

The Trumping of Science: Exploratory Study into Discrepancy between Politician and Scientist Sources in American Covid-19 News Coverage

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Abstract : Science journalism has been vanishing from America's national newspapers for decades. Reportage on scientific topics is limited to only a handful of newspapers and of those, few employ dedicated science journalists to cover stories that require this specialized expertise. News organizations' lack of readiness to convey complex scientific concepts to a mass populace becomes particularly problematic when events like the Covid-19 pandemic occur. The lack of coverage of Covid-19 prior to its onset in the United States, suggests something more troubling - that the deprioritization of reporting on hard science as an educational tool in favor of political frames of coverage, places dangerous blinders on the American public. This research looks at the disparity between voices of health and science experts in news articles and the voices of political figures, in order to better understand the approach of American newspapers in conveying expert opinion on Covid-19. A content analysis of 300 articles on Covid-19 by major newspapers in the United States between January 1st, 2020 and April 30th, 2020 illuminates this investigation. The Boston Globe, the New York Times, and the Los Angeles Times are included in the content analysis. Initial findings reveal a significant disparity in the number of articles that mention Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute Allergy and Infectious Disease, and the number that make reference to political figures. Covid-related articles in the New York Times that focused on health topics (as opposed to economic or social issues) contained the voices of 54 different politicians who were mentioned a total of 608 times. Only five members of the scientific community were mentioned a total of 24 times (out of 674 articles). In the Boston Globe, 36 different politicians were mentioned a total of 147 times, and only two members of the scientific community, one being Anthony Fauci, were mentioned a total of nine times (out of 423 articles). In the Los Angeles Times, 52 different politicians were mentioned a total of 600 times, and only six members of the scientific community were included and were mentioned a total of 82 times with Fauci being mentioned 48 times (out of 851 articles). Results provide a better understanding of the frames in which American journalists in Covid hotspots conveyed information of expert analysis on Covid-19 during one of the most pressing news events of the century. Ultimately, the objective of this study is to utilize the exploratory data to evaluate the nature, extent and impact of Covid-19 reporting in the context of trustworthiness and scientific expertise. Secondarily, this data will illuminate the degree to which Covid-19 reporting focused on politics over science.

Keywords : science reporting, science journalism, covid, misinformation, news

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