest groups that monitor media content would regard as absurd the findings of a non-biased media. Media slant, particularly an alleged leftward bias, has become an article of faith for many groups. However, their methods used should be treated with caution, often selectively using content to support their view. This selectivity is not unknown in scholarly studies. In perhaps the most hotly charged international issue, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Wolfsfeld (2006) takes issue with Philo (Philo and Berry, 2004) for selectively including examples to support the claim that the British media unfairly support Israel, a view disputed by pro-Israel advocates. The term 'gunman' Philo regards as having a connotation favoring Israel, while the

Israelis have regarded it as more positive than their preferred 'terrorist'. Thus, when it comes to content, a precise and careful analytical framework is essential. Although studies of US media find no overt partisan bias, a wider (and less simplistic) pattern of structural biases is invariably built into news content.

Covering the Political Process

News content reveals important tendencies in how media approach the political process itself. News of elections typically focuses on the horserace aspects of the campaigns, partly to attract audience attention but also to avoid accusations of bias, to which issue-oriented coverage is prone (Patterson, 1993). This tendency is true of both print media and local television, where a national sample of stories found 9 in 10 stories effectively turned politics into a sport (Belt and Just, 2008). An analysis of local television political coverage found that even in a city known for civic involvement and news use (Minneapolis), campaign coverage was strategy-oriented with little issue-depth and opportunity for candidates to speak directly (Stevens et al., 2006).

Research on the shrinking 'sound bite' finds that the voices of political leaders have diminished in television news since the 1960s (Hallin, 1992, 1994; Lichter, 2001). A content analysis of television news coverage of elections showed that the average length of sound bite has decreased from 43 in 1968 to 9 seconds in the 1980s (Hallin, 1992). The trend continued through the 1990s (Lichter, 2001). Some studies suggest that the decline bottomed out during mid-1990s (Lowry and Shidler, 1998), but findings generally indicated shrinking sound bites (Barnhurst, 2003; Bucy and Grabe, 2007; Lichter, 2001). In his content analysis of National Public Radio shows, Barnhurst (2003) showed that the sound bites of expert sources in general, as well as political, news have shrunk by almost half from 1980 to 2000. Further, the average length of sound bites on US television was shorter than that of European counterparts (Esser, 2008). Overall, the findings of sound bite research suggest that American journalism has become more interventionist in political news (Schudson, 1999). Patterson (1993) documents a long-term trend of news becoming more interpretive, with journalists themselves, rather than newsmakers, increasingly the source of that interpretation.

The horserace or 'strategic' framing of news appears to be particularly prevalent in the USA compared to Europe and Latin America. Strömbäck and Kaid's (2008) handbook of election coverage in 22 countries confirmed previous internationally comparative research (Esser and D'Angelo, 2006; Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2006) that found that the metaframe of 'politics as a strategic game' was stronger in the US than elsewhere. This emphasis on strategy carries over into news of military conflict. Griffin and Lee (1995), for example, find that the major US news magazines covering the 1991 Gulf War included a narrow range of images that emphasized military weaponry and technology and served to promote government policy. Steele (1995) noted a similar tendency in Gulf War

coverage as seen in the experts (predominantly military figures) selected to interpret military action.

News Sources and Topics

News content is built on news-makers. News is about self-perpetuating 'knowns,' as observed early on by Gans (1979) in his fieldwork at the major US television networks and news magazines. People appear in news who have already been there, whether presidents, candidates, leading officials or well-known others. 'Unknowns' must break into the news arena somehow, often sensationally: as protestors, rioters, strikers, victims, violators or participants in unusual activities. One of the most robust findings of content studies then is that news favors officials who appear in routine ways through official channels (Cook, 1998; Gans, 1979; Sigal, 1973; Tuchman, 1978), while others must get there in ways that serve to underscore their deviance. The dominance of official sources results in a tight interlocking pattern of news-makers, who define the boundaries of political discourse (Reese et al., 1994).

In similar vein, alternative voices in social movements often have been treated as deviant and covered negatively in the news. Many studies have documented that protests are framed as negative and threatening to stability (Bennett et al., 2004). In his oft-cited study of the news media coverage of the New Left in Vietnam War era, Gitlin (1980) showed how mainstream media damaged the legitimacy of war protestors, by focusing on extreme elements. He identified framing devices such as trivialization, polarization and marginalization and argued that the framing devices worked as 'deprecatory' themes (Gitlin, 1980: 27). Continuing the theme, McLeod and Hertog (1998) noted a frequent story narrative of violent crime, leading reporters to describe protests as a 'scene of battle' between protestors and police.

News Quality Issues

News is commonly accused of sensationalism; stories designed to attract attention are often assumed to divert attention from serious, substantive public affairs. This tendency is closely related to the phenomenon of 'tabloidization', defined now largely by preference for the amusing, titillating, and entertaining (compared to more socially uplifting content). This is true for television news, particularly at the local level where dramatic coverage is assumed necessary to attract audiences. With its emphasis on crime, conflict, disaster and exciting video, as documented in a host of television content analyses (Bennett, 2001), sensationalism from a political standpoint works against the kind of news quality thought to encourage well-informed citizens. Television news, a particular target of research on these themes, has become more sensational over time both in the USA (Slattery et al., 2001) and Europe (Vettehen et al., 2005).

Closely related to sensationalism is the tendency of news to humanize or personalize its stories. Iyengar (1991) distinguishes between two kinds of news framings: an 'episodic' treatment of a single concrete event illustrating a broader issue versus a 'thematic' treatment including more general, often abstract evidence. Many stories, of course, include

both kinds of information, but the more commonly found episodic news includes the anecdotal, humanized style of presentation, which is less likely to link events to broader policy. However, while episodic framing is criticized for its superficial treatment of social issues, a trend of analysis-centered journalism has been investigated as an important factor in making news tedious. In their extensive content analysis of newspapers from 1894 to 1994, Barnhurst and Mutz (1997) documented that stories, over the past 100 years have become longer, included more analysis, given less importance to individuals and more attention to groups. Thus, news is being stretched; at one and the same time we see more sensational news at one end of the spectrum and more lengthy analysis at the other. Barnhurst and Mutz's evidence lends support to the new 'long journalism' hypothesis. Historically, American journalism is moving from event-focus to analysis (Patterson, 1993; Schudson, 1978, 1982); news becomes longer and more analytical.

Quality of Representation of the Mediated World

Patterns of representation give us a sense of what is valued within news content, particularly in how news patterns differ from indicators of social reality. Indeed, newsworthiness means emphasizing those stories that have 'news value', that are significantly precisely because they are unusual. Shoemaker and colleagues regard newsworthiness as a kind of 'deviance'. On this basis news, it is argued, serves as a signaling process deeply embedded in human nature and consistent across a variety of national contexts (Shoemaker and Cohen, 2006). Even if we do not expect the media map to line up with its real-life analog, the comparisons provide valuable clues for understanding systematic content tendencies and the shape of the overall logic. Below are some areas of research that have been the most commonly examined such patterns.

Behaviors

Media violence has attracted substantial research across the spectrum of content, including news. Research has long demonstrated misrepresentation of violent crimes in news stories in numbers and kinds of crimes. News emphasizes violent crimes (Antunes and Hurley, 1977; Windhauser et al., 1990) and crimes against people (Ammons et al., 1982; Fedler and Jordan, 1982) compared to non-violent or property crimes. A content analysis of *Time* magazine crime stories in five select years from 1953 to 1982 found that 73% of the sample were about violent crimes whereas 10% of crimes reported to the police involve violence (Barlow et al., 1995). The over representation of violent crimes in news reports, particularly on television (Tunnell, 1998), is at expense of other crimes. From their content analysis of the *Los Angeles Times*, Rodgers and Thorson (2001) found that violent crimes such as homicide and domestic violence (25% of 416 sample crime stories) were much more likely to become news than property crimes (6%).

Demographic

Demographic patterns provide other unambiguous standards against which to assess news content. Coverage undercounts certain groups and is

prone to reproduce cultural stereotypes. Women, for example, are underrepresented in news (Gans, 1979; Gersh, 1992; Len-Rios et al., 2005; Rodgers et al., 2000). Female candidates for the Senate have been shown to receive less coverage than their male opponents, and that coverage was often about their viability rather than issues (Kahn and Goldenberg, 1991). Other coverage of women often underscored their unequal power position by seizing on stories that suggested women's frailties, such as difficulty in finding mates after a certain age and genetic deficits in math (Corbett, 2001; Rivers, 1993; Ross, 2002). News media has been criticized for its disproportionate representation of minority groups, particularly in relation to crime stories. On local television newscasts, African Americans were overrepresented as lawbreakers whereas whites and Latinos were underrepresented, compared to recorded crime rates (Dixon and Linz, 2000). The same study also found that whites were overrepresented as law defenders, such as police officers, while Latinos were underrepresented. Network television showed slightly different patterns of racial representation in reports. Both African Americans and whites were represented as lawbreakers consistently with official crime reports, but African Americans were underrepresented as victims of violent crime while whites were overrepresented (Dixon et al., 2003).

Entman and Rojecki (2001) have done extensive content analysis of television and local newspaper coverage of minority communities, finding a number of ways in which minorities are given more negative treatment. Compared to black defendants, for example, whites charged with similar crimes are more often named, depicted as well-dressed and less often in the physical control of the police. These features are said to humanize whites more than their minority counterparts, who are also disadvantaged with fewer pro-defense sound bites (Entman, 1990, 1992). In his ethnographic study, Heider (2000) found that local television, even in communities with majority minority populations, restricted ethnic minority coverage to news of festivals and crime.

Geographic

News patterns can be compared against actual spatial benchmarks. Earlier Studies of network news coverage found it skewed to over represent the Pacific Coast and Northeast (Dominick, 1977; Graber, 1989), with California, New York and Texas receiving a greater proportion of coverage than their electoral votes would indicate. News follows power, but in cases like this it exacerbates it. Many news organizations have been accused of having an 'inside the beltway' focus on official Washington, DC (Ryan, 1993). This television emphasis has changed somewhat, but the pattern remains rooted in cities of power, whether economic (New York), political (Washington) or cultural (Los Angeles). Replicating the Dominick (1977) study, Whitney et al. (1989) found similar geographical bias in news coverage on television. The top four states of New York, California, Illinois and Texas accounted for 50.6% of domestic news reports, while their population is about 30% of the US total. In the more recent satellite news era, US media were found more likely to cover remote areas

(Livingston and Van Belle, 2005). However, a content analysis of television news from 1982 to 2004 documented that news patterns found in previous research still existed, despite advances in newsgathering technologies (Jones, 2008).

Patterns of international news content have been closely scrutinized, given the larger political debate over the imbalance of global information flows. Although globalization has brought greater potential access by the world to the world, international news coverage continues to be vulnerable, especially given the cuts in overseas news bureaus. The first world receives disproportionately more US television news coverage than the rest, except in the tradition of 'coups and earthquakes' reporting, when natural disaster or other sensational events occur (Larson, 1983). Generally speaking, news tracks relationships of political alliances, predominantly featuring the allies of the USA and her enemies (Shoemaker et al., 1991). However, recent studies have identified two other key indicators of media attention: trade volume and the presence of international news agencies (Wu, 2000). Golan (2008) also found that the low level of trade with the USA partially explained the meager coverage of the African continent by US television news, despite newsworthy events.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND DEVELOPMENTS

Digital technologies have provided new opportunities for research. The Internet, in particular, has made possible a vast amount of news content that researchers can obtain readily and efficiently. Digitization rapidly increases the volume of contents online, making accessible once unreachable materials (Weare and Lin, 2000). Another benefit is lowered cost in collecting samples, with online archives and databases, such as LexisNexis, providing easy data collection. Computerized coding procedure is another significant contribution to research. Digitization of contents made possible computerization of coding and increased reliability of studies, though it also has limitations. The enormous amount of information and ephemeral, ever-changing nature of online contents has made scientific random sampling more complicated as it does (McMillan, 2000). Search engines, often used in sampling, are not completely reliable because none of the engines covers the entire Internet population (Lawrence and Giles, 1999). The hyperlink, a unique feature of the Internet, has brought a sea change in ways of reading materials and has complicated content analysis (Weare and Lin, 2000). In particular, hyperlinks have forced researchers to spend more time in defining the unit of analysis and how to set boundaries on the network to be examined (for example, Reese et al., 2007). Automatic coding of vast amounts of electronic text has allowed researchers to explore new content features, whether through cluster analyses of key vocabularies or trends in the news cycle (even from hour to hour) (Leskovec et al., 2009). Consistent with the network structure of the Internet, studies are mapping news patterns through their linking strategies, including the global blogosphere. Although most studies reviewed here have been confined to the professional news media, increasingly these sources of content are

interlinked with the burgeoning social media. A key methodological question during the transition from offline to online media analysis is whether Internet content is different from offline content for the same news media. Hoffman (2006) examined online and offline versions of the same newspaper and found no difference between versions in terms of mobilizing information. Research must adapt to our rapidly changing environment to adequately evaluate the significant sites where news content is distributed, and how on- and offline worlds are interconnected.

CONCLUSION

News content provides a valuable site for examining the symbolic environment, and – having established significant patterns and regularities – inferences can be made about the hierarchy of influences shaping that environment (Reese, 2001b) or the way citizens are expected to be affected. The content of news media is potentially as diverse as life itself, making it important to understand the various ways we can narrow the key features of interest. We have not included many examples from the more interpretive and qualitative approaches to content, favoring here external validity with those studies making broader generalizations about content using more systematic methods.

Taken as a whole, news content provides a power map for the larger political system. We do not expect news to represent society as a quasi-‘census,’ providing an exact analog to the way people, places, and roles are distributed in the society. Given the importance of news in the political process, we clearly have certain expectations for press performance involving quality, fairness and representation against which we can gauge our measures of content. News both reflects power and provides a site where power is worked out. We should not be surprised then to find disparities in gender, racial, class and geographical representation, since it reflects the present distribution of privilege within the system. We do, however, expect that news as a social space will not work to exclude newcomers, marginalize important voices or degrade the political process with excessive sensationalism. These are all areas of press performance for which an understanding of news content provides important clues.

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