

US journalism has become more subjective: study

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U.S.-based journalism has gradually shifted away from objective news and offers more opinion-based content that appeals to emotion and relies heavily on argumentation and advocacy, according to a new RAND

Corporation report.

In a unique analysis on news discourse and presentation, researchers found that the changes occurred over a 28-year-period (1989 to 2017) as journalism expanded beyond traditional media, such as newspapers and broadcast networks, to newer media, such as 24-hour cable channels and digital outlets. Notably, these measurable changes vary in extent and nature for different news platforms.

"Our research provides quantitative evidence for what we all can see in the media landscape: Journalism in the U.S. has become more subjective and consists less of the detailed event- or context-based reporting that used to characterize news coverage," said Jennifer Kavanagh, a senior political scientist and lead author of the report, which is second in a series of research into the phenomenon of "Truth Decay," the declining role of facts and analysis in civil discourse and its effect on American life.

"News consumers can now see how the news has changed over the years and keep that in mind when making choices about which media outlets to rely on for news," she added.

The analysis, enabled by a RAND text analytics tool previously used to analyze support and opposition to Islamic terrorists on social media, offers a detailed assessment of how news has shifted over time and across platforms. The RAND-Lex tool scanned millions of lines of text in print, broadcast and online journalism from 1989 (the first year such data was available via Lexis Nexis) to 2017 to identify usage patterns in words and phrases. Researchers were then able to measure these differences not only within one outlet or type of media (e.g. print) but also comparatively with other forms of journalism (e.g. print vs. digital).

Researchers analyzed content from 15 outlets representing print (The

New York Times, Washington Post and St. Louis Post-Dispatch), television (CBS, NBC, ABC, CNN, Fox and MSNBC) and digital journalism (Politico, The Blaze, Breitbart News Network, Buzzfeed Politics, The Daily Caller and The Huffington Post).

The findings point to a gradual and subtle shift over time and between old and new media toward a more subjective form of journalism that is grounded in personal perspective.

Consider broadcast news. Before 2000, broadcast news segments were more likely to include relatively complex academic and precise language, as well as complex reasoning. After 2000, broadcast news becomes less pre-planned as on-air personalities and guests engaged in conversations about news. (That year, 2000, is significant in the evolution of the media landscape, as viewership of all three major cable networks began to increase dramatically.)

Comparing broadcast news to cable programming, differences become more stark, with cable segments dedicating more time to opinion coverage and using argumentative language. The size and scope of these changes is substantial, but researchers also noted that these differences may be in part a result of their different audiences, with cable news focusing on specialized audiences.

When comparing newspapers to digital outlets, researchers were able to identify significant differences. Newspapers have changed the least over time, with content slightly shifting from a more academic style to one that is more narrative. As for digital journalism, the report found that online content is more personal and direct, narrating key social and policy issues through personal points of view and subjective references.

"Our analysis illustrates that news sources are not interchangeable but each provides mostly unique content, even when reporting on related

issues," said Bill Marcellino, a behavioral and social scientist and co-author of the report. "Given our findings that different types of media present news in different ways, it makes sense that people turn to multiple platforms."

The report is one in a series of RAND-funded reports into the triggers and consequences of Truth Decay. The first report, written by Kavanagh and RAND President and CEO Michael D. Rich, examined how Truth Decay is a set of four interrelated trends: increasing disagreement about facts, a blurring between opinion and fact, an increase in the relative volume of opinion and personal experience over fact, and declining trust in formerly respected sources of factual information.

That report identified how changes in the media have contributed to Truth Decay by increasing the volume of opinion over fact. Forthcoming reports will examine issues such online civic engagement and use of social media for political activities, public trust in institutions and how to evaluate media literacy programs.

"RAND has always been an institution where facts matter," Rich said. "This new stream of research sheds additional light on the drivers and implications of Truth Decay and is part of our continuing efforts to use analysis to improve civil discourse and public policymaking."

Provided by RAND Corporation

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