A STUDY OF SNARK IN NEWS MEDIA

John Hendel

Dr. Lee Wilkins, Thesis Supervisor

ABSTRACT

This study sought to examine the journalistic tone of snark. How does a snarky news tone affect audience reception among readers of both hard news and soft news stories? Specifically, the study sought to find how snark engaged and entertained readers and how humorous and credible readers found snark. An initial pretest of 41 participants read 20 news excerpts from the gossip news blog Gawker and the *New York Times* and rated them on a snark index of five qualities: wit, aggression, irony, informality, and critique.

The pretest successfully established that a difference in tone existed between the two news sources, based on the snark index, and allowed a subsequent experiment, involving 8 of the 20 news excerpts, to test for effects. In the experiment (N=99), people found snarky stories more engaging ($p<.05$), entertaining ($p<.01$), and humorous ($p<.01$) than non-snarky stories. However, people also found snark less credible ($p<.01$) and reported wanting to read snark less than regular news ($p<.01$). People reported finding soft news more entertaining ($p<.01$) and humorous ($p<.01$) than hard news, and this difference of story type significantly interacted with snark in all measures except entertainment.

The results suggest that snark has incredible power to attract attention. Considering the continuing expansion of Internet news media and increase in soft news coverage, further research needs to address journalistic tone and specifically biting, personality-driven snark.