Commercial Constraints and News Content: a Comparative Study of Quality Newspapers in France and in the U.S.

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Abstract

Can democracy guarantee freedom of expression to all? Do commercial considerations make the news media less likely to question the legitimacy of the status quo? To answer these questions, this study compares the quality newspapers in the U.S., which are entirely financed by their income from commercial activities, and those in France, which are partially subsidised by the government. A total of 476 articles selected between April 10 and July 9, 2003 were analysed. The findings show that, overall, newspapers in both countries tend to legitimise the status quo, but they do it in different ways. Newspapers of both France and the U.S. prefer to use government officials as news sources, but the French newspapers show greater reliance on the government, while American newspapers marginalise non-establishment voices, such as trade unions. Although the articles from French newspapers are found to be more likely to discuss the legitimacy of the government, most of these discussions were conducted by government officials rather than the public. The findings of this study correspond with some of the observations made by critics of media commercialism, but most of their notions were not supported. The research results indicate that further investigation is needed to clarify the relationship between commercial considerations and news content.
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