Comments on "International News Coverage and Foreign Image Building"

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Summary

It is well-known that the media shapes the way people perceive reality, but it is challenging to identify the exact channels through which it does this. How does the agenda pushed forward in mass media influence our perception of importance? Can the tone of a media message affect public attitude to the issue? Does the context of the message matter for how effective media is in shaping public opinions? In his paper, Gento Kato binds together machine-coding of texts and time-series analysis to answer these questions.

His study of Japanese printed media in 1987 - 2015 uses monthly public polls data to measure public opinions, and the words from first-page headlines as data points, to quantify media coverage through the tone and the context in which a country is mentioned. Using machine learning tools on the words, he separately identifies the effects of framing, agenda setting, and persuasion on public opinion. The study also finds that the magnitude and duration of the effect depending on the framing of the issue. Thus, each of these channels play distinct roles, and together affect our opinions of the world.

Major/Minor points

First, external validity requires comparing newspapers to other sources of media (TV, social networks, radio, etc) in terms of coverages, demographics of consumers and trends over time. If the demographics of the poll respondents is known as well, a difference-in-difference analysis could be done: if older people are more influenced by newspapers than younger people, than newspapers' content should impact older people's opinion by more.

Second, the chosen newspapers represent the left and the medium wings of the political spectrum, which results in bias in their coverage and the selection bias of people who read them. Right-wing newspapers are more nationalists and thus should be included in the analysis to avoid bias in estimates.

Third, to control for direct interactions with foreigners trade flows are used. Gravity models of trade suggest that trade flows are determined by geographic proximity of countries, and geographic proximity does not always imply direct interactions with foreigners. FDI and migration flows seems to capture the direct interactions with foreigners better, and thus can prevent the omitted variable bias. This data is available from UNCTAD and UNDESA websites.

And finally, in the content analysis the author uses only the headlines of the first pages to perform the content analysis. However, headlines and the body of the text could create different foreign perceptions. Thus, focusing only on the headlines can result in the measurement error and thus bias the results. The difference between headlines and texts can help identify the effect of fake news, which is potential interesting by itself.