Morality or Equality?

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The debate over same-sex marriage in the United States has strong opinions on each side, and new research co-authored by a University of Dayton professor shows mainstream, national news outlets are not immune from picking sides.

A study of news coverage from The New York Times and the Chicago Tribune on the issue of gay marriage revealed ideological bias. In their stories regarding the public debate of gay marriage, the Times adopted a positive tone in nearly two-thirds of its stories, while the Tribune took a negative tone in a majority of its stories.

"In terms of the big picture, the two newspapers looked at gay marriage very differently. One took the perspective of human equality, and the other took the perspective of human morality," said Juan Meng, assistant professor in strategic communication at the University of Dayton, a co-author of the study with Po-Lin Pan at Arkansas State University.

The study — "Morality or equality? Ideological framing in news coverage of gay marriage legitimization" — is published in the September issue of The Social Science Journal. It has fresh relevance as the debate over same-sex marriage was reignited in August by a federal judge’s decision to overturn California’s Proposition 8, a constitutional amendment defining marriage as between a man and a woman.

The news stories included in the study, however, were written between November 2002 and November 2004, one year before and one year after the legitimization of same-sex marriage in Massachusetts. Meng and Pan considered a total of 120 news stories during this time period, with 59 from The New York Times and 61 from the Chicago Tribune.

One interesting finding in the study showed that despite an evident bias in the two newspapers, both still included voices on either side of the debate, although some were included more frequently than others.

"This shows how the media can use a balance of sources and have an appearance of objectivity, yet still frame the issue in their preferred point of view," Meng said.

Some of the key findings include:

- The New York Times discussed the topic of equal rights in 34 percent of its stories, compared to the Chicago Tribune at 19 percent. The Tribune, however, discussed family values (22 percent) and religion (20 percent) more often than the Times (18 percent and 12 percent respectively).
- The Times used more liberal sources (44 percent) in reporting controversial topics such as gay marriage legitimization, whereas the Chicago Tribune used more conservative sources (39 percent).
- The Times adopted a positive tone (64 percent) on the issue of same-sex marriage; on the contrary, the Tribune more often used a negative tone (51 percent).
- After Massachusetts legitimized same-sex marriage, both newspapers used more government officials to state their perspectives. This was due in large part to the significance of the Massachusetts decision in the political debates of the 2004 election, Meng said.
- Following the legitimization of same-sex marriage, The New York Times increased its use of the perspectives of homosexuals and pro-gay marriage sources. However, the Chicago Tribune showed no significant change in its balance of perspectives from proponents and opponents of same-sex marriage.

"The New York Times definitely became an activist for gay marriage after the Massachusetts decision, and its reporting reflected the newspaper's embrace of the legitimization of gay marriage," Meng said. "The Chicago Tribune, however, showed little change in how it reported the issue, reflecting a reluctance to accept the Massachusetts decision or embrace the change."

Although the evidence is strong for bias in reporting the gay marriage debate in the two national newspapers, Meng said it would be a mistake to draw conclusions about the media outlets as wholes or to perpetuate stereotypes.

"The point is not to label the newspapers as either liberal or conservative — it's unfair to describe media outlets in a single
word," she said. "Our purpose was to focus on how the issue is reported, and how the public perceives the issue."

At the time when this research was conducted, California's Proposition 8 ballot initiative had not yet become a national story. Meng said she would like to follow up on the research to include additional newspapers and examine reports on recent developments in California.

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