

Research Proposal

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Title

“Three layers, two types of domestic news flow”: News prominence of places in Chinese newspapers

Problem statement

It's widely accepted that different countries receive unequal news attention and developed countries are more news-silent than developing countries. While the unequal representation of places was widely studied at national level, the “news flow” at domestic level was less explored. Moreover, previous studies usually investigated the relationship between place characteristics and news prominence, but media types were largely neglected.

News occurring within a specific territory are usually produced by local media which cater to the information need of local communities. However, due to the connection between places, local media will cover some distant news stories. The news prominence of a certain place depends not just on its local media, but, possibly more on news coverage of non-local media.

In China, there are not only Party newspapers but commercialized newspapers in various levels. Which places are more news-silent in these newspapers? When it comes to a certain place, what genres of news coverage are more silent (e.g., politics or economics)? Will news prominence of places differ in different levels, types of newspapers? Will the coverage from higher levels of newspapers influence the local newspapers? The project is going to address these questions.

Relevance of the study and embeddedness within existing literature

News attention and places

News is judged by newsworthiness by journalists and audiences. Geographical proximity generally increases the news value of news issues, thus distant news and local

news are rarely distributed evenly in any newspaper. But why some places are more newsworthy than others in different newspapers? Many scholars have studied this problem at the national level. According to news flow theory, today it is widely accepted that the prominence of a place in the news is attributed to three groups of variables: (a) traits of the place (e.g., the size and power of the place), (b) relatedness (namely, proximity to that place in terms of geography, demography, etc.) and (c) events (e.g., disasters, wars, conflict, local protest) (Balmas & Sheaffer, 2013; Guo & Vargo, 2017).

Chinese newspaper system

The newspaper industry in China operates on a dual-track system, which means that newspapers are not only regarded as mouthpieces of the Communist Party and the government but also enterprises that cater to the diversified needs of the market. There are three layers in China newspaper system, namely, central-level, provincial-level, and municipal-level. Every city, every province in China has an official newspaper which affiliated to the municipal or provincial Communist Party.

Media and place in China

A picture of isolation and territorial boundness used to exist in Chinese media landscape before the commercialization of media in 1980s. Local and provincial newspapers were subordinating to the central newspaper, and they were distributed and available in each respective location. However, this situation changed a lot due to the mobility and migration of Chinese society and the emergence of de-territorializing technologies such as Internet (Sun, 2012). Ordinary readers can reach to media content elsewhere easily nowadays and some regional media are actively seeking to reach translocal audiences. It's noted that competition, contradictions and collaborations exist among various levels of newspapers (Dong, 2014).

There exists geographically variations in the Chinese journalism and media (Sun, 2010, 2012). While political control over media remains intact, media enjoy the so-called "bird-caged" media freedom and various levels of manoeuvring space for journalistic autonomy in media lead to regional diversities (Pan, 2000). Generally speaking, newspapers from the coastal regions of eastern China cover more news on economic and social themes while the newspapers from less developed regions cover more on political news (Dong, 2014).

Objectives of the study

The term “news flow” usually refers to “global news flow” in previous studies, news flow phenomena on a less micro aspect thus are less researched. Additionally, media types were less explored in previous research. The main purpose of this project is to explore Chinese “domestic news flow” phenomena. Specifically, the project is going to (a) study the relationship among place traits, news characteristics, media types, and news prominence of places; (b) compare the differences of news prominence of places among different levels and types of newspapers; (c) map the domestic network of media attention using GIS-SNA methods.

Methodology

Data collection

The data analyzed in this project include the traits of places and the content of the different types of newspapers. The data on the characteristic of cities and provinces (e.g., population, GDP) come primarily from the *China Statistical Yearbook* compiled by the National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBSC) and from relevant statistics and reports. Corpus of newspapers will be downloaded from the Wisenews Database. The dataset will include the text of the articles, without advertisement or other content, as well as metadata such as the title of the article, the source of the article, and the date published.

Data measurement

News prominence of places. News prominence of places will be calculated by adding up the numbers of news items that mentioned the places in *non-local* newspapers. More specifically, news prominence of cities and provinces will not only be calculated in central-level newspapers, but in municipal-level and provincial-level newspapers respectively.

Attributes of news items. The project is going to using large-scale data to explore the characteristics of news items, thus computational content analysis methods will be used to explore the sentiment (negativity or positivity) and topic (e.g., sports, politics) of news items.

Data analysis

The project will apply both traditional statistical methods and computational methods.

Traditional statistics methods (e.g., correlation analysis and multivariate regression analysis) will be applied to test the relationship among the traits of places, characteristics of news, news salient of places. Spatial social network analysis will be applied to visualize the results. Spatial social network analysis is an integration of spatial and social network analysis used to understand the interactions between spatial and social dimensions of the built environment (Liu, Xu, & Ye, 2019), and it has been reflected in sociology, public health and organization science.

Limitations

Some data of newspapers may not be included in the Wisenews Database, thus supplemental materials, such as online news of newspapers, should be taken into consideration.

Scientific and societal relevance

The project will have theoretical and methodological contributions. The project has theoretical importance for better-understanding news flow among places within China and sheds light on news value theory in geographical aspect. More importantly, the project will help to understand the division and cooperation of Chinese newspapers. Methodologically, the use of spatial social network analysis will allow us to obtain a more comprehensive picture of “domestic news flow” in China. Moreover, the methods may also be available to use on international news flow studies.

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