

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF
AMERICAN PUBLIC
OPINION AND
THE MEDIA

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HANDBOOKS
OF
AMERICAN
POLITICS

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THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

AMERICAN

PUBLIC OPINION

AND THE MEDIA

Edited by
ROBERT Y. SHAPIRO
and
LAWRENCE R. JACOBS

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PREFACE

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PUBLIC opinion and the media form the foundation of the representative democracy in the United State. They are the subject of enormous scrutiny by scholars, pundits, and ordinary citizens. This volume takes on the “big questions” about public opinion and the media in popular debates and in social scientific research. The volume brings together the thinking of leading academic experts, delivering a cutting assessment of what we know about public opinion, the media, and their interconnections. This volume is particularly attentive to the changes in the mass media and communications technology and the sharp expansion in the number of cable television channels, websites and blogs, and the new social media, which are changing how news about political life is collected and conveyed. The changing dynamics of the media and public opinion has created a process of what we call *informational interdependence*. The extensive interconnections exert a wide range of influences on public opinion as the processes by which information reaches the public has been transformed.

In addition to encompassing critical developments in public opinion and the media, this volume brings together a remarkable diversity of research from psychology, genetics, political science, sociology, and the study of gender, race, and ethnicity. Many of the chapters integrate analyses of broader developments in public opinion and political behaviour with attention to critical variations based on economic status, education and sophistication, religion, and generational change, drawing on research that uses survey data and experimental designs. Moreover, the book covers the variations in public opinion and media coverage across domestic and foreign policy issues.

As academics well know—and as we tell our students—every project takes longer than you think. This book was no exception. We thank Dominic Byatt, Jennifer Lunsford, Sarah Parker, and Elizabeth Suffling at Oxford University Press, and copy-editor Laurien Berkeley, for their patience and superb assistance in moving this volume to publication. We are especially grateful to our good colleague George Edwards for proposing to Oxford that we undertake this volume. We share credit for what we have put together with him, but take full responsibility for any shortcomings. Stephen Thompson and Michael Scott provided able assistance as we scrambled to finish the volume, as did the proofreader, xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx, and indexer, xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx.

We thank most of all the outstanding scholars who agreed readily and with good cheer to write chapters for us. We stole their valuable time so that we and this volume’s readers would benefit from their highly engaged research and collective expertise.

Columbia University’s Department of Political Science, its Institute for Social and Economic Research and Policy, and the University of Minnesota’s Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs and Department of Political Science have provided us with strong

vi PREFACE

academic homes and support. We began work on this volume while Shapiro was finishing the 2006/7 year as a Visiting Scholar at the Russell Sage Foundation, which supported work that is reflected in this volume's final chapter regarding political leadership, "pathologies," and partisan conflict.

And as always, each of us is indebted to our soul mates, Nancy Rubenstein and Julie Schumacher, who were patient as we worked on this volume—and let us know that.

R.Y.S.

L.R.J.

New York and St Paul

August 2010

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SECTION TWO: MEASUREMENT AND METHOD

CHAPTER 9

EXPOSURE MEASURES AND CONTENT ANALYSIS IN MEDIA EFFECTS STUDIES

JENNIFER JERIT
JASON BARABAS

SCHOLARS typically study media effects in one of two ways. First, there is the individual-level approach, in which the researcher relies on media “exposure” or “usage” measures in public opinion surveys. Second, there is the environmental-level approach, which involves measuring media content and possibly even includes media data as a predictor in empirical models. Because the first method is more common, many studies purporting to study media effects do not actually include explicit measures of the media. While this state of affairs may seem unusual, analyzing media content is not straightforward, especially when it comes to integrating media messages and public opinion survey data. In this chapter we consider how media exposure has been studied, focusing on criticisms of media use measures and the main alternative to this approach: incorporating media content in the empirical analyses of public opinion data. We conclude with a discussion of some of the practical considerations regarding content analysis as well as the analytical challenges associated with estimating the causal effects of media messages on public opinion.

MEDIA EXPOSURE MEASURES

Researchers employ media exposure variables to capture the extent to which individuals encounter or are influenced by messages appearing in outlets such as television, newspapers, radio, and the Internet. While the evidence for direct persuasion effects

may be hard to find (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955), information carried in the mass media can have a powerful effect on opinions by influencing the ideas that are foremost in a person's mind as they make political judgments (for example, Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Zaller 1992). Likewise, features of media coverage such as the amount, breadth, and prominence of news stories are related to levels of political knowledge (for example, Barabas and Jerit 2009).

One of the most common ways to document the effect of the mass media is with a "media use" question, which asks respondents to categorize their news acquisition behavior. For example, the 2008 American National Election Study (ANES) asked respondents, "During a typical week, how many days do you watch news on TV, not including sports?" There were eight answer choices, from zero to seven days. The same question was asked about newspapers, radio, and the Internet. In the 2008 ANES, the average respondent reports watching television news 4.89 days per week. Other activities, such as reading a newspaper, listening to the radio, or obtaining news from the Internet, are more infrequent, taking place about two and a half days a week.¹ Despite the explosive growth of the Internet, television remains the most common form of media exposure, a pattern that has been reported in many commercial polls (for example, Pew Research Center for the People & the Press News Savvy Poll, February 2007).

Critiques of the Exposure Measure

Given the challenge of identifying media effects (Bartels 1993; Zaller 1996), the intellectual community has subjected media use questions to extensive examination over the past several decades. One of the first such attempts occurred in the late 1990s when Vincent Price and John Zaller explored the ANES media use measures (Price and Zaller 1990, 1993). More recently, Althaus and Tewksbury (2007) examined a variety of different media exposure measures and summarized their findings in a detailed report to the ANES Board of Overseers.

Based on an extensive series of analyses, Althaus and Tewksbury urged the ANES Board of Overseers to (1) continue the use of self-reported media exposure questions along with questions that measure political knowledge since each has unique effects; (2) employ media exposure items pertaining to newspapers, television, radio, and news sources on the Internet; (3) standardize the measures of exposure to each of the four news media as days in a typical week; and (4) include a measure of political discussion formatted to match the days per week scale. In addition, Althaus and Tewksbury advocate adding a new media exposure question that asks respondents to identify

¹ We calculated survey averages using the sampling weights provided by the ANES. For details on the administration of the ANES, see <http://www.electionstudies.org>.

where they have been getting most of their information about the presidential campaign.

After the publication of the Althaus and Tewksbury report, other scholars were invited to comment on their recommendations. While most of the commentators support the continued use of the media exposure measures, they raised a number of important substantive and methodological issues. For example, some scholars question whether the traditional ANES exposure measures will hold up across generations, especially as media content is delivered via cellphones, portable electronic devices, or even smart automobiles that may escape standard categorizations (Shapiro 2008). Others believe that it is essential to combine media use questions with measures of media attention in order to get at the differential effects of motivation and opportunity (Eveland, Hively, and Shen 2008).² Even within a single medium such as television there are numerous programs that provide political information, each varying by content and audience (Fowler, Goldstein, and Shah 2008). Accordingly, adapting the traditional media use questions to allow for some differentiation of television programs might be necessary. Lumping together viewership across programs without distinguishing who watches what and how often may introduce measurement error into studies that seek to determine the effects of television viewing (Fowler, Goldstein, Hale, and Kaplan 2007).³

Finally, Barabas (2008) identified several challenges with using individual-level measures of media exposure. He highlighted the following issues:

Social desirability. When answering media use questions, respondents may overreport their media usage, thinking that this is the socially desirable answer. Americans overreport other behaviors, such as voting (Burden 2000; Karp and Brockington 2005) and church attendance (Hadaway, Marler, and Chaves 1998; Presser and Stinson 1998). Although Althaus and Tewksbury find no evidence of social desirability bias in the ANES exposure measures (2007, 16), other studies conclude that overreporting takes place. For example, Prior (2009a) compared survey estimates of evening network news usage to Nielsen estimates, which are based on automated recordings of usage, and found evidence of considerable overreporting (also see Bechtel, Achepohl, and Akers 1972; Prior 2009b; Robinson 1985).

Selection bias. Self-reported media exposure in cross-sectional surveys like the ANES is not randomly assigned. Thus, patterns attributed to media exposure could instead be due to underlying differences between those who opt to use one medium versus another. Although analysts often include demographic variables to control for some of these differences, it is difficult to eliminate selection threats. As a result,

² This might entail asking people how much attention they pay to particular types of news (e.g., “How much attention do you pay to news on national news shows about the campaign for president—a great deal, quite a bit, some, very little, or none?”).

³ Here, scholars have had some success with an alternate format that asks respondents to state which particular source they use to get information about politics (Barabas and Jerit 2010; also see Freedman, Franz, and Goldstein 2004 for an innovative approach to measuring exposure).

associations between media exposure and other outcome measures may be due to differences in sample composition or omitted factors that predict both exposure and the dependent variable.

Reverse causality. Employing a media usage term as a predictor in a regression equation does not necessarily mean that it is a causal variable. Knowledge, or whatever outcome one is trying to explain, could be influencing media usage. In fact, two-way, or reciprocal, causation is even a possibility (Eveland, Shah, and Kwak 2003). While recent studies have reported evidence of a unidirectional relationship between media use and political knowledge (Eveland, Hayes, Shah, and Kwak 2005), endogeneity is a long-standing concern in media studies (for example, Mondak 1995). In general, it can be challenging to estimate the causal effects of media coverage in cross-sectional studies (but see Barabas and Jerit 2009 for one approach).

The preceding issues represent inferential threats, particularly from the standpoints of construct validity and internal validity (Shadish, Cook, and Campbell 2002). Media exposure items in cross-sectional surveys also may face problems related to statistical conclusion validity. That is, studies that seek to document media effects (via the typical media use measures) may suffer from low statistical power. Simulations with known media effects have revealed that power often is too low to recover statistically significant effects with typical sample sizes (e.g., $n = 1,000$ to $1,500$; see Zaller 2002). Thus, documenting meaningful media effects—even when they really exist—can be difficult in the public opinion polls that researchers often employ.

Exposure Alternatives

In light of these potential problems, some scholars resort to experiments in which media content is delivered randomly to treatment and control groups. There is a long tradition of studying media effects via randomized experiments and we do not intend to survey that literature here (for exemplars, see Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Iyengar 1991; Neuman, Just, and Crigler 1992). Compared with scholars who rely on the media use measure, experimenters are on firmer ground when it comes to asserting the causal effect of a media treatment. However, critics often question the external validity of experiments. Such critiques focus on the convenience samples that are used in many experiments (for example, Sears 1986) or on the possibility that the experimental setting might exaggerate the impact of the stimulus (for example, Kinder 2007). The second point is particularly relevant to researchers interested in media effects, as the complex nature of the information environment can be difficult to capture in a randomized experiment (see Barabas and Jerit 2010 for discussion).

As another alternative to self-reported media exposure, many scholars use political awareness, which is measured by asking people factual questions about politics (Price and Zaller 1993; Zaller 1992). Typically, such questions ask about civics facts (e.g., the percentage required to overturn a veto), the assumption being that “[people] who are

knowledgeable about politics in general are habitually attentive to communications on most particular issues as well” (Zaller 1992, 43). Across a number of different analyses, Zaller (1992) demonstrates that individuals with high levels of political awareness internalize more information from the mass media (e.g., in the form of considerations) than people with low levels of awareness. In a related, and widely cited, study Price and Zaller (1993) show that when it comes to explaining news recall, political awareness outperforms self-reported media exposure and other measures (e.g., education).⁴

INCLUDING THE MEDIA IN STUDIES OF MEDIA EFFECTS

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The fundamental limitation of the individual-level approach to studying media effects is that it says little about the precise elements of media coverage that affect public opinion. Even if we could “correct” some of the problems identified earlier, such as measurement error (Bartels 1993), we still would not know what it is about media coverage that affects the mass public. In many cases simply knowing that someone used a particular style of media such as print or television is not enough; the researcher’s theory necessitates knowing something about media content (e.g., what kind of information was provided?).

Typically, scholars have taken one of two approaches when it comes to using media data in studies of media effects. With the first approach, data from a media content analysis complements, but does not directly factor into, the analysis of public opinion. For example, in studies of political knowledge, information from media content analyses may be used to inform the researcher’s expectations regarding learning patterns (for example, Druckman 2005; Graber 1988; Patterson and McClure 1976). Other researchers have adopted this same basic approach in studies of attitudes and candidate evaluations (for example, Althaus 2003; Druckman and Parkin 2005; Gilens 1999).

The other method of studying media effects is to incorporate media data *directly* in the analysis as a variable. This approach involves merging media content with public opinion data and treating the media variables as predictors. Oftentimes, this is done in analyses of aggregate opinion (for example, Althaus and Kim 2006; Barabas and Jerit 2009; Duch, Palmer, and Anderson 2000; Holbrook and Garand 1996; Jerit 2008; Simon and Jerit 2007). It also is possible to include media variables in individual-level studies of public opinion (for example, Barabas and Jerit 2009; Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeldt 1998; Jerit and Barabas 2006; Jerit, Barabas, and Bolsen 2006; Kahn and Kenny 2002; Price and Czilli 1996). There are important analytical issues to consider when media

⁴ As a proxy for political awareness, some analysts employ interviewer ratings of the respondent’s level of political knowledge (but see Martin and Johnson forthcoming for a critique of this practice).

variables appear alongside of individual-level predictors. We discuss these issues in greater detail later.

The key point is that in both situations, the central concept of interest—information from the mass media—is incorporated in the empirical analysis either directly or indirectly. There is much to recommend with either of these approaches and both offer advantages over media use variables. In the rest of this chapter, we address some of the practical considerations that come into play when a researcher seeks to incorporate media data into studies of media effects.

Online Media Databases

Assuming investigators want to include media content in a media effects study, a natural question becomes what source to use. To date, most scholars rely on online archives to identify and collect the texts they will later analyze.⁵ For researchers interested in documenting media effects, the two most popular archives are LexisNexis Academic Universe and the Vanderbilt Television News Archive, though many other sources have become available in recent years (e.g., NewsBank, ProQuest). As discussed below, a number of important issues arise with the use of online archives, all potentially affecting the quality of one's data.⁶

Choosing a source

The first and perhaps most obvious consideration when using an archive that contains hundreds of sources is choosing a source(s) to content-analyze. There is some evidence that different newspapers cover the same topic differently (Woolley 2000), but there has been little sustained empirical analysis of the matter. Consequently, the common practice is to use a single source such as the *New York Times* or the Associated Press on the grounds that it leads the coverage in other outlets and/or provides the raw material for stories and broadcasts appearing around the country (for example, Jerit 2008; Simon and Jerit 2007).

Like many of the issues that will be raised in this section, the choice of source depends on the goals of a study. If the purpose is to capture general trends in news coverage, relying on a news “leader” might make sense. For example, in a study that examines media coverage of recent political developments, Barabas and Jerit (2009) report similar results regardless of whether they operationalized media coverage with story counts from the Associated Press or from specific broadcast and print sources

⁵ Some have voiced concern that online databases differ from the published record (for example, Snider and Janda 1998; Woolley 2000). Nevertheless, most scholars continue using electronic news archives rather than coding the actual stories (but see Page 1996, who employs both methods).

⁶ Our discussion assumes that researchers intend to analyze the full text versions of a story rather than relying on indices or other proxy measures (see Althaus, Edy, and Phalen 2001 for a treatment of that topic).

(*CBS Evening News*, *USA Today*). In contrast, in an earlier study, Jerit, Barabas, and Bolsen (2006) hypothesized that the type of outlet mattered for the phenomenon they were studying (the “knowledge gap” between individuals with low and high levels of socioeconomic status). Consistent with their expectations, they found that higher levels of newspaper coverage exacerbated the knowledge gap between low and high socioeconomic groups. Increases in the amount of television coverage had no effect on the knowledge gap.

Depending on one’s research question, then, it may be appropriate to use a small number of sources (or even a single source) as an indicator of the larger information environment. Even in this situation, however, it is useful to demonstrate that the results hold when other sources are interchanged for the proxy measure (for example, Simon and Jerit 2007).

Identifying stories

Once a researcher has settled upon a source or sources, he or she has to come up with a method for identifying news stories on their topic. Typically, this is done through a keyword search, but that simple description belies the challenge of identifying appropriate keywords. On the one hand, if keywords are too general, the search may turn up of thousands of “hits,” many of which are only tangentially related to the topic at hand. On the other hand, keywords that are overly specific may generate too few hits, causing the researcher to miss wide swaths of media coverage. Even after one settles upon an appropriate level of generality, slight changes in the choice of keywords can result in dramatically different search results. In light of these challenges, an iterative approach to keyword selection often works best. The procedures described by Chong and Druckman (2010) should serve as a model for other researchers. For each of the issues in their study, they settled upon an optimal set of keywords by “experimenting with alternative word combinations and locations (e.g., in the headline or lead paragraph of the article) and reading a sample of articles generated by each combination to ensure that all major articles were captured” (Chong and Druckman 2010, 18; also see Jacobs and Shapiro 2000, app. 3).

What are you counting and over what period of time?

Decisions regarding the unit of analysis and the time period for a content analysis are important matters that must be guided by theory. Whether one is coding entire stories, individual paragraphs, or some smaller unit, like a sentence, is a decision that must flow from one’s research question and theoretical argument. For example, in her analysis of the 1993–4 health care reform debate, Jerit (2008) used weekly measures of rhetoric based on a content analysis of the Associated Press. The weekly unit of analysis allowed her to examine the give and take between opposing political elites, which was essential for evaluating the hypotheses of her study. In other cases, the researcher may be interested in looking at trends in media coverage over a longer period of time, in

which case monthly or even yearly data may make more sense (for example, Jacobs and Shapiro 2000).⁷

In addition to the unit of analysis, researchers also must specify a time period for their content analysis. For example, Jerit, Barabas, and Bolsen (2006) examine media coverage over the six-week period preceding a public opinion survey. This particular time frame was chosen to correspond with the wording of the knowledge questions they were examining. These items asked people about recent political developments (e.g., events that had occurred in the “past month” or “past month or so”). At a more general level, choices about the time period of a content analysis entail assumptions about information processing and, in particular, human memory.

As the preceding discussion suggests, the ease and availability of online archives belie the complexity of issues that surrounds their use. There also are limits to the kind of information one can obtain from online archives. As we will discuss in more detail below, information about images is absent from the transcripts of most electronic archives. Additionally, other important details (e.g., did an article appear “above the fold”?) are not apparent from the transcripts in LexisNexis and similar online archives. As a result, stories obtained from these sources are an imperfect representation of the information to which people are exposed. Given that the rationale for combining media content analysis with survey data often has to do with analyzing realistic media treatments, it is important that scholars keep this potential limitation in mind.

Human versus Computer-Based Coding

After identifying a body of text to be coded, the researcher must decide whether he or she will do manual or machine-based coding. The manual approach involves trained human coders analyzing the textual elements of a news story. Although this has been the most common way of conducting content analysis (Graber 2004), the explosion in content analysis software programs has encouraged an increasing number of scholars to try computer-based coding (for examples, see Fan 1988; Nadeau, Niemi, Fan, and Amato 1999; or Shah, Watts, Domke, and Fan 2002). Today, it is possible to automate many of the tasks previously assigned to human coders, including simple story counts as well as comparisons of entire texts to identify their similarities and differences. Many programs can even detect textual themes as well as specific words and strings of words (Graber 2004, 53).

In order for scholars to take advantage of computer-based coding, however, the text must be in computer-readable format. Now that many news stories, speeches, and other political texts are archived electronically, this requirement is not as onerous as it once was. But machine-based coding still involves some work on the part of the analyst.

⁷ Regardless of what the researcher is counting, intercoder reliability checks should be done at the unit of analysis. Intercoder reliability analysis is a topic that could easily fill an entire chapter on its own; we refer interested readers to Neuendorf (2001) and Krippendorf (2003).

To the extent that one is interested in something beyond a simple count of stories, it is necessary to specify what the software program is looking for, whether that be a word, phrase, or frame.

For example, Kellstedt (2000, 2003) tracks the use of two media frames—individualism and egalitarianism—in the mass media. In order to do that, he created a dictionary of words and phrases that indicated the presence of each of these broad, thematic frames. Next, a content analysis software program examined the presence of these words and phrases in thousands of *Newsweek* and *New York Times* articles over a forty-year period (see Shah, Watts, Domke, and Fan 2002 for another example). As the previous example makes clear, dictionary-based coding makes it possible to analyze large amounts of political text. But as scholars have observed, computerized coding does not dispense with the need for human input, given the start-up costs involved in developing and testing a coding dictionary. Thus, dictionary-based computerized coding is to some extent theory-driven, based on a priori expectations of what concepts are relevant and how they fit together. Increasingly, researchers are developing ways to let the data (i.e., the text) speak for itself (Laver, Benoit, and Garry 2003; Quinn et al. 2010; Simon and Xenos 2004).

In many instances, the research question demands that the researcher make a qualitative judgment about a news story or political text, such as the extent to which it emphasizes political strategy over substance (for example, Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Lawrence 2000), or whether facts are accompanied by contextual information (Jerit 2009; Neuman, Just, and Crigler 1992). In this situation, human coding often is preferred because the coding task involves some sort of *interpretive* judgment about a political text.

Consider a recent study by Chong and Druckman (2010) that examines how various political issues were framed in the mass media over differing time periods. Chong and Druckman used human coders to identify the presence or absence of a frame, as well as the frame's position (pro or con) relative to the issue, the incidence of a refuting argument or frame in the same article, the reference to statistical or numerical data, and episodic evidence pertaining to individual cases or experiences. It is hard to envision how one would direct a computer or piece of software to make such fine-grained judgments. Thus, the primary advantages of manual coding, and the reason why many researchers continue to use this approach, are its greater flexibility and the rich data that human coding generates. To the extent that a researcher is interested in how some feature of news reporting affects audiences (say, the tone of a story or the effect of a facial display), there may be few alternatives to human coding.

Having said that, manual coding comes with some disadvantages. The most obvious is the tremendous cost in terms of time (and ultimately money) that it takes to train human coders. Regardless of how well trained or experienced a coder may be, it is essential to demonstrate the reliability of one's data, which will necessarily involve some redundancies in coding (and further increases in the time-cost of the coding effort). All of this means that researchers who choose the manual approach probably

cannot undertake coding projects of the same magnitude as those relying on computer-based programs.

Going beyond Volume

Many content analyses use counts, such as the number of stories over a particular time period. Aside from the topics raised in the previous section, there are some concerns specific to frequency-based content analyses. For example, Woolley (2000) describes the necessity of “deflating” counts when one uses an index such as *The Readers’ Guide to Periodical Literature* over long periods of time because counts in one era may not mean the same thing in another. More generally, researchers should place information about story counts in context, either by noting the presence of other important events (for example, Barabas and Jerit 2010; Jerit and Barabas 2006) or by examining the volume of coverage relative to some other benchmark, such as the top story of the year (Woolley 2000).

As the title of this subsection suggests, there is a growing appreciation that public opinion scholars need to look beyond the frequency of a message and to consider other aspects of news coverage. For example, Althaus and Kim (2006) show that the content and tone of news stories moderate priming effects. Work by Chong and Druckman (2007) indicates that the strength of a frame may be just as important as its prevalence in real-world political debate. More generally, the recognition that people face complex information environments (for example, Althaus and Kim 2006; Chong and Druckman 2007; Sniderman and Theriault 2004) means that scholars will continue to conduct fine-grained analyses of media coverage. This in turn ensures that human coding will persist even as automated coding programs become more widespread.

New Frontiers of Content Analysis

Given the rate at which computer-based content analysis software programs and online archives are proliferating, the field of content analysis is likely to change rapidly over the coming years. Here we highlight two issues that will be important for the next wave of researchers seeking to do content analysis: the necessity of incorporating audiovisual information in media content analyses, and methods for content-analyzing “new” or hard-to-obtain sources such as webpages, blogs, and radio programs.

Audiovisual content

The analysis of audiovisual content has not kept pace with the importance of visual information in televised and print news stories (but see Graber 2001 or Grabe and Bucy 2009 for exceptions). Television is a case in point. Despite the importance of TV as a source of political information, scholars have analyzed this medium mainly in terms of its *verbal* content—that is, through analysis of the spoken word (but see Sulkin and

Swigger 2008 for an analysis of campaign ad visuals). The same charge can be leveled against the analysis of print sources (e.g., newspapers, news magazines), though the visual component of a print source is by definition a more minor element of the story. Even though an increasing amount of information is conveyed through visuals, content analysis of images and audiovisuals is seldom undertaken.

This bias in research practices is troubling. Scholars have shown that the visuals that accompany news stories may reinforce or contradict the text (Messaris and Abraham 2001). Thus, when researchers ignore the visual component of the news, they may mischaracterize the message that people take away from the information environment. Consequently, much of what we “know” about public opinion may be subject to change once we take into account the role of visual information (Grabe and Bucy 2009). This point relates to the second topic we wish to highlight: how to find information about new media or hard-to-find sources.

New and hard-to-find sources

It can be challenging to content-analyze particular sources such as Internet webpages, blogs, and many radio shows because the coverage of these sources in online archives is not as extensive as it is for print and broadcast outlets. Moreover, in the case of the Internet, the appearance of websites changes throughout the day, making it difficult to characterize the content on these pages even with Internet-capturing technology such as the Wayback Machine.⁸

This situation poses a significant challenge to anyone seeking to content-analyze such sources (though see Hopkins and King’s (2010) mixed hand-computer approach to coding blogs). We suspect it will only be a matter of time before there is an equivalent to LexisNexis for the Internet. Until then, however, researchers are at the mercy of news websites, some of which have extensive archiving systems and others that do not. This state of affairs makes it difficult to follow an earlier recommendation about using detailed media use questions; e.g., asking people about the particular source they use.⁹ In our experience, respondents sometimes name Internet sites or radio stations that are difficult to find.

Analytical Challenges

When researchers combine media content with individual-level public opinion data, they usually treat the media data as a proxy for the larger information environment that respondents were exposed to in the weeks (or months) before they entered an opinion poll. But this can present difficulties for assessing the causal impact of media coverage on public opinion. First, by including media data (e.g., story counts) as variables in one’s analyses of individual-level data, the researcher is effectively

⁸ <<http://www.archive.org/web/web.php>>. Accessed Feb. 8, 2010.

⁹ See n. 3.

assuming that survey respondents were exposed to that information. Naturally, whatever media effects exist should be strongest among the subset of the sample that was exposed to such information. Here, any of the previously mentioned indicators of media exposure (self-reported media use, political awareness, and education) may be useful in helping researchers to identify media effects (for example, Barabas and Jerit 2010).

The second complication that arises from combining media data with opinion polls is the resulting “clustering” that occurs in one’s data (with individuals from the same survey “nested” in whatever information environment preceded the survey). In this situation the researcher effectively has data at two levels. The first is the level of the individual survey respondent; the second corresponds to the information environment preceding the survey. Because individuals in any given survey confront similar information environments, there are statistical dependencies in the resulting data set. This is a problem in so far as most statistical models assume that one observation is unrelated to another (Steenbergen and Jones 2002). In these situations “multi-level” or “hierarchical” models may be necessary (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002).

Finally, no discussion of analytical challenges would be complete without mentioning statistical power. When researchers combine media content and public opinion surveys, there may be thousands of survey respondents in the resulting data set, but the effective n is actually much lower (it is equivalent to the number of “media environments”; see Stoker and Bowers 2002). Complicating the issue further, researchers often are interested in how particular subgroups respond to media messages. But answering this question necessitates statistical interaction terms (Kam and Franzese 2007) and thus splits the individual-level data into increasingly smaller groups—both of which reduce statistical power (Zaller 2002).

CONCLUSION

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Researchers tend to study media effects in one of two ways: using an individual-level measure of media exposure or linking media content with public opinion data. Each approach helps one understand the effect of the mass media. Like any method, however, each comes with distinctive strengths and weaknesses. We have tried to highlight some of the key issues that scholars might consider in this regard. Yet the continually evolving media environment—in particular, the increased availability of news sources as well as the ease with which people can select their information source—presents challenges for anyone seeking to understand the nature of media effects (Bennett and Iyengar 2008). We can only hope that these changes in the media landscape will inspire researchers to find new and better ways of identifying the causal impact of the mass media on public opinion.

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