

Writing for Old and New Media: A Natural Experiment

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Abstract

This project seeks to consider how different constraints in online versus print journalism encourage differences in political journalistic content. A natural experiment furthers our understanding of this phenomenon by holding other aspects (namely, the journalist) constant. A sample of reporters who changed jobs from online to print, print to online, as well as control groups of those switching online to online and print to print, are considered and compared in terms of content topic, length, language, frequency, and other dimensions. The implications of these differences for news audiences, as well as society at large, are discussed.

Keywords

journalism; online; medium; experiment

Context, Importance, and Connections to Literature

As new media political journalism outlets proliferate (17% growth from 2010 to 2011), and as their counterparts in traditional outlets such as print newspapers lose staff, deteriorate in circulation, and in some cases cease to exist (Pew 2012), it becomes increasingly important that we understand the impact of writing in a new media environment. While the scholarly community is quite familiar with the challenges, advantages, and constraints of the traditional model of political journalism and publishing, less is known about the corresponding structural factors associated with online outlets. More importantly, we have yet to truly engage with the question of how such structural factors may affect the content produced by political journalists in these realms. This project is an important step in contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the nature of content in online political journalism.

Comparisons across media are unfortunately rare in Internet studies (as well as in the broader social sciences). While a growing number of scholars are pursuing questions of content across medium (Lee 2007, Baum and Groeling 2008, Haynes and Pitts 2009, Bode and Hennings 2012), these are generally restricted to particular subject, and often to online media only. Rather than being held to such narrow content-related boundaries, this project rather examines coverage among certain individuals – comparing the work produced by journalists who work for both old and new media at different points in their careers. This allows us to see the actual effects of the constraints of different types of media on the type of political journalistic content produced while holding the journalist constant – an important question for a changing media industry and a changing democracy.

This work contributes to a long tradition of recognizing that, in part, “the medium is the message” (McLuhan 1994). Research on online political news coverage and blogs, for example, shows that users of online media are influenced in different ways as compared with traditional media like newspapers and television (Atkinson 2007, Johnson and Kaye 2004). By understanding inherent differences in content, we can further develop our understanding of how structural factors may influence the content which users receive, as well as how they perceive it. And understanding the news norms (Schudson, 2001, Ettema, 2007, Janssen and Keis, 2005) specific to online content should further our understanding of what type of information the growing online news audience is receiving.

Research Design

This project is actualized by taking advantage of a natural experiment of sorts. Dunning suggests “Natural experiments can sometimes provide social scientists with an important means of improving

the validity of their empirical inferences” and this case can help us to do just that (2008, 283). In 2007, the website Politico.com was founded by two former Washington Post reporters. At that time, and soon after, a wealth of other reporters (most of whom had previously worked for traditional media outlets) joined the staff and began writing for Politico. This transition allows for a unique comparison across medium (Politico and the news outlets which formerly employed each of the reporters), while keeping the individual (reporter) constant. As such, it should allow us to isolate the effect of writing for old versus new media. (Although Politico distributes a daily “playbook” in the D.C. area, it is primarily an online publication, and one that is targeted at a different audience than mainstream publications – primarily the Washington elite and so-called political “junkies.”) Although this is only a single case, it represents an important one – not only does Politico continue to recruit from the upper echelons of political journalists from print media, it also attracts roughly 3.1 million unique visitors per month, accounting for over 16 million page views (Politico 2009).

As a further test of this specific context – print versus online journalism – and to ensure it is not merely the act of changing jobs or media outlets in general, I also consider two comparison groups. First, I include political journalists who moved from different online outlets to Politico in the same time period. Finally I include political journalists who moved from one traditional media outlet to another during the same time period. These comparisons allow us to assert more definitively that it is the constraints or structures inherent in online journalism, rather than idiosyncrasies of job changes or moves within media genres, which drives any differences in content in this period of transition.

Methods

To compare the content from before and after joining Politico, I pursue two simultaneous analytic strategies. First, I employ computer-aided content analysis to consider the easily measurable differences between media outlets. Are pieces longer? Do they use different types of vocabulary (using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) dictionary)? Do individual journalists publish more frequently when working for new or old media? I also compare Google Page Ranks (a rough measure of popularity) of stories by reporters before and after leaving old media for new.

Additionally, I use human coders to gain a more nuanced understanding of the differences in content in both periods in question. Human coders can answer more complicated questions than can computer-assisted content analysis. Do the journalists employ different types of frames (Chong and Druckman 2007) in a news story? Are a different number or type of sources consulted? Do they consider different topics? Are stories more or less balanced? Are they written in a different style or format?

Importance and Conclusions

This natural experiment advances our knowledge of online political content in important ways. By analyzing the work of these journalists before and after they joined Politico, we can further our understanding of how the constraints, challenges, and advantages of different media affect the content produced therein. Given the decline in print media and the rise of online (Pew 2012), any observed differences become increasingly important in terms of what type of information is available and consumed by citizens. As political information is integral to a functioning democracy, it is imperative that we understand as fully as possible what type of political information is available and consumed by the American citizenry. This study is an important step in expanding our grasp of the important differences in content between online and more traditional sources of political information.

Acknowledgments (Arial 10, Bold, Aligned Left, Single Line, 12pt before 10pt after)

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