

Types of Media Outlets (Formats and Genre)

AUTHOR

Linarsds Udris

KEYWORDS

formal variable, print, broadcast, online, websites, TV

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

“Types of media outlets”, often referred to as “media type” or “medium type”, is a variable that is widely used for content analyses of news media. The variable indicates which media outlets share certain characteristics. Grouping media outlets to media types ultimately helps reveal patterns and implications beyond the individual case of a specific outlet.

FIELD OF APPLICATION/THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

The variable can be used for content analyses of print, broadcast or online media. It takes the form of a formal variable, with an underlying theoretical construct. As such, it provides important context information of the analyzed content. It is sometimes also labelled as “format” in research (cf. <https://www.hope.uzh.ch/doca/article/view/2638>; also Schwaiger & Vogler, 2023). Classifying media outlets into distinct types serves one important diagnostic goal of content analyses, i.e., explaining how structures related to media outlets affect the actual content. For example, Boukes et al. (2022) compared quality versus popular news media and public versus commercial broadcasting newscasts because they expect the “organizational structure, commercial pressure, and motivations” to differ among these types and affect which stories are given more prominence based on news factors. Löb et al. (2024) compared daily newspapers and online websites “as representatives for top-down news production and [...] political blogs as a representative for bottom-up news production”, because the former are expected to adhere more to professional standards and ethical principles,

resulting in fewer elements of incivility (outrage) in news content. In another large-scale manual content analysis of political news, Reinemann et al. (2017, p. 147) concluded that “medium type explains the extent to which more hard news or less hard news is published”: public service television and broadsheet papers offer more hard news than commercial television and tabloids. In the same analysis, the authors also follow a prognostic goal, which addresses implications for media use and reception. Outlets were selected based on their membership in certain types, as the authors assume that media types differ in their importance for different segments of society (e.g., reach, trust) (Hopmann et al., 2017). Finally, selecting outlets as representatives of media types helps answer the question how media “perform” based on normative criteria and which role they play in media systems (Magin et al., 2023; Freudenthaler & Wessler, 2023). Treating a media outlet not as an individual, “special” case but as a representative of a broader media type therefore helps reveal more general patterns. Hence, the variable is also useful in international comparative research, where types of media outlets can guide researchers’ sample selection of functional equivalents across countries (Hopmann et al., 2017).

While the variable “media type” can be considered a formal variable which does not require complex interpretation by human coders (or is not even part of the coding as such but only used later to aggregate media outlets), researchers should treat this variable very carefully. In particular, they should pay close attention to its underlying theoretical construct and justify the classification criteria. As becomes clear, not all studies working with media types fulfill these demands, let alone define the term “media types”, which limits their theoretical contribution.



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REFERENCES / COMBINATION WITH OTHER METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION:

While the name of a media outlet is usually provided by databases or easily identifiable by human coders, media type is not necessarily. Sometimes, common databases like the international database Lexis-Nexis or the Swiss database Swissdox Essentials categorize available outlets into types but their classification scheme does not necessarily match theoretical constructs researchers are interested in.

In any case, the variable “type of media outlet” makes an ex ante categorization of media content possible. A combination with automated content analyses or any other manually coded variables is possible.

INFORMATION ON EXAMPLE STUDY

Media types are groups of media outlets which share certain characteristics (Udris et al., 2020). However, there is no standard operationalization of media types in the literature, and it is unclear which of the many characteristics are the most

Table 1. Sample Operationalization

Medium	Operationalization	Studies
Cross-media	Öffentliches Radio (Public broadcaster: radio) Öffentliches Fernsehen (Public broadcaster: TV) SRG-SSR Online (öffentlich) (Public broadcaster: online) Privatfernsehen (Private TV) Abonnementszeitungen (Subscription newspapers) Abonnementszeitungen-Online (Subscription newspapers online) Sonntagszeitungen/Magazine (Sunday papers / magazines) Online Pure (Online pure player) Pendlerzeitungen (Commuter papers) Pendlerzeitungen-Online (Commuter papers online) Boulevardzeitungen (Tabloid papers) Boulevardzeitungen-Online (Tabloid papers online)	fög (2023)
Cross-media	Kauftageszeitungen (Paid-for daily papers) Gratistageszeitungen (Cost-free daily papers) Überregionale öffentlich-rechtliche Radiosender (Supra-regional radio programs by the public broadcaster) Überregionaler Privatradiosender (Supra-regional radio programs by private broadcasters) Regionale öffentlich-rechtliche Radiosender (Regional radio programs by the public broadcaster) Regionale Privatradiosender (Regional radio programs by private broadcasters) Überregionale öffentlich-rechtliche Fernsehsender (Supra-regional TV programs by the public broadcaster) Überregionale Privatfernsehsender (Supra-regional TV programs by private broadcasters) Branchenspezifische Online-Anbieter (Online news providers from the media industry) Branchenfremder Anbieter (Online news providers from outside the media industry)	Seethaler (2015)



Cross-media	Abonnement-Online (Subscription newspapers online) Boulevard/ Pender-Online (Tabloid papers / Commuter papers online) Sonntagszeitungen/ Magazine (Sunday papers / magazines) Öffentlicher Rundfunk (Public service broadcaster)	Eisenegger et al. (2020) Codebook: Oehmer et al. (2020)
Cross-media	Stock market traded Stock market traded with dominant shareholder Privately held Civil Society Public (Both “legacy” outlets (TV, radio, print) and “digital-only” outlets were selected.)	Benson et al. (2018)
Cross-media	Mainstream news outlets: Broadsheet daily national newspapers (online editions) Tabloid newspaper (online edition) News magazines (online editions) Regional newspapers (both print and online) Web provider National TV newscasts Most-watched TV special (during the pandemic) Alternative news outlets: (two outlets selected based on reach data)	Reinemann et al. (2024)
Cross-media	Newspapers: Upmarket (left of center) Upmarket (right of center) Mass-market Television, news bulletin: Public Commercial Websites: Upmarket	Hopmann et al. (2017)
TV & Print	Values “Media types”: Commercial TV news Public service TV news Tabloid newspaper Quality newspaper “Media channels”: TV news Newspapers	Strömbäck & van Aelst (2010)
Print	National Regional Weekly (Tabloids were explicitly excluded.)	Umbricht & Esser (2016)
TikTok (news organizations)	Digital Native Press TV channel TV programme Radio & Television	Vázquez-Herrero et al. (2022)

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important ones to make for a media type. Classification criteria can refer to a socio-geographical space (e.g., regional or national newspapers: Umbricht & Esser, 2016), publication schedule (e.g., dailies or weeklies: Umbricht & Esser, 2016), a channel, medium or platform (e.g., TV or radio news: Strömbäck & van Aelst, 2010), media outlets on TikTok: Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2023), sometimes connected with the legacy or history of an outlet (e.g., “digital native”: Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2023, or “digital-only”: Benson et al., 2018), a business model (e.g., cost-free newspaper or subscription newspaper: fög, 2023; “mass market” websites or “upmarket” websites: Hopmann, 2017), ownership and regulation structures (e.g., public or private TV news: Strömbäck & van Aelst, 2010; outlets owned by a company traded on the stock market or by a privately held company: Benson et al., 2018), the relation to political actors and/or political leaning (e.g., newspapers “left of center” or “right of center”: Hopmann et al., 2017; “mainstream” or “alternative media”: Reinemann et al., 2024). Often, researchers use a combination of classification criteria (e.g., regional private TV news: fög, 2023 or Seethaler, 2015). Sometimes, researchers even compare different criteria and use them as factors to test which of those have an impact on the content – for instance whether differences within the group of newspapers are larger than between newspapers and TV news (Strömbäck & van Aelst, 2010).

Codebook example: Oehmer et al. (2020)

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