Media Bias through Facial Expressions on Local Las Vegas Television News

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INTRODUCTION

The mission of many news broadcasters is to report information to an audience in a way that can be easily understood by the viewer. However, when a news anchor communicates a story on the local news, it is possible for his own opinions to be portrayed through nonverbal communication to the audience. A reporter has a journalistic obligation to provide fair and unbiased reports at all times, but when and if his own predispositions escape through facial and body expressions to the audience, that information then becomes tainted with bias. Using a visual analysis method, this study examines the facial characteristics of local television news anchors and reporters in Las Vegas and how they contribute to credibility based on nonverbal communication. The purpose of this study is to find out if local Las Vegas news broadcasters portray bias through nonverbal facial characteristics while reporting the news.

BACKGROUND

Television has often been seen as an entertainment function and over the years has become an intricate part of American life. Postman (1985) described television as the most widely used form of entertainment. He said no matter what is depicted from television news anchors or reporters that television news serves as entertainment and pleasure for the audience member (Postman, 1985). Despite the rapid growth of online news, television continues to be the public’s first daily news source (PRC, 2012). Television has often been seen as an entertainment function and over the years has become an intricate part of American life. Postman (1985) described television as the most widely used form of entertainment. He said no matter what is depicted from television news anchors or reporters that television news serves as entertainment and pleasure for the audience member (Postman, 1985). Despite the rapid growth of online news, television continues to be the public’s first daily news source (PRC, 2012). Television news viewers spent 52 minutes watching television news, while those who received online or mobile news only spent 30 minutes receiving news from those sources (PRC, 2012).

Studies have shown there exists a relationship between community and local news (Hoffman, 2010). Traditionally, people find connections to their community through such activities as religious affiliations or clubs (Mullen, 2007), so how does a town with a transient nature establish community connections? Mullen (2007) argues that Las Vegas media were the entities that created enough of a relationship between the people moving in and out of town and the place where they worked and lived. He argues that the local media were the ones to establish a sense of community in Las Vegas (Mullen, 2007). An alarming number of Americans no longer trust media to report the news objectively (Jones, 2004). This is a problem in a democratic country that relies so much on this medium to provide information to its citizens (Jones, 2004). It is important to study media bias because of the societal and ethical implications that media may have on the public (Babad & Peer, 2009).

METHOD

The method for this study is visual content analysis using Paul Ekman’s six basic facial emotions and a research method used by Porter et al. (2012). The researchers studied emotional leakage in facial expressions to determine emotional intensity from particular expressions. Emotional leakage occurs when facial expressions involuntarily reveal what the person is actually thinking or feeling (Porter et al., 2012). The researchers believed that the more intense a feeling, the more “leakage” would occur involuntarily on the face and that less powerful emotions would be concealed very easily (Porter et al., 2012). The method for the current study follows the same principles that news broadcasters would have emotional facial leakage when speaking about subjects they feel strongly about, which then would be revealed to the audience members and then ultimately shown bias from the anchors.

First Phase of Analysis: Record the first story of each local station at the 6:00 P.M. for a constructed week during a one month period. The four local stations are, KSNV Channel 3 (NBC), KVVU FOX 5 (FOX), KLAS-TV Channel 8 (CBS), and KTNV Channel 13 (ABC).

Second Phase of Analysis: Take the recorded story of each station and then capture still photographs of every five seconds of the story. From there, only still photographs of the faces of anchors or reporters were snipped out of the pile of pictures to focus on, rather than pictures of the stories. Once all still photographs have been taken of each top story of each news station of each phase of analysis, each photograph will be visually analyzed by this researcher and compared to Ekman's six facial emotions utilizing the Pictures of Facial Affect (POFA).

Third Phase of Analysis: Analyze each facial expression for every five seconds of the stories for specific traits similar to the Porter et al. (2012) study where the goal was to find “genuine” (felt emotion is expressed), “simulated” (expressed emotion with no emotion felt), “masked” (felt emotion will be covered by opposing emotional expression), or “neutralized” (despite presence of a felt emotion, no emotion will be expressed on the face). Then each expression is visually compared to Ekman’s six basic facial expressions utilizing his specific traits for each expression and how they measure compared to the still photographs. Exaggerated expressions and head movements are seen as a greater sense of liveliness or positive nonverbal communication (Theobald et al., 2009). Weakened expressions and head movements that are seen as disinterest, sadness, or depressed affect signals a negative nonverbal communication (Theobald et al., 2009). For those broadcasters that do not provide “neutral” facial expressions but may convey positive or negative facial expressions would then be displaying nonverbal bias (Friedman et al., 1980).

HYPOTHESIS

It is hypothesized that this anchor or reporter will exhibit some form of bias through facial expressions. It is hypothesized that a strong emotional story will display leakage and therefore bias from anchors and reporters of each station. It is hypothesized that KVVU and KTNV will show more bias than KLAS-TV and KSNV because those stations are more liberal and more sensational.

REFERENCES


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