Using TVEyes to Gauge Public Opinion, Test Messaging

A Case Study: Wesleyan Media Project

The Wesleyan Media Project was established in 2010 to track advertising in federal election cycles. Since then, WMP has been providing real-time information spending in federal elections, as well as public sentiment on key election issues, with the goal of developing a definitive database that enhances the ability of scholars, citizens, and journalists to access and to use public information to understand the varied influences on American democracy in general and political campaigns in particular.
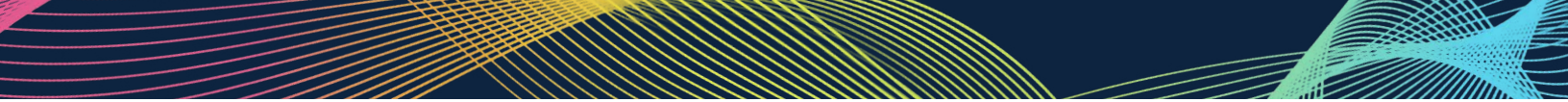
Goal

In the days, weeks, and months following the passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) in 2010, the WMP team and its collaborators wanted to investigate how media – including both ads and news – varied across the country in volume and in tone with respect to the new law. Specifically, because mass media have been shown to be important and influential in shaping citizen opinions and understanding of public policy, they wanted to understand how much messaging regarding the ACA there was on air and how it portrayed the new marketplaces. Ultimately, they also wanted to know how messaging might affect public perceptions of US health care the options generally.

Solution

The WMP measured the variation in messaging during the early phase of implementation as a first step toward assessing whether media messaging might provide a distinct contribution to consumers' perspectives and their health insurance enrollment behaviors.

To assess local news coverage, WMP turned to TVEyes to receive data from hundreds of U.S. TV Channels via its Transcript and Video API Solutions. WMP then used the TVEyes content to conduct closed-captioned searches for ACA-related words (i.e., "health care," "healthcare," "Obamacare," "Obama care," and "Affordable Care Act") appearing in up to two news broadcasts during the highest-rated half hour of local news in each of the 210 markets across the U.S. A trained team of coders determined whether the story mentioned or focused on the ACA and whether it pertained primarily to the new insurance products, the politics of the issue, or both. Coders also assessed whether the news story conveyed a negative, positive, balanced, or neutral impression of the marketplace.

During this time, 1,286 local news stories mentioning the ACA aired. The content of local news coverage varied, with 42 percent focusing solely on the politics of the ACA, including demands that it be delayed or defunded in exchange for reopening government, 46 percent focusing on the new health insurance products, and the remaining 12 percent mentioning some aspects of both.

Within the subset of local news stories containing product information (n=744), 50 percent conveyed an optimistic or encouraging impression of the new insurance products, 26 percent conveyed a pessimistic or discouraging impression, 19 percent conveyed both encouraging and discouraging information, and 5 percent were neutral.

Outcome

The WMP team's analysis using TVEyes data was published in the *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* and underscored the importance of understanding the substantial variation in the volume and tone of coverage that Americans actually experience in their local environments. The findings to-date suggest that **media messaging varies across local environments** and that such variation might be important in understanding differences in attitudes. This is especially important when it may also affect behavior like health insurance enrollment outcomes, or the understanding of related information, such as availability of or costs of plans.

The findings imply that **evaluations by analysts or policymakers that do not account for these media factors could lead to misleading conclusions.** For example, a finding of low uptake of insurance in a particular geographic region does not necessarily mean that citizens in that area are not interested or that the insurance plan options are unaffordable. Rather, it could be that dominant media messages in that area (whether in news or advertisements) contributed to lower public enthusiasm toward insurance options.

TVEyes was proud to support this important endeavor and its potential to impact individual health care decisions and, ultimately, health outcomes. TVEyes continues to support WMP on research projects like this one – as we have for almost the last 10 years – because we understand the importance of accurately gauging local messaging in order to identify gaps or opportunities to communicate vitally important information.

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> Working with TVEyes was not only easy to do, it remains an essential element in our ability to track and understand the content, variation and effects of local media messaging on a variety of important policy areas and issues. TVEyes has been great to work with, and it's a huge reason we're still a client today, nearly a decade later."
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> **– ERIKA FRANKLIN FOWLER,** *Co-Director, Wesleyan University's Wesleyan Media Project*

To learn more about TVEyes and how our suite of products can support your organization and its work, visit www.tveyes.com.