

# Product Differentiation in National TV Newscasts: A Comparison of the Cable All-News Networks and the Broadcast Networks

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*This study explores content differences in the evening newscasts of the cable all-news networks and compares the evening newscasts of the cable and broadcast networks. A content analysis found strong evidence of product differentiation in the major evening newscasts between the cable and broadcast networks as well as among the cable all-news networks. Each network contributed significantly to adding unique news to the daily television news pool and the topics of the unique stories were diverse.*

The three traditional broadcast newscasts on ABC, CBS, and NBC are continually losing their customers. According to Nielsen Media Research, during the 1995-96 broadcast year, the combined rating/share of the three broadcast evening newscasts dropped to 23.3/49. They lost three percent of viewership or about 650,000 homes compared to the 1994-95 year (McClellan, 1997b). Sixteen years ago, the three newscasts were watched in 41.2% of all American TV homes (Zoglin, 1996).

By contrast, CNN and CNN HN have steadily increased their share of total U.S. television news-viewing minutes every year in relation to the three broadcast networks (Baldwin, Barrett, & Bates, 1992). People named CNN their favorite network for news. Although CNN's average rating is not high, many news-viewers tune to CNN at times of crisis (Fouhy, 1996). For example, the half-hour from 12:00 to 12:30 a.m., August 31, 1997, CNN's coverage on Princess Diana's death, generated a 6.5 rating or 4.6 million households (Forkan, 1997).

The year 1996 witnessed the entry of two new national all-news networks into the market which has long been monopolized by the incumbent, CNN. A joint venture of NBC and Microsoft launched Microsoft/NBC (MSNBC) on July 15 with 22.5 million cable subscriber homes (Mifflin, 1996). Then on October 7 an international media mogul, Rupert Murdoch who attempted to buy CNN in the mid-1980s, started Fox News Channel (FNC) with 17 million cable homes (Zoglin, 1996). The sudden

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proliferation of cable news programming might have affected not only the incumbent, CNN, but also the major broadcast newscasts and, of course, television viewers.

The objective of this study was to compare the evening newscasts of the cable all-news networks and the major broadcast networks, as well as to make comparisons between the 24-hour cable news channels. While broadcast networks target a mass audience, most cable networks play to a relatively small audience. The evening newscasts are compared on the basis of their news story topics, news delivery formats, international news coverage, and their *unique*, that is, unduplicated news stories.

Previous research on national and local news has focused heavily on *duplication* or *consonance* of news values and news treatment due to common values in the newsroom or the structural nature of the broadcast industry (oligopoly). Very little research has analyzed news judgement on the basis of the *unique* or non-duplicated stories of competing networks (Atwater, 1984). Also, studies on the comparison of news programs offered by different electronic news media (e.g., broadcast vs. cable news networks) are rare (e.g., Media Institute, 1983; Stempel, 1988) and no study has yet made a quantitative analysis of the cable all-news market.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has encouraged multichannel television to increase diversity in television programming. It is assumed that competition creates diversity in the marketplace of ideas, facilitating broad discussion of important issues (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991). In this regard, news and public affair programs significantly contribute to the realization of the FCC's goal—to obtain diversity by providing vital information and interpretation for the viewing public (Atwater, 1983).

In seeking to identify program differentiation in the cable and broadcast news programs, this study explores systematically what and how each additional network contributes to greater *diversity* and *uniqueness* in overall news programming in the daily information pool.

## Product Differentiation

Price leadership and product differentiation are two strategies that firms can employ when confronted with competition (Porter, 1980). In the multichannel industry, since price competition for audience is rare, media firms need to differentiate their products from their competitors. Product differentiation occurs "when, owing to differences in physical attributes, ancillary service, geographic location, information, and/or subjective image, one firm's products are clearly preferred by at least some buyers over rival products at a given price" (Scherer & Ross, 1990, p. 17). For firms seeking to make their demand curve less elastic, successful differentiation provides an insulated position against competitors by enabling firms to sell a larger quantity at a given price or by allowing the firm to create brand loyalty in customers

resulting in lower sensitivity to price. This uniqueness may build an entry barrier for competitors to overcome (Greer, 1992; Porter, 1980).

However, being unique may require a trade-off with investment if achieving differentiation requires costly effort such as extensive research, product design, high quality materials, or intensive customer support. Thus, the firms employing the differentiation strategy cannot ignore costs and risk (Porter, 1980).

Horizontal product differentiation focuses on differences in attribute variety among competing brands. It occurs "when one brand contains more of some attributes but less of some other attributes in comparison to another brand" (p. 117). Consumers' different tastes will exploit differing strong and weak points among brands given identical prices (Greer, 1992).

Since newscasts have several different elements such as story topics, international news coverage, and uniqueness in news items, there is an opportunity to look at product differentiation in several dimensions when examining content diversity in newscasts.

## **Competition and Diversity in News Content**

### **Comparison between the Cable Networks**

Primetime evening newscasts have traditionally been considered important in terms of audience ratings and their impact on the images of networks. The two new networks (FNC and MSNBC) intended to make their evening newscasts distinct from the incumbent, CNN. According to Roger Ailes, president of Fox News, FNC will report some things not covered by the other news networks ("Fox's news," 1997). George Case, vice president for newsgathering of Fox News said that it would not produce a broadcast news show like the others ("TV takes," 1997). With regard to the political tone of news reporting, the industry speculated that FNC's reports would have a conservative slant on the news because of the political personalities of Rupert Murdoch and Roger Ailes.

MSNBC's promotion revealed its strategy of linking the television news programming with the web site. By emphasizing the connection with the audience through both TV and the Internet, MSNBC promoted itself as a future- and technology-oriented news network. Further, it attempted to differentiate from CNN both in news coverage and in target audience: "CNN may have invented cable news, now watch the network that's reinventing it"; "It's not the same old news"; and "It's not your father's newscast"—playing on the Oldsmobile advertising campaign—all to indicate a fresh approach. Therefore, the following research questions are posed:

RQ<sub>1</sub>: Is there any difference in news story topics in the cable evening newscasts?

RQ<sub>2</sub>: Is there any difference in the proportion of international news in comparison to national news in the cable newscasts?

RQ<sub>3</sub>: Is there more unique (unduplicated) news than duplicated news in the cable newscasts?

## Comparison between the Broadcast and Cable Newscasts

The Media Institute's comparative study (1983) of the broadcast networks' and CNN's newscasts discovered that CNN's business and economic news stories were more balanced and less sensational than those of the broadcast networks. However, CNN's reporting was of less depth compared to network reporting, despite the two-hour length of *Primenews*. There was no significant difference in the news priority of CNN and the networks.

Stempel (1988) compared *CNN Prime News* (at 8 p.m. EST) and *The MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour* (at 7 p.m. on PBS) with the early evening newscasts (at 6:30 p.m.) on ABC, CBS, and NBC. Using 14 topic categories, he found some differences along with moderate correlation between CNN and the three broadcast networks in terms of news topics covered. In the selection of individual news stories, CNN heavily emphasized *popular amusements*, was less dependent on news from New York and Washington, D.C. and reported a somewhat greater number of *international* stories. Therefore, he concluded that broadcast newscasts, CNN, and PBS did not offer the same news. Expanding to the three cable news networks, we hypothesize that:

H<sub>1</sub>: There will be differences in the coverage of news story topics between the cable and broadcast network newscasts.

H<sub>2</sub>: There will be a difference in the proportion of international news compared to national news between the cable and broadcast newscasts.

Besides news story topics and international news coverage, the two major electronic news carriers may be different in the mix of unique and duplicated stories. It has been suggested that time limitation in broadcast newscasts will be a potential force leading to topic duplication (Fowler & Showalter, 1974). Cable evening newscasts have more time for differentiation compared to broadcasts newscasts (60 minutes v. 30 minutes). Therefore, the last research question is as follows:

RQ<sub>4</sub>: Do the cable networks' newscasts offer more unique (unduplicated) news than the broadcast newscasts?

## Method

This study applied a content analysis of TV newscasts, an appropriate method for the broad goal of describing and comparing the evening newscasts of cable and traditional broadcast networks.

Three evening newscasts of the cable national all-news networks were selected: CNN's *The World Today* (10:00 - 11:00 p.m., EST), FNC's *Fox News Report*<sup>1</sup> (7:00 - 8:00 p.m.), and MSNBC's *The News with Brian Williams* (9:00 - 10:00 p.m.). Cable

national all-news networks are defined as the cable networks that offer various formats of general news programs including newscasts, news analysis, and news talk/interviews, nationally, 24 hours a day. FNC and MSNBC offered only one newscast in the evening hours. Among CNN's evening newscasts, *The World Today* was selected to match the length of FNC and MSNBC's hourly newscasts. To compare the cable newscasts with the broadcast newscasts, the three traditional broadcast evening newscasts that aired between 6:30 p.m. and 7:00 p.m. (EST) were selected: *ABC World News Tonight*, *CBS Evening News*, and *NBC Nightly News*.

This study employed a constructed week sampling method. During March 23 to May 31 of 1997 (10 weeks), a weekday was randomly selected from each week to form two constructed weeks with no weekends.<sup>2</sup> This study did not consider the weekend editions of the newscasts to insure cross-network comparability since MSNBC and FNC did not offer newscasts on weekends.

Although the cable newscasts and broadcast newscasts were aired at different times, they all are in the same time framework, i.e., they were aired in the evening after normal business hours. Matching broadcast early evening newscasts with cable nightly newscasts seemed to be reasonable, because these are the principal general news efforts of the cable news networks and as such are comparable to the broadcast network news. The cable networks appear to schedule their news later in the evening to avoid direct competition with the broadcast newscasts.

The unit of analysis for the comparison of the newscasts was the news story. The number of news stories was counted. A *news story* is conceptually defined as "any topic introduced by the anchor coupled with any report or reports by other correspondents on the same topic and any concluding remarks by the anchor" (Fowler & Showalter, 1974, p. 713).<sup>3</sup> Operationally, a news story is defined as "a piece reported from one location, or which had the same person or group of persons reporting (or being interviewed), or which had one primary topic" (Wicks & Walker, 1993, p. 103). Thus, if the location changed, if a different reporter or source was interviewed, or if the subject was changed distinctly, this was coded as a new story. For example, if an anchor summarized a day's stock market, and interviewed a person for the analysis of the stock market, it was coded as two separate stories.

Only active reporting of a story was included in the analysis. An anchor's or a reporter's personal comments such as "good evening," "thank you," and "good night," the introduction of the following programs, and bumper shots and visuals of upcoming stories were not treated as part of a story. Teases and banter between anchors were also excluded.

All sampled editions of the six newscasts aired during the two composite weeks with no weekends (a total of 60 newscasts) were videotaped, and the transcripts of the news programs were obtained from several sources. Vanderbilt News Archive (<http://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu/>) provides the summary transcripts of the broadcast newscasts through the Internet. The full transcript of MSNBC's *The News with Brian Williams* was available on the MSNBC web site (<http://www.msnbc.com/onair/msnbc/>

bwilliams/archives/). Additionally, ATI computer software was used to get the full transcripts of CNN's newscast, because CNN provided only the transcript of several news stories on its web site (<http://cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/>). The *Fox News Report* transcripts were not available.

All news stories were content analyzed according to story topics, international news coverage, and uniqueness. First, news stories were classified into 13 topic categories<sup>4</sup> based on the earlier systems used in Deutschmann's (1959), Atwater's (1983), and Stempel's studies (1985, 1988).

News stories, then, were divided into (1) international news and (2) national news. An *international* news story is defined as a news story targeting events which occurred out of the U.S. territory or items which primarily dealt with foreigners, foreign countries, and international relations. *National* news refers to a story primarily focusing on domestic events or people, and which occurred within the U.S. territory. A news story was also coded according to its uniqueness: (1) unique and (2) duplicated. A *unique* news story refers to a news story by only one network among the networks compared on a given news day.

The reliability of the coding scheme was checked by applying Cohen's *kappa*. Since the subsamples for the reliability test were randomly selected among the study samples, standard errors of Cohen's coefficient were also obtained. Two hundred and thirty-nine news stories (20% of total stories sampled) were randomly selected and reviewed by two coders including this researcher. Because uniqueness was to be compared among the news stories aired on the same day, two days (six newscasts, 240 stories) were randomly selected to test the reliability for uniqueness. All reliability coefficients were within the acceptable range.<sup>5</sup> Cohen's *kappa* (and standard error for the coefficient) was .90 for news story topic; .94 for international news stories; and .97 for unique news stories.

A goodness of fit test was applied to test the research hypotheses. *Vertical diversity* (VD) of news topics, showing diversity in using available news topics by the networks, was measured by applying the reverse of Herfindahl index,<sup>6</sup> and Cramer's *V* was used to find the degree of association between networks and the variables to be compared.<sup>7</sup>

## Results

To examine program differentiation in evening newscasts, 827 cable news stories and 367 broadcast news stories were analyzed. Major news events that occurred during the sampling period included the mass suicide of the Heaven's Gate members in California, the campaign funding issue, the army sex scandal, and the Kelly Flynn adultery case. In the number of stories per half-hour, FNC offered the most, 17 stories; ABC, CBS, and MSNBC, 13 stories; CNN, 12 stories; and NBC did the least, 11 stories.<sup>8</sup>

## News Story Topics

The first three columns of Table 1 report the percentage of the total of news stories by each cable network on each of the 13 story topics. Generally, the largest representation of news stories fell within two categories: crime/court and government/politics. *Vertical diversity* (*VD*) indicated that the cable newscasts, overall, utilized about eight story topics ( $VD = 7.81$ ) among 14 categories. MSNBC was the highest in topic diversity ( $VD = 7.82$ ), followed by FNC ( $VD = 7.59$ ) and CNN ( $VD = 7.30$ ).

CNN covered proportionally more health/welfare and science/technology/computer stories than FNC and MSNBC. FNC presented more diplomacy/foreign relations and social conflict stories and less health/welfare stories than CNN and MSNBC. MSNBC provided more business/economics stories than CNN and FNC. A goodness of fit test showed that the differences in the coverage of topics among the networks were significant ( $\chi^2[24, N = 827] = 48.03, p < .01$ ). The association between networks and story topics was weak at Cramer's *V* of .12, however.

Referring to the totals in columns four and eight of Table 1, we see that the cable newscasts, overall, gave top priority to crime/court and government/politics news,

**Table 1**  
**Percentage of Total News Stories Devoted to Topic Categories by Network**

	CNN	FNC	MSNBC	Cable Total	ABC	CBS	NBC	Broad't Total
Business/Economics	7.3%	6.8%	11.3%	8.3%	9.2%	9.9%	11.4%	10.1%
Government/Politics	16.2%	15.8%	19.5%	17.0%	16.8%	9.9%	13.3%	13.4%
Diplomacy/Foreign Relations	4.3%	11.0%	6.6%	7.7%	7.6%	6.1%	5.7%	6.5%
War/Defense	0.4%	0.9%	0.4%	0.6%	3.8%	2.3%	1.9%	2.7%
Crime/Court	26.5%	25.0%	21.4%	24.3%	19.8%	29.8%	20.0%	23.4%
Social Conflict	0.9%	5.4%	1.9%	3.0%	1.5%	0.8%	1.0%	1.1%
Accident/Disaster	10.3%	10.4%	7.4%	9.4%	9.2%	11.5%	10.5%	10.4%
Health/Welfare	7.7%	2.4%	5.1%	4.7%	6.9%	6.9%	10.5%	7.9%
Science/Tech/ Computer	6.0%	1.5%	2.3%	3.0%	3.8%	5.3%	3.8%	4.4%
Education	2.1%	2.4%	2.3%	2.3%	3.1%	2.3%	6.7%	3.8%
Religion/Ceremony	3.8%	3.6%	4.3%	3.9%	6.9%	4.6%	4.8%	5.4%
Arts/Entertainment/ Sports	5.6%	6.5%	7.8%	6.7%	7.6%	5.3%	2.9%	5.4%
Human Interest/ Feature	9.0%	8.3%	9.7%	8.9%	3.8%	5.3%	7.6%	5.4%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
(n)	(234)	(336)	(257)	(827)	(131)	(131)	(105)	(367)

$\chi^2(24, N = 401) = 82.44, p < .001$  (among the cable networks); Cramer's *V* = .23.

$\chi^2(12, N = 1194) = 30.82, p < .01$  (between cable and broadcast); Cramer's *V* = .16.

$\chi^2(60, N = 1194) = 98.18, p < .01$  (among all six networks); Cramer's *V* = .06.

and the broadcast newscasts to crime/court, government/politics, accident/disaster, and business/economics stories.

*Vertical diversity (VD)* indicated that the topics of the broadcast newscasts were spread over more topics ( $VD = 8.54$ ) compared to the cable newscasts ( $VD = 7.81$ ). ABC had the highest  $VD$  of 9.02, followed by NBC (8.99), MSNBC (7.86), FNC (7.62), CNN (7.32), and CBS (7.06).

Overall, while the cable newscasts covered proportionally more government/politics and human interest/feature news, the broadcast newscasts reported more health/welfare stories than did the cable newscasts. A goodness of fit test showed that the differences between the cable and broadcast newscasts were significant ( $\chi^2[12, N = 1194] = 30.82, p < .01$ ). A Cramer's  $V$  indicated a weak positive association between the variables at .16. Therefore, hypothesis 1, that there will be differences in story topics between the cable and broadcast networks, was supported.

Significant differences in topics were also found among individual networks ( $\chi^2[60, N = 1194] = 98.18, p < .01$ ), but the association between networks and topics was very weak (Cramer's  $V = .06$ ). Compared to other networks, CNN covered proportionally more science/technology/computer stories. While FNC reported more diplomacy/foreign relations and social conflict stories, MSNBC featured more government/politics stories. ABC offered more religion/ceremony and war/defense news, and CBS presented more crime/court stories. Finally, NBC covered more health/welfare and education stories.

## Unique News Coverage

Table 2 compares a ratio of unique news stories to the total news stories of each cable newscast. Again, the unique stories are those which were not duplicated by the other two cable networks. Of the 827 cable news stories, 401 stories (48.5%) were coded as unique. The combined contribution of the two *new* networks (FNC and MSNBC) to cable's unique news pool accounted for 73.8 percent (296 stories out of 401 stories) of cable's total unique stories.

There were no significant differences in the number of unique news stories offered by the three networks ( $\chi^2[2, N = 827] = 5.21, n.s.$ ). This means that all three of the cable networks were similar in reporting unique news.

Table 3 cross-tabulates unique stories of the cable newscasts by story topics. The unique news stories of the three cable newscasts appeared to be most frequently associated with three categories across all networks: government/politics, crime/court, and human interest/feature news. Overall, the cable networks utilized eight or more topic categories in reporting unique stories ( $VD = 8.20$ ).

Compared to other networks' unique stories, CNN's unique stories covered proportionally more human interest/feature, health/welfare, and science/technology/computer news. MSNBC's unique stories dealt with more government/politics,



**Table 2**  
**Percentage of Unique News Stories by Cable Network**

	CNN	FNC	MSNBC	Total
Unique	44.9% (105)	53.3% (179)	45.5% (117)	48.5% (401)
Duplicated	55.1% (129)	46.7% (157)	54.5% (140)	51.5% (426)
Total (n)	100.0% (234)	100.0% (336)	100.0% (257)	100.0% (827)

$\chi^2(2, N = 827) = 5.21$ , n.s. (among the cable networks).

business/economics, and arts/entertainment/feature news. FNC's unique stories covered more crime/court, diplomacy/foreign relations, accident/disaster, and social conflict news.

FNC's unique stories were spread over more categories ( $VD = 8.40$ ) compared to CNN ( $VD = 6.74$ ) and MSNBC ( $VD = 6.43$ ). Significant differences in the topics of unique stories were found among the networks ( $\chi^2[24, N = 401] = 82.44, p < .001$ ), and a Cramer's  $V$  of .23 indicated a weak positive association between networks and topics of unique stories.

**Table 3**  
**Percentage of Unique News Stories by News Topics by Cable Network**

	CNN	FNC	MSNBC	Total
Business/Economics	3.8%	5.6%	12.8%	7.2%
Government/Politics	22.9%	14.5%	28.2%	20.7%
Diplomacy/Foreign Relations	1.0%	10.6%	4.3%	6.2%
War/Defense	0.0%	0.6%	0.0%	0.2%
Crime/Court	17.1%	20.7%	8.5%	16.2%
Social Conflict	0.0%	7.8%	0.9%	3.7%
Accident/Disaster	4.8%	9.5%	3.4%	6.5%
Health/Welfare	15.2%	3.9%	10.3%	8.7%
Science/Technology/Computer	6.7%	0.0%	1.7%	2.2%
Education	3.8%	2.8%	0.9%	2.5%
Religion/Ceremony	1.0%	3.4%	1.7%	2.2%
Arts/Entertainment/Sports	6.7%	8.4%	12.0%	9.0%
Human Interest/Feature	17.1%	12.3%	15.4%	14.5%
Total (n)	100.0% (105)	100.0% (179)	100.0% (117)	100.0% (401)

$\chi^2(24, N = 401) = 82.44, p < .001$ ; Cramer's  $V = .23$ .

Vertical diversity (VD): CNN = 6.74; FNC = 8.40; and MSNBC = 6.43; and Cable overall = 8.20.

Table 4 compares a ratio of unique stories to the total news stories of each cable and broadcast network, but now the base is the total of all stories in both the cable and the broadcast evening newscasts. Of the total 1,194 cable and broadcast news stories examined in the study, 37 percent (441 stories) were found to be unique. The two new cable networks (FNC and MSNBC) together contributed 58.5 percent (258 stories out of 441 stories) of the total unique stories for both broadcast and cable.

In total, the three cable newscasts had more unique stories than the broadcast networks, which is logical since they were longer. There were significant differences in the percentage of unique stories between the cable and broadcast newscasts ( $\chi^2[1, N = 1194] = 33.52, p < .001$ ). A Cramer's  $V$  of .17 indicated a weak positive association between types of newscasts and the coverage of unique news.

FNC had the highest proportion of unique news stories. Among the broadcast networks, ABC had the highest proportion of its unique news stories, followed by CBS and NBC. A chi-square test showed that individual newscasts were significantly different in the percentage of unique stories ( $\chi^2[5, N = 1194] = 52.12, p < .001$ ). A Cramer's  $V$  indicated a weak positive association at .21.

**Table 4**  
**Percentage of Unique News Stories by Network**

	CNN	FNC	MSNBC		ABC	CBS	NBC	Broad't Total
			Total	Cable				
Unique	39.3% (92)	49.4% (166)	35.8% (92)	42.3% (350)	32.8% (43)	21.4% (28)	19.0% (20)	24.8% (91)
Duplicated	60.7% (142)	50.6% (170)	64.2% (165)	57.7% (477)	67.2% (88)	78.6% (103)	81.0% (85)	75.2% (276)
Total ( <i>n</i> )	100.0% (234)	100.0% (336)	100.0% (257)	100.0% (827)	100.0% (131)	100.0% (131)	100.0% (105)	100.0% (367)

$\chi^2(1, N = 1194) = 33.52, p < .001$  (between cable and broadcast); Cramer's  $V = .17$ .

$\chi^2(5, N = 1194) = 52.12, p < .001$  (among all six networks); Cramer's  $V = .21$ .

Table 5 compares the percentage of each news topic covered in unique stories by network. Cable's top four categories covered by unique stories were government/politics, crime/court, human interest/feature, and arts/entertainment/sports topics. Broadcast's top four categories were health/welfare, government/politics, arts/entertainment/sports, and business/economics topics. While cable's unique stories covered proportionally more crime/court, human interest/feature, and government/politics topics, broadcast's unique stories dealt with more health/welfare and education topics.

Broadcast's unique stories covered more diverse topics ( $VD = 9.20$ ) than cable's unique stories ( $VD = 8.12$ ). There were significant differences in the topics of unique stories between the cable and broadcast newscasts ( $\chi^2[12, N = 441] = 37.87, p <$

.001). A Cramer's  $V$  of .29 indicated a positive association between types of newscast and topics of unique stories.

Compared to other networks' unique stories, CNN's unique stories dealt with proportionally more science/technology/computer topics. FNC's unique stories covered more crime/court, social conflict, and accident/disaster news. MSNBC's unique stories reported more government/politics, business/economics, and arts/entertainment/sports topics. ABC's unique stories covered more arts/entertainment/sports and religion/ceremony topics, and CBS's unique stories featured more business/economics, crime/court, and war/defense news. Finally, NBC's unique stories reported more health/welfare, education, and human interest/feature news. Most of the topics preferred in all stories by each network were reemphasized in unique stories, too.

**Table 5**  
**Percentage of Unique News Stories by News Topics by Network**

	CNN	FNC	MSNBC	Cable Total	ABC	CBS	NBC	Broad't Total
Business/Economics	4.3%	6.0%	15.2%	8.0%	7.0%	17.9%	5.0%	9.9%
Government/Politics	21.7%	15.1%	25.0%	19.4%	20.9%	3.6%	10.0%	13.2%
Diplomacy/Foreign Relations	1.1%	9.6%	3.3%	5.7%	9.3%	7.1%	0.0%	6.6%
War/Defense	0.0%	0.6%	0.0%	0.3%	2.3%	3.6%	0.0%	2.2%
Crime/Court	16.3%	20.5%	9.8%	16.6%	4.7%	21.4%	5.0%	9.9%
Social Conflict	0.0%	8.4%	1.1%	4.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Accident/Disaster	5.4%	7.2%	2.2%	5.4%	2.3%	3.6%	0.0%	2.2%
Health/Welfare	13.0%	4.2%	5.4%	6.9%	16.3%	17.9%	25.0%	18.7%
Science/Tech/Computer	6.5%	0.0%	2.2%	2.3%	4.7%	3.6%	5.0%	4.4%
Education	3.3%	3.0%	0.0%	2.3%	7.0%	0.0%	25.0%	8.8%
Religion/Ceremony	1.1%	3.0%	2.2%	2.3%	9.3%	0.0%	0.0%	4.4%
Arts/Entertainment/ Sports	7.6%	9.0%	15.2%	10.3%	14.0%	10.7%	5.0%	11.0%
Human Interest/Feature	19.6%	13.3%	18.5%	16.3%	2.3%	10.7%	20.0%	8.8%
Total ( <i>n</i> )	100.0% (92)	100.0% (166)	100.0% (92)	100.0% (350)	100.0% (43)	100.0% (28)	100.0% (20)	100.0% (91)

$\chi^2(12, N = 441) = 37.87, p < .001$  (between cable and broadcast); Cramer's  $V = .29$ .

$\chi^2(60, N = 441) = 151.78, p < .001$  (among all six networks); Cramer's  $V = .12$ .

Vertical diversity (VD): CNN = 6.90; FNC = 8.39; MSNBC = 6.33; ABC = 8.14; CBS = 6.99; and NBC = 5.41; Cable overall = 8.12; and Broadcast overall = 9.20.

VD showed that FNC's unique stories were the most diverse in topic (8.39), followed by ABC (8.14), CBS (6.99), CNN (6.90), MSNBC (6.33), and NBC (5.41). Significant differences in the topics of unique stories were found among individual networks ( $\chi^2[60, N = 441] = 151.78, p < .001$ ), but the association between the variables was very weak (Cramer's  $V = .09$ ).

## International News

*Comparison between the Cable All-News Networks.* According to the first section of Table 6, the cable news networks, overall, devoted about 20 percent of total news stories to international news. FNC offered the highest percentage of international news compared to MSNBC and CNN. FNC devoted nearly one of three stories to reporting international news. Although significant differences in international news coverage were found among the networks ( $\chi^2[2, N = 827] = 34.01, p < .001$ ), a Cramer's  $V$  showed a weak association between networks and international news coverage at .20.

**Table 6**  
**Percentage of International News by Networks**

	CNN	FNC	MSNBC	Cable Total	ABC	CBS	NBC	Broad't Total
International	10.3%	30.4%	19.5%	21.3%	26.0%	19.8%	13.3%	20.2%
National	89.7%	69.6%	80.5%	78.7%	74.0%	80.2%	86.7%	79.8%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
(n)	(234)	(336)	(257)	(827)	(131)	(131)	(105)	(367)

$\chi^2(2, N = 401) = 42.27, p < .001$  (among the cable networks); Cramer's  $V = .32$ .

$\chi^2(1, N = 1194) = 0.19, n.s.$  (between cable and broadcast).

$\chi^2(5, N = 1194) = 40.22, p < .001$  (among all six networks); Cramer's  $V = .18$ .

$\chi^2(2, N = 367) = 5.78, n.s.$  (among the broadcast networks).

*Comparison between the Cable and Broadcast Newscasts.* Overall, as shown in Table 6, columns four and eight, both the cable and broadcast newscasts devoted around 20 percent of total news stories to international news. There were no significant differences between the cable and broadcast newscasts ( $\chi^2[1, N = 1194] = 0.19, n.s.$ ). Thus, hypothesis 2, that there will be differences in international news coverage between the cable and broadcast networks, was not supported.

Significant differences in international news coverage were found across all six networks ( $\chi^2[5, N = 1194] = 40.22, p < .001$ ), and a weak positive association between the two variables was also confirmed at a Cramer's  $V$  of .18. FNC covered the highest percentage of international news, followed by ABC, CBS, MSNBC, and NBC. CNN reported the lowest percentage of international news. No significant difference was found in the coverage of international news among the broadcast networks ( $\chi^2[2, N = 367] = 5.78, n.s.$ ).

## Discussion

This study explored content differences in the evening newscasts of the cable national all-news networks and compared the evening newscasts of the cable and broadcast networks. As broadcast and cable networks usually do not compete for

audience and popularity on price to consumers, it was expected that they would compete by differentiating program content.

Significant differences in the coverage of story topics were found not only among the cable evening newscasts but also between the cable and broadcast evening newscasts. Despite their general emphasis on crime/court and government/politics news, the networks had their own distinctive topic areas of emphasis. The emphasis of all six networks on crime/court news is consistent with the conclusion of a study issued in August, 1997 by the Center for Media and Public Affairs (McClellan, 1997a). MSNBC's light coverage on science/technology/computer topics seems to not fully utilize NBC's strategic alliance with Microsoft.

The broadcast newscasts and CNN emphasized health/welfare news. This reflects the current trend called *public* or *civic* journalism. Under this philosophy, the news outlet seeks to reconnect with its community by taking polls, sponsoring issue forums and seeking solutions to people problems (Zoglin, 1996). For example, NBC has tried to differentiate its *Nightly News* from its competitors by trying to make the newscast more relevant to viewers' daily lives. NBC covers less traditional, serious news from Washington and more user-friendly topics like health, the family, and consumer issues with feature reports. The network offers fewer stories per night, moving the broadcast closer to a magazine-show approach (McClellan, 1997b; Zoglin, 1997). Some of NBC's efforts in this vein were found in the study. Compared to its broadcast rivals, NBC featured more health/welfare, education, and human interest/feature stories. The trend is, in part, a response to the three cable networks which can cover spot news as it happens.

Differentiation in the evening newscasts is highlighted in the coverage of *unique* stories. Each additional cable network significantly contributed to increasing uniqueness in cable's news pool by offering a substantial number of unique stories. The two new cable networks, especially, contributed substantially to increasing the diversity of television news content in our society. Since some people rely almost exclusively on TV news, cable's contribution to the television news pool should increase the diversity of information in society.

It is noteworthy that the topic areas of unique stories were not concentrated on a few categories, but were spread over more than eight of the 14 topic categories. The unique stories have a diversity of topics and are *not* just in the human interest/feature category.

The differences in the topics of unique stories across networks also show that each additional network contributed to the increased diversity of the topics of unique stories. Diversity in the topics of unique stories was not the result of a single network's effort, but the result of the efforts of all competing networks.

Many more international news stories were found in FNC's evening newscast compared to the other cable newscasts. FNC covered international news in three times as many news stories as did CNN, perhaps because its parent is an international (rather than U.S.) company. CNN's low coverage of international news in the evening newscast may result from the fact that CNN has separate news programs devoted to

international reports such as *CNN World Report*, *CNN WorldView*, and *CNN World News*. However, in *The World Today*, CNN wraps up the day's major news events.

This research dramatically confirms theoretical propositions that competing firms will focus on product differentiation as a "generic competitive strategy" when price competition does not directly work in their market (Greer, 1992; Porter, 1980). Although this study did not compare before- and after-competition, the dramatic number of *unique* news stories in the evening newscasts indirectly supports the assumption of economic theories of television program diversity: an increase in the number of channels of television programming will result in an increase in the diversity of news topics offered. The dramatic numbers of unique news stories provide indirect but strong evidence of competition in the all-news market.

Product differentiation in newscasts may operate to the benefit of news viewers by increasing the size of the primetime television news pool. More news items are in circulation among viewers and come to public attention. In turn, this may affect the public agenda.

The diversification of television news sources, and the combined efforts of each competing network to be differentiated from its competitors, has produced diversity, as reflected in unique stories, in line with the FCC's endeavor to facilitate the dissemination of a broad spectrum of information.

Future research should continue to keep an eye on the dynamics of competition in the cable national all-news market and the longitudinal change in program diversity in the market, perhaps with this initial work as a baseline. Program differentiation evidenced by this study should be checked in the future to determine whether viewers perceive the differences among the competing networks. Is differentiation perceived? Is it perceived as intended?

Finally, future research is needed on the effects of breaking news itself and could also include analysis of the excesses that may arise from the competition to be first and most dramatic in using breaking stories to attract audience.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The title was *The Schneider Report* when it was sampled.

<sup>2</sup> The first constructed week was composed of April 21 (Monday), April 1 (Tuesday), April 9 (Wednesday), April 17 (Thursday), and March 28 (Friday); the second constructed week was composed of May 26 (Monday), April 29 (Tuesday), May 21 (Wednesday), May 15 (Thursday), and May 9 (Friday).

<sup>3</sup> In some networks, stock market indices were usually reported by an anchor while in some networks indices were presented in graphic format without an anchor comment. Thus, a graphic-only stock market report was, for those exceptions, considered as a 'news story' for a comparison purpose in this study.

<sup>4</sup> For definitions, contact the author.

<sup>5</sup> A minimum reliability coefficient, as a rule of thumb, is about .75 or above when using *kappa*. See Wimmer & Dominick (1997), pp. 128-129.

<sup>6</sup> An index of *vertical diversity* (VD) was constructed by reversing the Herfindahl index:

$$VD = \frac{1}{p_h^2}$$

where  $p_h$  is the proportion of each content category  $h$ . The measure ranges from a low of 1 to a high limit of the number of each content category and shows the number of categories that a network utilizes (Hellman & Soramäki, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> The range of Cramer's  $V$  is 0 (no association) to 1 (perfect association). See Riffe, Lacy, & Fico (1998).

<sup>8</sup> The average number of news stories in the cable news networks was divided by two because the cable newscasts are twice as long as the broadcast newscasts.