Does a change in media ownership have an impact on health reporting?


The news organisation, Northern and Shell, purchased the Daily Express Newspaper in November 2000, from United Newspapers for €125 million – following a rapid change in sales. Both owners of these organisations (Richard Desmond of Northern and Shell and Baron Stevens of Ludgate of United Newspapers), described as careless (Greenslade, 2000), had differing political interests and so it seems important to address whether such a change in ownership could have an impact on the content of news produced. The Daily Express has become a supporter of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), acting as a financial backer, and closely follows the party line – this leads to question whether such political involvement can have an impact on the content of news produced. The choice of focus on health reporting follows on from the BBC article published in 2000 stating that the tabloid media (including the Daily Express) unfairly stigmatises mental illness. This research project aims to determine whether a change in ownership directly affects the health news that is produced. This will be achieved by analysing the theory of framing, the coding of health reporting and the influence of media ownership.

Methodology

The qualitative method, consisting of organised discussion (Kitzinger 1994), enables the research to generate alternative explanations. To assess whether they noticed a change in editorial judgement and direction, who were part of the transition between United Newspapers and Northern and Shell will be interviewed. This study requires such analysis of language in order to see if there is a difference in the type of health news produced e.g. the study found newspapers ignored research from developing countries.

Focus Groups:

Focus groups were set up in order to gain a better understanding of the interviewees. Participants were asked a series of questions about their own media consumption and what type of health news they would like to see in the future. The participants were then asked to evaluate the media coverage of a particular health issue, in this case mental illness. This method was chosen because it enables quantities to be drawn from qualitative interviews. Every daily copy of the Daily Express newspapers, from May 1999 to May 2001, needs to be examined - the unit of analysis was each health news article. Each news article in the sample will be coded in terms of general topics such as the NHS, diseases, risk factors etc. Once coded, you can compare what is more prominent or more common.

Ethical Considerations

Due to the use of focus groups in this research project, ethical consideration must be taken due to the interaction with people. One possible issue that may arise could be due to whistleblowing - staff being interviewed may be less inclined to disclose information or be honest in fear of causing problems at work. This could lead to inaccurate answers, however, if it is a group discussion, hearing other people speak could encourage individuals to also engage. The best way to prevent this issue from limiting the validity of the research would maybe be to build up an honest relationship between participant and researcher to ensure openness.

Weaknesses

There hasn’t been an extensive deal of research on the change of ownership of British tabloid newspapers and so this research has an original angle to go from - in particular on the way that health reporting is covered.

Focus Groups:

This project has a strong case study which forms the basis of the research - it provides a unique opportunity to compare two time periods of the same text in order to see whether there is a direct relationship between change in ownership and health news produced. The independent variable (the Daily Express newspaper) is the constant whereas the owner of the paper changed from United Newspapers to Northern and Shell.

There is a clear set time frame to conduct the research over which allows for the research to be conducted specifically.

Strengths

The Daily Express newspaper is daily and is even for a year sample, that still means that there will be hundreds of newspaper prints to go through and analysis - extremely time consuming.

Obtaining a year’s worth of newspaper copies could prove to be a challenge. The whole basis of the research relies on the data and so it would be a major issue if the access is not available. This research project namely focuses on health reporting and so the results found will not be able to be applied generally as a theory of media ownership affecting all news.

Another issue is the with content analysis, there could be many other variables which could impact the type of health news produced, besides media ownership such as government changes, health outbreaks etc.

References:


Can nothing derail the Express train? Marketing Week, 26 (26), 14.


