

Section «Journalism»

The research on the impact of CNN and Fox News channel on the U.S. public opinion

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Introduction to the issue

In the scientific circles of the United States the impact of television on the audience is examined since the late 50's - early 60's.[1, p. 2] The very first presidential television debates had marked it's ability to change the preferences of voters significantly after Vice President Richard Nixon lost to a little-known Democratic senator from Massachusetts John Kennedy in 1960.

In the early 1980's the issue began to shift from the topics of direct influence of television on the minds of citizens to the question of agenda setting. The research identifies the political bias of CNN and Fox News channel, as well as the impact it gives on the public opinion in the United States.

Ideological bias of the U.S. broadcasters

The term "CNN effect" appeared in the late 1980s. It was linked to the concept of news broadcasting 24 hours a day and implies the significant role CNN played in the shaping of the U.S. public opinion towards the Persian Gulf war. Critics say that during the Gulf war CNN avoided delivering of shocking pictures and made itself an advocate for the current U.S. foreign policy.[5, p. 4-5] The conservative Media Research Center had been publishing an amount of facts of the channel's biases since Rick Kaplan, who had a long-time friendship with Clintons, became the president of CNN. In 1996, during the Bill Clinton's fundraising scandal, Rick Kaplan instructed CNN staff to "limit their use of the word 'scandal' in reporting on Clinton's campaign fundraising woes".[3] In 1998, after the Monica Lewinsky story came out, he also accused some CNN journalists of interference to the privacy of the President.[2]

Fox News was launched by Rupert Murdoch in October 1996 and soon became the main competitor to CNN. The term "Fox effect" implies the estimated impact of Fox News channel on the U.S. domestic policy in general and the growing popularity of the Republican Party in the late 1990's - early 2000's in particular. During the presidency of George W. Bush Fox News faced plenty of accusations from the liberal public [6], since Murdoch had openly expressed his sympathy for the Republican Party, and Roger Ailes, the president of the broadcaster, worked earlier as a media consultant for the conservatives and was credited with guiding George Bush to victory in the presidential election in 1988.

The authors of the report "The Invisible Primary - Invisible No Longer" made an analysis of the nature and tone of U.S. media reports about the two leading political parties during the election campaign of 2008 [8, p. 10, 27, 31-32] (see Table 1).

As you can see, during the period of the election Fox News offered more positive reports about the GOP than negative and in contrast it offered more negative reports about the Dems

than positive. As for CNN, quite the opposite. The data also tells us about the general much more favorable tone of the cable TV-networks towards the Dem. Party.

Degree of ideological influence on the public mind

The ideological bias of the channels does not necessarily implies the existence of a certain ideological pressure on the public consciousness. On March 30, 2006 the professors from Berkeley and Stockholm Universities published their joint study on the impact of the Fox News channel's biased position on the viewers of the channel. Proved by means of mathematical modeling 50-page report "The Fox News Effect: Media Bias and Voting"[7] asserts that there was an increase in the number of Republican Party voters at the rate of 3 – 8% in those cities where people gained the access to Fox News by the year of 2000. But was the media field unbiased before Fox News came to the market? The answer is NO [4] (see Table 2). Until 1996 the conservative audience was bypassed by the U.S. television, although about the half of the U.S. citizens usually vote for the Republican Party. We should make the necessary conclusion that the forthcoming of Fox News was inevitable. The channel came as an absolute monopolist on the market of Republican philosophy on the TV, while there is a tough competition for a liberal audience.

The hypothesis is that the real impact of CNN and Fox News channel on the public mind is quite limited because the audience makes a conscious choice between conservative and liberal channels. This is indicated by the results of the next poll [4] (see Table 3).

The poll shows that a permanent Fox News and CNN viewer admits the existence of their certain ideological position. The bias is not argued by one and is not considered as a problem. This fact must significantly reduce the potential impact of the ideology on the audience. The audience is ideologized initially.

Conclusions

1) The U.S. news broadcasters CNN and Fox News are both biased but toward the different political authorities. The general tone of the US television broadcasting is negative toward the Republican Party.

2) The Fox News channel has no alternative of being the most viewed U.S. news-channel since it has a monopoly on the market of the conservative political philosophy on the TV.

3) The ideological impact of the channels on public opinion is quite limited. The audience is ideologized initially.

References

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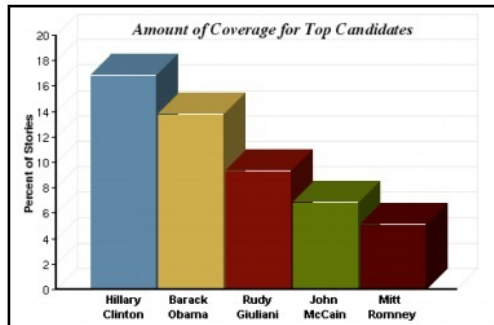
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Illustrations

Table 1

Tone of Cable Coverage by Channel Percent of All Stories						
	Democrats			Republicans		
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Positive	Neutral	Negative
CNN	27.7%	49.1	23.2	13.5%	45.9	40.5
FOX	24.2%	38.9	36.8	32.0%	46.7	21.3
MSNBC	47.2%	34.1	18.7	37.8%	32.7	29.6

Tone of Newspaper Coverage by Party Percent of All Stories			
	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Democrats	58.8	30.0	11.3
Republicans	26.4	34.0	39.6



The data: The Invisible Primary – Invisible No Longer: A First Look at Coverage of the 2008 Presidential Campaign // Harvard Kennedy School: http://shorensteincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/invisible_primary_invisible_no_longer.pdf

Table 2

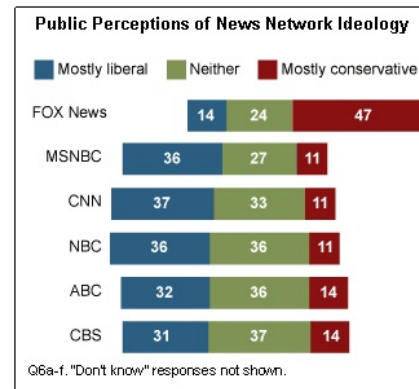


Table 3

	Viewers Assess News Networks' Ideology			
	Regular Fox news viewers	Regular CNN viewers	Regular MSNBC viewers	Regular Nightly network viewers
Fox News is...	%	%	%	%
Mostly liberal	17	16	19	17
Mostly conservative	48	50	48	45
Neither in particular	27	23	22	24
CNN is...				
Mostly liberal	49	41	31	34
Mostly conservative	11	11	14	12
Neither in particular	26	41	43	34

The data: Pew Research Center: <http://www.people-press.org/2009/10/29/fox-news-viewed-as-most-ideological-network/>

Рис. 1: Data Tables