Cable News Coverage and Online News Stories: A Large-Scale Comparison of Digital Media Content

Abstract

We compare cable news reporting with online news stories to assess differences in media content. We make use of large-scale data resources to operationalize information diversity on three levels: gatekeeping or news selection; coverage or differential attention to news; and the degree of subjectivity in news statements. These three levels of analysis are often associated to the identification of media bias. Our approach, however, does not imply a deviation from an ideal norm of unbiased objectivity; instead, it tries to capture differences in what news media consider newsworthy. We analyze the captions of about 140 cable channels in the U.S. and hundreds of online news stories for six months, an observation window that coincides with the 2012 Republican primaries. Our findings suggest that cable channels are more similar to each other than to online news sources, but that similarities vary across the three levels of analysis. The comparison between online news and cable channels also suggests that some of the differences are not related to systematic bias but to the amount of diversity that the two media allow (cable being more restricted by space constraints than online media).