Shift to political topics as the main content strategy of American cable news

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Abstract

The content strategies of American 24-hour news channels are undergoing significant transformations in the digital environment. While TV so far remains one of the most preferred news sources for Americans, it still has to find the new ways to attract and to keep the audience (especially younger audience). One of the transformation trends that proved to be successful for cable news has been the shift to mostly political coverage. The author focuses on the highest rated prime time cable shows and explores the extent of political items and strategies of their presentation.

Keywords

Introduction

The birth of cable television in the late 1970's is considered by some researchers to be the starting point of digitalization in broadcast (Vartanova, 2011). 24-hour news channels began to emerge in the same niche soon after the start of the era of cable TV. The United States of America is the country that gave the world the concept of non-stop news broadcast. That's why American experience of 24-hour television news in the new digital consumption environment seems especially valuable.

Today there are three main cable news channels on the American market, and the competition is very tough: CNN, Fox News Channel and MSNBC. There are also financial news channels on cable (CNBC, Bloomberg, Fox Business

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Network), but being specialized, they are not the objects of our research. Also, CNN's sister-channel HLN, originally meant as the place to get the main headlines of the day in 15 minutes, is providing non-stop coverage, but its present concept of 'news by day and mysteries and investigations by night'[1] is quite different from authentic 24-hour news. In this article research focuses mostly on the three main cable channels.

By the end of the 20th century the Internet, and later blogs and social networks turned into the main serious competitors for all traditional media. However, studies show television to be in the most favorable position in this respect: 'Americans who prefer to watch news still choose TV, while most of those who prefer to read the news have migrated online' (Mitchell et al., 2016a). The same study found TV to be the most popular news platform for 57% of U.S. adults. However, most of them are over 50 years old. Only '45% of those 30-49 and 27% of those 18-29' often get their news on TV (Mitchell et al., 2016a).

Cable news channels have started to try new content strategies in order to keep their older audience and to gain younger viewers in the digital environment. Ratings also remain another strong factor that drives the channels' search for the new forms of engaging the audience.

For example, starting from the late 2000's politics gradually became the dominant topic on the U.S. cable news channels air. The study conducted in 2016 shows cable news channels to be one the most preferred sources of political information (Mitchell et al., 2016b). Of course, one cannot underestimate Donald Trump's presidency as another serious reason of the strong boost of the air time given to politics. For instance, the volume of political news on CNN in 2017-early 2018 doubled compared to 2013 (the correlation of political items in the news show to the total quantity of items in the news show).

Literature review

The process of digitalization of television has been in the focus of many researchers. The main scholarly approaches of technological determinism, media economics and audience studies, reflected in the works of McLuhan, Habermas, Napoli, Hujanen, Williams and others, are systematized by E. L. Vartanova (Vartanova, 2011). Particularly, she studies and describes the 'channel branding' trend in terms of digitalization by the school of media economics (Vartanova, 2011). Researching this trend further, we can suggest that prime time anchor's

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[1] From the company's web-site: https://edition.cnn.com/specials/videos/hln

name (and face), as well as prime time shows, are a significant part of channel branding.

The importance of channel branding is also partially analyzed by K. E. Zadorozhnaya, who examines the era of post-network television in the United States and notes the shift from 'channel-driven' to 'menu-driven' viewing habits (Zadorozhnaya, 2010). Even though the digital audience is driven by 'menu-driven' model of TV-viewing (Zadorozhnaya, 2010, 120–121), channel's reputation and brand name is still one of the main instruments used to attain the audience.

S. L. Urazova analyzes television as an institution and looks at the main transformations triggered by digital environment, exploring in-depth the conflict between showmanship and reality (Urazova, 2013). Her findings made us think of redefining the role of an anchor in today's cable news.

There are current studies describing the habits of modern news consumer and annual media reports, showing the main trends in the economics of the American television. Both were crucial for analysis and building our further research.

Some key studies were conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2016-2017. One of them found cable news channels 'have become a destination for political news', topping the list of the most helpful source types for news about the elections (Cable News Fact Sheet, 2018). The same study found 55% increase in combined prime time viewership for the three major news channels in 2016.

The dominance of political news on cable proved to be not only popular with the audience, but also profitable as a business model. According to SNL Kagan, the total revenue for CNN, Fox News and MSNBC was up by 10% in 2017 (Cable News Fact Sheet, 2018).

We decided to take this research further and find out exactly how much politics and in which form is being offered on cable prime time shows. We are assuming that the ratings boost speaks for the success of this format. Another important aspect that is closely connected with the content transformation is the transformation of anchor's role and functions, as well as the transformation of journalist's role.

The **goal** of this research is to find out exactly how politics is changing the concept of 24-hour broadcast news and what content strategies are used by some of the most demanded prime time cable shows to survive and expand in the digital environment.

The main **research questions** are:

How significant is the volume of political news on cable?

Which formats are in high demand?

What is the ratio of news and commentary in the highest-rated cable news shows?

Are the traditional functions of an anchor changing? If so, how?

Hypothesis

The highest-rated shows on evening prime time cable news are political and personality-based. Politics in the Trump era is the major and the most essential theme of the 9 pm hour on any of the three cable channels (we expect to find at least 75% of political items in the overall show rundowns). The line between news and commentary is blurring, anchors and reporters allow themselves to express personal opinion, to tell the viewer what's good or bad and to judge the news of the day. 'Talking heads' and various discussions are replacing textbook journalism and objective analysis.

Methods

This research was conducted from July 2017 through October 2018. We analyzed TV-programming of the three main U.S. cable news channels (CNN, Fox News and MSNBC). We decided to focus on the highest rated time slot for cable news channels – the 9 pm ET hour. Two of the shows in our focus – 'Hannity' and 'The Rachel Maddow Show' – are the top two shows on cable news in the recent Q3 report for 2018. CNN comes in at #23 and #24 with 'Cuomo Prime Time' and 'Anderson Cooper 360°', which are the highest rated shows for the network (Katz, 2018).

We formed a sample of randomly selected 9 pm weekday shows from 2017-early 2018. For each channel the sample consisted of 10 shows. We picked five dates (Monday through Friday) from 2017 and five more from 2018. This gave us the opportunity not only to analyze the overall numbers, but also to forecast some current trends. Even though our sample does not include weekends (for the mere reason of different weekend programming), we consider it representative, as we are dealing with 24-hour news, where each show has a form and style, which are pretty constant. The character of information that goes into the show is also more or less constant. The daily news items that fill the show are variable. For this reason the same show will have the same fundamental formula on any given day, which is what we are trying to study. The only thing we were trying to avoid in our random selection of dates was major breaking news or big state holidays. Our goal was to select typical, neutral news days.

We realized that flagship evening prime time shows allowed anchor commentary and could include commentary more than any typical daytime

news hour. Our goal was to study the extent of this commentary and its appeal to the viewers, as well as the extent and the character of political coverage.

The shows in the sample included:

1) For CNN: Anderson Cooper 360°, Cuomo Prime Time (had a test run in January 2018, started regularly airing in June 2018).

2) For MSNBC: The Rachel Maddow Show

3) For Fox News: Hannity

Each show was one hour long (including commercials).

The two 'constructed' short weeks (weekdays only) were formed from the following dates:

1) 2017: 17th July, 22nd August, 20th September, 10th November, 21st December;

2) 2018: 11th January, 7th March, 3rd April, 7th May, 15th June.

We also analyzed TV schedule for each channel on their official web-sites (https://edition.cnn.com, https://www.foxnews.com, http://www.msnbc.com). We calculated the overall weekly amount of separate shows and the amount of shows with obvious political focus in their descriptions on the web-sites (for instance, 'The Daily Briefing' on Fox News or 'The Situation Room' on CNN). We counted each show only once, and skipped reruns. Multi-hour shows (like 'MSNBC Live' or 'Fox & Friends') we counted as one.

Our main research methods were content analysis and comparative content analysis.

Finally, a brief clarification of several key terms which we are using throughout this article:

1) political coverage – by which we mean any air time given to news about politics;

2) political news items – by which we mean any politics-related news in any format or genre, presented within one particular show;

3) political shows – by which we mean those cable news shows, which original conception and purpose are focused on delivering and analyzing only political news.

Results

Our research confirmed the hypothesis of extensive political coverage on all three cable news networks in their prime time, but the results exceeded our expectations. We also found that evening anchor's duties now do include impressive amount of commentary, which differs on each channel. Finally, we argue that all the three cable prime time shows are using nearly identical guest-heavy format, however each show has its unique distinctive style.

Shift to political discourse

To analyze the extent of the 24-hour news channels' switch to political coverage we decided to look at two main aspects: the share of political shows in the overall schedule and the actual extent of political news within prime time news shows.

The overall schedule analysis shows that about one third of overall programming on each channel is Washington-oriented (*Table 1*). The numbers in the table show the total amount of shows per week (excluding overnight reruns).

Table 1

**The share of political shows
in the overall cable news weekly programming**

Channel	Overall shows, N	Political shows, %
Fox News	83	32
MSNBC	89	27
CNN	80	30

We noticed that political programming is heavier on weekends on MSNBC (3 political shows on a typical weekday versus 4.5 on a typical Saturday or Sunday) and weaker on CNN (4 political shows on a typical weekday versus 2 on a typical Saturday or Sunday) and Fox News (5 political shows on a typical weekday versus 1 on a typical Saturday or Sunday). However, these are only the shows marked as political in their titles and descriptions[2].

The more important aspect, however, was to find the actual extent of political coverage in the highest-rated prime time shows, which do not have clear political focus in their descriptions. The sample analysis of the topics covered on air over the two constructed periods proved that prime time coverage of 24-hour cable news channels is indeed dominated by politics (*Table 2*).

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[2] Some examples of the shows clearly marked as political are: 'Hardball with Chris Matthews' (description: 'the place for politics'), 'AM Joy' (description: 'in-depth interviews and perspectives on political stories'), 'Inside Politics', 'The Situation Room with Wolf Blitzer' (description: 'the latest in political news and international events'), 'Fox News Sunday with Chris Wallace' (description: 'from the policy debates to political fights') etc.

Table 2

Political topics in cable news prime time
(%, the ratio of political versus other news items in a show)

Channel	Political news	Other news
Fox News/Hannity	92	8
MSNBC/Maddow	80	20
CNN/Cooper, Cuomo	83	17

Looking at the numbers for each year, we can say that the amount of non-political news items in 2018 dropped on CNN (down 50%) and Fox News (down 30%) and rose on MSNBC (up 50%). However these numbers right now are speculative and require further verification.

Donald Trump is an important factor in the ways politics is covered on these three channels. However, each of them covers Trump differently. Right-wing Fox News remains loyal to conservative values and mostly praises Trump allowing little to none critique. The channel also opposes itself to the rest of the media, calling major channels and publications biased. MSNBC continues to provide liberal agenda and finds ways to negatively mention Trump in most of political stories. CNN has found itself in the middle of an ongoing war with the current leadership (Schonfeld, 2018). The channel not only critiques Trump, but also tries to regularly factcheck him and his statements.

Here are just some of the examples of the polarized cable Trump coverage in prime time:

- Sean Hannity (Fox News): 'We'll always be fair and balanced. We're not the destroy-Trump media' (1st June, 2018); 'President Trump is slamming the Russia investigation, is rightly calling it a witch hunt and a democratic hoax created because Hillary Clinton lost the election' (11th January, 2018); 'So now the media is trying to attack the president, his mental health, which is completely ridiculous, so idiotic for so many reasons' (11th January, 2018).
- Rachel Maddow (MSNBC): 'These are incredible organizing feasts. <…> We watched from the very beginning people coming together and protesting their member of Congress in the Trump era' (3rd April, 2018); 'When the president's campaign chair was convicted of eight felonies and almost at the exact same moment the president's lawyer pled guilty to eight felonies, most of us went slack-jawed, right? Wow, 40 years from now, this is the day I'll brag about having been alive for, right?' (22nd August, 2018).
- Anderson Cooper, Chris Cuomo (CNN): 'Anger feeds the same instincts that drive what Trump said' (11th January, 2018); 'We begin, though,

keeping them honest with the White House being less than transparent, less than honest about the payoff to an adult film actress, Stormy Daniels' (7th March, 2018).

There is also an interesting trend in the on-air relations of the three cable news channels. They do mention each other and run soundbytes (short taped comments) from each other's air. The way they do it can be summarized in the following statements:

- Hannity (Fox News) refers to MSNBC and CNN anchors and reporters, sometimes runs their soundbytes, criticizes them and makes fun of them, labels the channel as 'destroy-Trump media' and 'fake news' (example from 11th January, 2018: 'This has been a conspiracy theory manufactured by the industrial fake news media complex that has been spread <…> by the likes of CNN and conspiracy TV MSNBC').
- Maddow (MSNBC) refers to CNN anchors and reporters and praises their job (example from 11th January, 2018: 'Tweet is from CNN's Manu Raju, he's a very good reporter').
- Cooper/Cuomo (CNN) refer to Fox News anchors, offering subtle critique of their reporting and ethical skills (for example, on 10th November, 2017 after running part of Hannity's interview with Republican Senate candidate Roy Moore about allegations of sexual assault, Anderson Cooper remarks: 'That's called leading a witness, by the way').

Summarizing, we can suggest that prime time cable news has nearly completely morphed into cable political news, with Hannity presenting the heaviest political coverage on Fox News. Two of the channels show polarized bias remaining loyal to their original conception: conservative Fox News and liberal MSNBC. CNN, which used to label itself as neutral, in the Trump era proves to be closer to liberal stance.

Guest segments

One of the major trends in the evening prime on cable is the shift to 'talking-head'-based genres on air. Guests are the essential part of all the flagship shows we analyzed. We also checked the transcripts and full episodes for other shows on the three cable news channels and found the same tendency. A panel of experts discussing various political news of the day is now an important attribution of cable news shows. Some panels (mainly on CNN) consisted of 5-6 guests at a time. In our sample there were no cases of opposing views presented within the panels. Most of them agreed on major viewpoints.

Guest panel turned out to be mostly essential on the 'Hannity' show: 77% of the news is accompanied by panel discussion and analysis. Only 57% of news

items on the CNN shows and 50% of 'The Rachel Maddow Show' had panel- or guest participation.

The ratio of single- and multiple-guest interviews was more or less even on Fox News and CNN. 'The Rachel Maddow Show' was the exception: all of the interviews were conducted with one guest at a time (*Table 3*). 32% of Ms. Maddow's guests were reporters from other media (mostly print) who broke news stories she was presenting.

<div align="right">Table 3</div>

Guest interviews and analysis in cable news prime time shows, %

Channel	Single guest	2+ guests
Fox News/Hannity	40	60
MSNBC/Maddow	100	--
CNN/Cooper, Cuomo	54	46

Most of the airtime, apart from guest segments, is filled with anchor reads and comments. The orthodox broadcast news genre of reportage (presented in the form of a 'package') is rarely used in the highest-rated shows we studied. In our sample we found only **three** reporter packages on CNN (4% of the news items) and none on MSNBC and Fox News.

News versus commentary

Another important research question we tried to answer was the ratio of news and commentary on the most popular cable news shows. To figure it out we analyzed only those show segments that contained no guest interviews, debates or other show promos. As our focus was only on anchors and reporters, we studied various anchor reads (with or without soundbytes), reporter live shots and packages. As commentary we marked any segments containing opinion, judgment, views expressed with personal pronoun *I*, clear positive or negative connotation, in-depth situation analysis showing alleged causes and consequences that benefit certain political viewpoint.

The results were expected and surprising at the same time. The expected part was with Fox News and MSNBC prime time programs, the surprising – with CNN, where we found much less commentary than stated in our hypothesis (*Table 4*).

Table 4

News and commentary from cable news prime time anchors, %

Channel	News	Commentary
Fox News/Hannity	44	56
MSNBC/Maddow	46	54
CNN/Cooper, Cuomo	86	14

Most part of the commentary normally could be found in long opening monologues of Sean Hannity and Rachel Maddow. Closing show monologues (much shorter in their total running time) also contained commentary examples. Here are some: *'Let us be clear, the mullahs of Iran are not good people. They've killed Americans in Iraq. They fought proxy wars. They want death to Israel and death to America. You cannot trust these people'* (Hannity, 7th May, 2018); *'I have a special message for the abusively biased media that once again is trying to smear me'* (Hannity, 3rd April, 2018); *'So I'm uncomfortable with the peace that I have arrived at as a person who talks about the news for a living on that stuff. <…> I don't cover misstatements and lies from senior administration officials and the president himself and vice president. <…> I have a very uneasy piece even with myself about that day to day granular, embarrassing, wrong, exploitative stuff'* (Maddow, 11th January, 2018).

CNN's 9 pm hour does not necessarily start with a long monologue, although on some days there are such examples and they do contain commentary: *'The facts of the day are as ugly as it is instructive'*; *'I don't want to teach my kids and your kids a bad word. My president decided to make that choice'* (Cuomo, 11th January, 2018). With CNN, the examples of commentary are subtler and they lay not so much in the language but in story selections (adult actress Stormy Daniels allegations of her involvement with Trump, John McCain banning Trump from his funeral, Melania's approval rating being higher than her husband's, etc.) and the clear course to prove Trump and his administration wrong. Every show includes factchecking statements Trump made verbally or in a written form, dissecting them and convincing the viewer the President cannot be trusted.

Overall, commentary segments on Fox and MSNBC are longer than on CNN. Some Maddow shows contain mostly commentary and present one major story of the day at different angles. Our sample contains no appearances of channel's correspondents (either live hits or pre-taped reports) and only one phoned-in report ('beeper') with MSNBC's Capitol Hill producer.

CNN had the highest number of live and pre-taped reports (14), twice as much as Fox News (7). Looking at the ratio of commentary and news in 2017 and 2018 we can so far suggest that it stayed nearly flat on Fox News and MSNBC,

while on CNN the number of commentary segments jumped significantly in 2018 (up over 25%).

The findings here lead us to believe that the traditional role of a news anchor is now transforming and one of the essential parts of this transformation is the blurring line between the duties of a news anchor and a news commentator. With heavy political coverage, cable news anchors are starting to openly express their opinions on air.

They are also comfortable sharing personal stories with their viewers and making themselves the subject of the news they present. Consider, for example, the story of Rachel Maddow buying a canoe, which she told the viewers closing her 15th June, 2018 show or the 'Hannity hotline' which the host often closes his show with. CNN's Chris Cuomo talks about his kids when he criticizes Trump for using the word 'sh*thole'[3]. Thus, we can talk about anchor's star power. Prime time anchor's personality needs to be one of the viewer attractors.

In this respect we can also look at a broader picture. American television news is traditionally built around dominant anchor, although this was not the case in the mid-1940's (Conway, 2007). One can also suggest that when CNN was the only source of 24-hour news, it didn't matter that much which anchor was delivering it. Nowadays, when the competition is tough, anchor's personality can be a powerful ratings booster, and this is the card each U.S. news channel is actively playing.

Naming the news show by the name of its anchor (or host) has long been one of the traditions in American television (and not necessarily news – consider, for instance, 'The Ed Sullivan Show' which ran on CBS from 1948 to 1971). Cable news is actively using this tradition, trying to capitalize on the star-power of the most recognizable anchors. For example, titles of 12 out of 16 (75%) MSNBC shows in a typical weekday line-up are based on the first and last names of their anchors ('MSNBC Live with Ali Velshi', 'Andrea Mitchell Reports'). CNN and Fox consider some of their anchors to have enough star-power to be able to name shows by their stand-alone first or last names ('Wolf', 'Hannity'). Overall, on the three channels the share of the show titles containing full or part of anchors' names in them is shown in *Table 5*.

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[3] This was the lead story on most of CNN shows on January 11th, 2018. Don Lemon devoted the entire 10 pm hour to its coverage. He also was very outspoken in his opening and closing monologues, sharing personal stories and providing pure commentary to show his feelings.

Table 5

Anchors' names as part of show titles
(%, in relation to the total number of shows in a typical weekday schedule[4])

Channel	Full name	First or last name	Either full or partial name
CNN	15	15	30
Fox News	46	15	61
MSNBC	75	6	81

Overall, the expansion of the role and functions of an anchor leads to another shift in cable news. It is becoming personality-centered. This trend surely contradicts textbook journalism, but seems to be working in the digital environment, where consumers are drawn to the news interpreted in a way that supports their political preferences as opposed to neutral presentation, which leaves further analysis and final opinion up to the consumer.

Conclusions

To sum up, we argue that it is necessary to redefine the concept of 24-hour cable news in the digital environment. American cable news market proves to be an example of the changing strategy of broadcast news in the 21st century, at least in the highest-rated prime time shows. The concept of 24-hour all-topic-news is morphing into the concept of 24-hour political news and talk. Strong ratings are the evidence of success. We can also argue that this trend is hardly going to change as long as Donald Trump remains in the White House.

The findings of this study suggest that the basic ingredients of today's prime time news shows on cable are: extensive amount of political news (over 80%), guests and guest panels presenting the same rather than opposing views, and anchor commentary which becomes just one part of his/her star-power and overall channel branding.

This formula is the base of every show we analyzed, however each of them has its distinctive style. Sean Hannity is the only anchor openly praising Trump. He is opposing himself and Fox News channel to the rest of the media, depicting himself as the only source of real news, openly telling the viewers in oversimplified terms what they need to consider good or bad. His shows start with extensive monologues, often without supporting video, the rest of the program includes live reports from the White House and guest panel or panels

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[4] Calculations are based on CNN/U.S., Fox News and MSNBC TV schedule for Thursday, August 9, 2018.

to react to the opening monologue and other stories. Here we found the highest volume of anchor commentary.

Rachel Maddow also starts off with long monologues with complicated analysis delivered in a very conversational way. Her show is the only one that never uses guest panels and prefers to interview one guest at a time. Most of these guests are reporters who broke various anti-Trump stories in other media. There are no live or taped reports from network's correspondents. The volume of commentary on the show is almost equal to Hannity's.

Chris Cuomo and Anderson Cooper are the prime time anchors with the least amount of commentary and the highest volume of news items in the show (presented as tells, live and taped reports). However, the amount of political content is slightly higher than on MSNBC. The shows heavily rely on guest panels (sometimes managing to fit up to 6 guests on air at the same time). One of the strategies (used by CNN not only on prime time shows) is to factcheck Donald Trump and to prove him wrong. Sometimes it overtakes the primary journalistic mission of reporting the news.

Overall, we are observing a strong shift to constant political coverage, presented by network's star anchor whose duties have been expanded to commenting the news, expressing personal views and judgments and who is supported by a whole league of regular 'talking heads' filling the air time by their reactions to anchor's monologues and other news items (sometimes limited to one major story).

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