

On Hard versus Soft News: A Content Analysis of Reporting by Three Nationally-Televised Evening News Programs

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Abstract

While television still represents the most pervasive medium by which Americans get their news, questions as to the quality and content being reported have been raised. Through the lens of framing theory, this study utilizes content analysis of three main evening news broadcasts to examine what type of news is being reported and in what context. Results suggest that there is a significant difference between the broadcasts studied, and that the majority of each program is devoted to content other than what is considered “hard” news.

Keywords

Hard and Soft News, Content Analysis, National News Broadcasting, Framing Theory

1. Introduction

Despite the growth in media outlets reporting on national news, traditional evening news broadcasts on America’s top television networks, as represented by ABC, CBS, and NBC, continue to reach the highest number of viewers [1]. Today’s evening news programs are common in structure and production to those of years’ past; generally having a single main anchor, multiple on-site reporters, green-screen capabilities in order to illustrate pictures or videos, and consisting of between five and ten news segments that are interspersed with commercial advertisements [2]. Regardless of modern changes in media availability and technology integration, nationally-relevant news can generally be categorized as either “hard” or “soft” with respect to reporting classification.

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War, foreign affairs, economics, politics, and stories that have an underlying need to be reported in a timely fashion are considered to be hard news stories. Whereas entertainment, celebrities' lifestyles, human-interest stories, pop-culture, the arts, and news that is not breaking-news with regard to urgency are generally categorized as soft reports [3]. Knowing the difference between how nationally-broadcast evening news programs are reporting hard and soft issues can influence viewers' perceptions of importance and impact the media effects, if any, which are cultivated through the daily reports.

2. Literature Review

In order to designate television news content as "hard" or "soft," it is necessary to conceptualize the underlying dichotomy. Reineman *et al.* [3], for example, provides a comprehensive outline of prior studies that have attempted to measure news along "hard" and "soft" categorical lines. While some studies have attempted to limit the focus of measurement to singular characteristics, other researchers have alternatively argued that the concept of news "softness" requires a multi-dimensional framework [4]. Of particular interest is the prevalence of *topicality* or *timeliness* of news content as a key determinant of categorization, which appears almost universally in both unidimensional and multi-dimensional measurement studies.

Beyond the topicality of the actual content, various scholars have advocated for greater emphasis on the style of news presentation. Building from a foundation of two dozen theoretical, empirical, and conceptual research articles, Reineman *et al.* [3] discuss the role of news production and consumption/reception in the conceptualization of "hard" versus "soft" news content. In other words: It is not only the topic of a news item that makes it a "hard" or "soft" one, but also the framing of an event or topic linking it to the public good, to policy issues or to society at large.

The framing of the content, then, is an important component (and often a complicating factor) in delineating between "hard" and "soft" news. From a theoretical standpoint, literature on framing theory focuses on the *ways* in which information is presented, rather than (or in addition to) the information itself. In general terms, Postman and Powers [5] describe the process of framing and its inseparable influence on the actual "content" of the news program: The packages are put together frame by frame, phrase by phrase, with hundreds of cuts or edits, stringing together image after image until the piece is completed ([5], p. 68).

In more specific terms, the type of framing can affect the overall perception of the story, thus eliciting the dichotomous designation between "hard" and "soft" news stories. Zukas [6] notes the integration of framing theory within studies of television news content, comparing the role of framing and agenda-setting strategies in the production of news. Additional literature further supports the claim that production details and decisions affect the "softness" of the news [3] [7].

The idea of framing is central to the production of news on both cable television and among local networks. Interestingly, while subtle differences in the frame can alter the content or "news", a significant portion of television news programming features an almost universal set of characteristics [5] [8]. These common elements are encapsulated in the rising prominence of the "news magazine" on cable television: "the predictable scene is an anchor at a large desk, back-grounded by video screens, with over-the-shoulder graphics introducing each story" ([9], p. 840). The resulting composition, or collection of aesthetic characteristics, produces a framing effect that influences how audience members perceive both the overall story and the underlying content or "news".

In addition to aesthetic elements and scenic design strategies, commercial concerns play an important role in the framing of news on television. While there is some heated contestation regarding commercial interests and news on television, there does appear to be evidence of a fundamental change in the structure and composition of both cable and network programs. For example, the 2013 Pew Research Center "State of the News Media" report noted that "across the three cable channels, coverage of live events and live reports during the day, which often require a crew and correspondent, fell 30% from 2007 to 2012 while interview segments, which tend to take fewer resources and can be scheduled in advance, were up 31%." Nie *et al.* [10] further discuss how "mainstream broadcast news is time constrained and thus chooses to cover a subset of issues most viewers find important" (p. 432).

Beyond such factors as timing of segments, interviews, video and audio clips, and other show features that must be carefully programmed to allow for advertising, the actual stylistic elements and rhetorical characteristics employed by program personalities have a significant impact on the overall message. The tone and manner in which information is presented on cable and local news programs, and the recognizable characteristics of pro-

gram hosts as celebrity personas, creates a framing mechanism for the overall message, one as equally influential as the technological and commercial considerations. In terms of technology, research from Greer and Ferguson [11] helps to highlight the increasing prominence of social media within traditional news broadcasts has complicated the collective understanding of exactly what constitutes as “hard news” versus “soft news.”

Statement of the Problem

Even with modern technological advances in media, nationally broadcast television networks continue to be a main area where Americans receive their daily news. The general supposition that national evening news programs report mostly on current, hard-news stories relevant to the majority of Americans can be questioned, however, after viewing but a few broadcasts. Specific acceptable standards for this research focusing on real news content will be outlined in the following section, but in general, news content can be considered operationally-defined as hard news if it is: breaking news or timely to the date of the broadcast, covered up-front or multiple times in the same half hour time frame, and having a viewer impact on a national scale. Historically, nationally-televised evening news programs would devote the vast majority of their broadcast time to these hard-news stories [4]. Yet, the problem at hand in this research study was to determine if real news is being marginalized by today’s ever-changing viewer demands and the networks’ overall profit motive.

The main question examined in this study was: How well do the top three U.S. evening news television programs report hard news? The following hypotheses were focal points for analysis and discussion.

H1—National evening news programs do not devote the majority of their 30 minute broadcast to covering hard news stories.

H2—Promotional segments plus commercial time are greater than time spent covering hard news stories.

H3—There is a significant difference between ABC, CBS, and NBC with regard to percentage of broadcast time devoted to hard.

3. Methodology

In order to effectively test the hypotheses listed above this study utilized a cross-sectional, content analysis methodology to analyze hard news reporting on three nationally televised evening news programs. The non-probability convenience sample population included ABC, CBS, and NBC in the 6:30 - 7:00 pm or 7:00 - 7:30 pm Eastern Standard Time frame. The content analysis research design employed in this study is appropriate due to the allowance of systematic and iterative coding of hard and soft news segments. In this case, content analysis was also a suitable approach as a first step to determining how individuals make sense of the programming they view. Sampling units of analysis examined and coded in this study were broken down into individual news segments or when a news topic changed. Coding was broken down into five options for the category of news type: 1) [Hard] News—A time sensitive story, or one that is currently happening. 2) [Soft] Feature—Non news story that is not time sensitive or currently happening. 3) Commercial—An advertisement or commercial break with paid promotional content out of the networks’ control. 4) Editorial/Opinion—A discussion piece, likely by the news anchor(s). 5) Promo—This category includes information about upcoming news segments, and introductory or ending comments by the reporter. The segments were coded by length of time in seconds, and segments covering more than one news area were coded by dividing the number of topics in the segment by the total time of the segment. For the present study, only news coded in category 1—news—was counted towards hard news reporting.

4. Results

Data were coded for this study in terms of hard news and soft news. The coding scheme was built from foundational literature on news framing, keeping the concept of topicality (timeliness) as a key definitional component of hard news (e.g. [3] [4]). It should be noted that the implications discussed further in this section were based on the analysis of a specific interpretation and definition of hard versus soft news reporting. For this study, the researchers operationally defined hard news as: a time-sensitive or breaking news story, or one that is currently happening and evokes interest on a national scale. The main question researched in this study was: how well do the top three U.S. evening news television programs report hard news? Based on the research question, the hypotheses outlined in the methodology section were statistically analyzed using both descriptive (as shown in

Table 1 and **Table 2**) and inferential statistics. **Table 1** illustrates the average time of hard news reported, in minutes, for each television network during the period of June 24 - 27, 2013. It can be seen that during this time period CBS devoted the most time to hard news reporting at 15 minutes out of the half-hour evening broadcast, followed by ABC then NBC with 13.9 and 12 minutes respectively. Collective, average hard news content in minutes is also displayed in **Table 1** which supports the H1 hypothesis: national evening news programs devote the majority of their 30 minute broadcast airing content other than hard news stories. An independent samples t-test showed a 3.558 t-value which was greater than the required critical value of 3.169 at the $p < 0.01$ level (DF = 10), which provides strong statistical significance in support of the H1 hypothesis. **Table 2** illustrates the time each network spent covering hard and soft news as a percentage of their entire 30 minute broadcast based on the 12 observations during the week. The H2 hypothesis: there is significantly more hard news coverage than soft news coverage in network evening news broadcasts was tested using the independent samples t-test. A t-value of 13.71 was calculated which was higher than the required critical value of 3.169 (DF = 10). Therefore evidence was found in favor of the H2 hypothesis at the $p < 0.01$ level for the collective mean values of the 3 main national networks.

The H3 hypothesis stating that *there is a significant difference between ABC, CBS, and NBC in the amount of broadcast time devoted to hard news stories* was tested using the single-factor analysis of variance (ANOVA) method. The test structure here allows for making determinations of any difference between any of the 3 main television networks' evening newscast. With an F-value of 0.5811, the analysis showed that the critical value of 4.256 was not met, therefore there is no significant difference in hard news reporting time among the three networks at the $p < 0.05$ level (DF = 2,9); therefore the H3 hypothesis was rejected.

5. Discussion and Recommendations

The results of this study provide evidence supporting the H1 and H2 hypotheses which show that even though national evening news programs show significantly more hard news than soft news, the total amount of hard news aired during an entire 30 minute broadcast still does not count for the majority of that half-hour segment. Topicality, or timeliness of news content, was an important characteristic in the framing of hard news, echoing the operational methods and outcomes measured in previous studies (e.g. [3] [4]). Furthermore, through statistical data findings, the H3 hypothesis was rejected; therefore showing that there is not a significant difference between the three evening news network broadcasts with regard to the amount of hard news each station airs.

Table 1. Number of minutes devoted to hard news, soft news, or commercials for each broadcast station.

Broadcast Network	Hard News	Soft News	Commercials	Soft News plus Commercials	Total News without Commercials/Broadcast*
ABC	13.9	5.7	6.3	12	23.7
CBS	15	4.1	8.7	12.8	21.3
NBC	12	10.9	6.6	17.5	23.4
Avg. (Mean) Total	13.6	5.2	7.2	15.3	21.77
Standard Deviation	1.5	1.5	0.8	0.7	

*Time computed from hard news percentage subtracted from total broadcast time. Some broadcasts were coded less than a full 30 minutes due to weather interruptions from local stations.

Table 2. Frequency of hard news reported as a percentage of an entire 30 minute evening news broadcast.

Broadcast Network	Frequency of Hard News Reporting*	Frequency of Soft News Reporting*
ABC	46%	19%
CBS	50%	14%
NBC	40%	36%

*Time computed from hard news percentage subtracted from total broadcast time. Some broadcasts were coded at less than a full 30 minutes due to weather interruptions from local stations.

Because content analysis is very systematic and coding rules were rigorously applied, time was a main factor limiting this study. The timeframe of the content analyzed was only four days; June 24-June 28, 2013 and, therefore, may not accurately represent network broadcast segments or content on a longer timeline. Furthermore, the researchers could not create or mandate that hard news be present on those days, so a lengthier data collection period may offer more conclusive findings. However, according to the data findings in this study, evening news broadcasts do maintain relative consistency in their hard news reporting time. Indeed, this consistency represents an important characteristic in the overall “frame” of the news program [5] [9]. Finally, hard news may not be entertaining news; from an economic perspective, a television network’s first goal is to be a profitable business and soft news may be viewed as more attractive to both viewers and commercial advertisers.

It may be unfair to suggest or even expect hard news reporting to outnumber airtime for all other soft and commercial-related content, yet the outcomes also may surprise some viewers in the amount of time per half-hour that is devoted to non-hard news items. A premise brought up earlier in this study was the notion that consumer demands or profits from commercial content could be underlying drivers for non-hard news content [11]. However, that notion cannot be corroborated by the coding information done in the scope of the content analysis for this study. This examination may, however, provide the groundwork for further studies that may want to dig deeper into the commercial content aired during these primetime news broadcasts.

A recommendation for future research in this area would be to code for more in-depth information during the commercial break periods to determine if commercial content is consistent with available target viewer demographic information and to what extent there are differences between the top three national broadcast networks in that regard. Lastly, an additional study recommendation would be to focus on historical data of national broadcast news programs to show possible longitudinal differences in reporting time on hard and soft news topics. Trends showing significant increases or decreases in the amount of time devoted to specific news types may provide for further interpretation as to the driving factors for networks’ change in news programming content over time.

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