Reviewing key concepts in research on political news journalism:
Conceptualizations, operationalizations, and propositions for future research

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Abstract: Unfortunately much existing scholarly research on news performance suffers from a lack of conceptual clarity and comparability. The authors will summarize existing efforts to analyze news content in ways that is comparable across cultures and facilitates cumulative science. Using six concepts that feature prominently in Western discussions of news performance – negativity, bias/diversity, hard/soft news, game/strategy, interpretative journalism, personalization – the authors will make practical suggestions as to how a more standardized approach to operationalizing and measuring them will improve generalizability of future content analyses.

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What is This?
Reviewing key concepts in research on political news journalism: Conceptualizations, operationalizations, and propositions for future research

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Research on political news journalism is at the intersection of political communication and journalism research. It is one of the most important areas of journalism research, not least from a democratic perspective. Democratic theory expects the mass media to serve several roles (Benson, 2008; Graber, 2003; Gurevitch and Blumler, 1990; Norris, 2000; Strömbäck, 2005): informing voters about the candidates and their ideas; interpreting actions of candidates and their opponents; controlling those in power; and mobilizing voters politically. To the extent that the media serve these roles, they do it predominantly through their news coverage of politics and society. Whether explicitly or implicitly, most discussions about the media’s democratic role thus focus on political news journalism.

Research on political news journalism has also become much more prominent during the last decade. This holds true for both single-country and comparative studies, although the increasing prominence of comparative journalism research is particularly noteworthy (De Vreese, 2003; Esser, 2008; Hanitzsch and Mellado, 2011; Plasser et al., 2009; Shoemaker and Cohen, 2006; Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2011; Van Aelst et al., 2008; Van Dalen et al., 2011). Both single-country and comparative research have also created
many important insights about patterns in political news coverage and longitudinal or cross-national differences and similarities.

Yet, despite all progress, research on political news journalism faces some serious challenges related to a lack of conceptual clarity as well as insufficient comparability across studies and cumulativity of findings. This holds particularly true for research that focuses on the content of political news. While many scholars use similar theoretical concepts, the conceptualizations and, in particular, operationalizations often differ. This often makes it hard to take stock of our current knowledge and assess whether country differences or developments over time are real, or whether they are a function of differences in conceptualizations or operationalizations. This, in turn, makes it difficult to build solid theories explaining patterns of political news coverage across time or space. If the goal of scientific research is to build and test theories, then this is a serious problem.

For example, research on news increasingly refers to ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ news but often very different things are implied (Baum, 2003). Likewise, while there are many scholars in different countries doing research on the extent to which news journalism frames politics as a strategic game (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; De Vreese, 2003; Lawrence, 2000; Patterson, 1993; Strömbäck and Van Aelst, 2010), and they largely share the same terminology, there is no agreement on how this framing of politics should be conceptualized and measured. Different scholars use different measures. This, in turn, inhibits the cumulativity of findings and hampers efforts to build theories that may explain differences and similarities in how different media in different countries at different times cover politics. A similar situation holds true for most, if not all, key concepts in research on patterns in political news coverage.

We believe this situation is highly unfortunate, and that research on news content has a lot to learn from fields where standardization of key variables has progressed further. The best example might be survey research, where there are a number of standardized core variables used to investigate, for example, political interest and party identification. These are standard components of surveys and election studies across the globe, and the academic community has engaged in a long tradition of collaboration to make this possible. Admittedly, no single variable or set of variables might be ideal for all people and all purposes at all times. Undoubtedly political scientists have wished to change the wording and focus of specific items in, for example, the American national election studies, but this price of ‘what if …’ is outweighed by the benefits of comparisons and insights over time. By standardizing core variables, survey research has made great progress in opening up comparisons across time and space, which has significantly increased our understanding of the phenomena being investigated.

This is why we took the initiative for a special issue reviewing key concepts in research on political news journalism. The purpose of this special issue is twofold. The first purpose is to review research and offer an assessment of the state of affairs vis-a-vis key concepts in research on political news journalism. By doing this, we hope this special issue will provide the scholarly community with a point of reference related to each of the selected concepts, on which future research can build. If future research continues to be characterized by a lack of conceptual clarity and comparability across studies, research cumulativity will, however, continue to suffer. Hence, the second purpose is to suggest how each of the selected key concepts should be conceptualized and operationalized. By
doing this, we hope to contribute to increasing standardization of how key concepts are conceptualized and, perhaps most important, operationalized and investigated empirically.

The concepts that have been selected for this special issue were chosen because they are all widely used in content analyses of political news, because there are no standardized operationalizations of the concepts, and because of their relevance for democratic news discourse and theories of news production.

As noted, the media in democracies are expected, among other things, to inform people and interpret processes with societal and political relevance, control those in power, and mobilize people politically. Content analyses of political news coverage can exhibit important information about how the mass media fulfill these political roles in divergent national settings.

With respect to their informative role, some national communication systems offer more favorable opportunity structures for political messages to be relayed to the public in a comprehensive and neutral way than others. Some national settings foster a more partisan, depoliticized or personalized campaigning and reporting culture. With respect to the interpretative role, many democratic news systems have experienced a cultural shift from the media acting as passive informant to active shaper of public opinion, with some organizations pursuing an interventionist role and posing as being ‘the better’ public representative than elected politicians. While interpretation and analysis can provide important background for audiences and facilitate deeper understanding of the issues, an overly interventionist role can become a source of conflict between political actors and media actors, especially if politics is mainly presented as a strategic game. This borders on another political role discussed in democratic theory, namely the watchdog function of the media. Here the media are supposed to guard citizens against undue infringements of their rights by the apparatus of the state, and uncover abuse of power as well as unfitness for public office. Yet an excessive abuse of the control function by the media may encourage an ideology of negativity and voter alienation.

Against this discussion of democratic news performance, some features of political news journalism have raised particular interest among scholars, in particular an interpretive journalism, partisan bias, media negativity, and depoliticization through a focus on soft news over hard news, framing of politics as a strategic game, and media personalization. Hence, these concepts were selected for a review and for this special issue.

The authors are all members of the Network of European Political Communication Scholars (www.nepocs.eu). They come from more than 10 European countries, and have thus been able to review not only the English-speaking literature, but also the literature in different European languages. All members were instructed to review research in their native language on all six concepts. In addition, all teams were instructed to review research on their concepts, based on quantitative content analysis, and published in books as well as in major international journals. The time period for the review was restricted to research published between 1990–2010.

Each of the articles in this special issue focuses on one of the core concepts and follows a common structure. They outline why the concept is important and why there is a need for a systematic review. They proceed by reviewing the most important theoretical and conceptual foundations, how the concept has been defined in previous
research, and, if appropriate, discuss different dimensions of the concept. They then outline how the concept has been operationalized and discuss the key findings in previous research. Finally, all articles synthesize the literature on the concept and suggest how it should be conceptualized as well as operationalized. To this end, all articles also include an appendix that features suggested variables and coding instructions.

The suggested variables and coding instructions are intended for use in quantitative content analysis using the full news story as the unit of analysis, which is the most widely used methodology and approach in research on news content. This means that they focus on the manifest and the verbal content of the news story, rather than the latent or the visual content. While we agree with those who criticize research for not taking visuals seriously enough (Grabe and Bucy, 2009), the focus on the manifest and verbal content of news stories is intentional: this is the approach most research on political news journalism takes, and this is thus the approach to research on news content that is in the greatest need of standardization. Most of the reviewed literature focuses on print and television, but the concepts and indicators may very well be applied to radio or online news as well.

Blumler et al. (1992) already stated 20 years ago that before comparative communication research can establish itself as a recognized sub-discipline, it must achieve greater cumulativity in findings and interpretation. Similarly, Kaid and Strömback (2008: 427) noted that one of the main challenges for research on news content ‘is to develop standardized instruments and coding instructions used by various scholars around the world’. Unfortunately, as Norris (2011: 369) recently concluded, progress on this route is still often ‘hampered by poor conceptualization and measurement’.

By compiling this special issue, our goal is to contribute to increasing conceptual clarity, comparability and cumulativity in research on how the media cover politics. To this end, we encourage anyone to feel free to use the proposed variables and coding instructions. Those who do not agree with the suggested conceptualizations and operationalizations, we instead encourage to propose their alternatives. We welcome any debate and any criticism that might contribute to greater standardization of core variables and, through that route, increasing comparability and cumulativity.

References


