Media coverage of large countries at the 2015 Milan EXPO

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Abstract

An inertial bias or status quo bias in media industries, as in other markets, means the perpetuation of a certain behaviour or attitude. If mass media frequently address certain issues, an inertial bias means that such issues will be treated again independently of their absolute or relative newsworthiness. This paper studies the inertial media bias in relation to the Milan Expo 2015, an event where, in theory, all participant countries ought to have been considered equal. The empirical analysis considers the articles and reports on the Expo of the two most important online Italian newspapers, Repubblica and Corriere della Sera between May and October 2015. The estimates show that the newspapers devoted more articles and words to the largest countries, while the slant towards the richest countries was less evident. In addition, the tone of the media reports regarding large and rich countries was more positive.

Keywords

media markets, media bias, newspapers, inertia, status quo, expos

1 Introduction

Media bias is a long debated field of research, regarding the causes, forms and consequences of a positive or negative attitude in news reports, which limits the neutrality of non-advertising media content and the independence of journalists. While a media bias has been proven to exist in several countries and epochs, it does not necessarily arise as a deliberate choice of the mass media. Media bias may also arise from unintentional, unconscious or inertial human behavior. In fact, the tendency to regularly report on and debate a subject can induce journalists to keep going back to that subject in the future, regardless of its absolute or relative "newsworthiness." For example, that mass media devote more space to large and rich countries is certainly not surprising. Large and rich countries have more inhabitants, larger geographical areas and more economic resources. This abundance of *structural characteristics* and how these are *combined* increase the probability of notable events and stories being reported in the media. At the same time, the high fre-

quency of newsworthiness regarding large and rich countries can generate an inertial effect on the behaviour of journalists and editors, and induce them to re-present news and stories regarding those nations.

This research studies the inertial media bias within the media coverage of the 2015 Milan Expo. In particular, the empirical analysis investigates the reports of the two most important Italian newspapers *(Repubblica and Corriere della Sera)* regarding foreign pavilions. The main objective of the empirical analysis is ascertain whether the reports favoured the pavilions of those countries that are more frequently covered in newspapers stories, that is the largest and richest countries. The analysis examines both the quantitative aspects of the media coverage (articles and words devoted to each country) and the positive/negative attitudes of the articles that described the participation of foreign countries. An Expo is an appropriate framework to explore the inertial media bias. First, participation at the Expo is a *unique* and *equal* event for all the countries that take part in it, although the analysis must ensure the condition of "parity of participa-

tion." For example, the empirical analysis can control for the resources that each country invests in the event. Second, one of the aims of Expo Milan 2015 was to give a voice to the smallest and poorest countries and to stigmatize the un-sustainable food consumption of developed nations. According to the theme *Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life,* the Expo organizers highlighted the importance of the event in raising public awareness regarding issues such as hunger, food security and the lack of energy resources, following the approach of the Bureau International des Expositions over the last few decades (http://www.expo2015.org/archive/en/learn-more/the-theme.html). The mass media are thus expected to give space and attention to the participation of small and poor countries. If they fail to give this space, the mass media are probably suffering from an inertial bias where the main focus is, as usual, on the "most influential countries."

2 The theory of media bias

Media bias is an apparently widespread phenomenon. For example, Baron (2006) reports that the majority of American readers perceive media content as biased, although there is no established consensus on the nature and direction of the perceived bias. This bias may regard the coverage of news and stories (quantitative bias). An event may be reported in detail, quickly touched on or completely ignored. The same issue can be debated continuously or occasionally. In addition, the space devoted to different issues being equal, the journalists can assume a positive, negative or neutral attitude towards the items and people involved in an event (qualitative bias). A qualitative bias can be either clear and explicit or surreptitious and underhand. In the latter case, journalists select certain words and expressions to induce a positive or negative reception. Finally, a positive or negative attitude towards an event can characterize the work of an individual journalist as well as the majority of the professional staff of newspapers or broadcasting stations.

While political bias has characterized the mass media since the invention of the printing press, the first systematic analysis of media bias within the contemporary media system must be attributed to Innis (1950, 1951), who investigated the influence of media on the culture and development of societies. After Innis' seminal works, media scholars have suggested that the multiple forms of media bias can have different explanations (McQuail, 1992). For example, media bias can arise from direct or indirect linkages with political power (Besley & Prat, 2006; Snyder & Stromberg, 2010), which is the case of those television stations under public control (public broadcasting services). Also private media moguls may have a certain ideological orientation. However, private corporations that control major news organizations compete in order to maximize profits and market share, thus leading these corporations to follow a rational economic calculus rather than a personal worldview (Sutter, 2001; Puglisi & Snyder, 2011). The bias can consist of a positive attitude towards major advertisers (Reuter & Zitzewitz, 2006; Ellman & Germano, 2009; Gambaro & Puglisi, 2010). Newspapers and newscasts can emphasize the good news and overlook the bad news regarding the "big spenders," in order to be rewarded with larger advertising investments.

Media bias may also be related to demand-side explanations (Mullainathan & Shleifer, 2005; Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010). Individuals may have a preference for certain news and entertainment content and want stories that are consistent with their political or social viewpoints. This may provide an incentive for a news organization to bias stories in order to increase the "brand loyalty" of a particular clientele. Finally, biased stories may increase the probability that a journalist's article will be published or may promote the worldview of the journalist. In other words, a journalist might indulge in "sensationalism" to accelerate his/her career (Baron, 2006).

Measuring media bias is not easy. An important issue is that the phenomenon to observe must be extracted from all other information content published in a

newspaper or broadcast during a newscast. In addition, it is not easy to define the optimal grade of neutrality, in order to establish a standard that assesses the impartiality of reporters. These issues explain why the measure of media bias changes with the research objectives and the media under analysis (Groseclose & Milyo, 2005).

Media bias has both ex ante and ex post effects. First, those who read news stories can take the media bias into account and be suspicious of news reports that could be biased. This makes readers and viewers more cautious in taking decisions based on the news. Second, media bias affects the probability that particular stories will be reported, thus increasing the likelihood that individuals will act based on the news. In addition, bias and the consequential skepticism reduce the demand for news. The profit-maximizing news companies must thus decide how much bias to tolerate in their news, given the possible disadvantages that the bias would create in a competitive "market for attention."

Going back to the source of media bias, a conscious decision of the editorial staff can entail some forms of bias. At the same time, the media bias may arise from unintentional or unconscious human behavior.

Like many other professionals, journalists are subject to psychological mechanisms that lead to distorted perceptions during the processing of information. For example, some studies suggest that negative or unfavorable information produces greater and more persistent effects than positive or favorable information if the journalist suffers from cognitive limitations (Cacioppo & Gardner, 1999; Baumeister et al. 2001; Rozin & Royzman, 2001; Garz, 2014). There is a solid theoretical basis for this. Within decision sciences, prospect theory highlights the stronger effects of favorable information because loss aversion and endowment effects affect the decision-making processes. Therefore, journalists might respond differently to positive and negative changes in economic variables (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Kahneman et al. 1991; Tversky

& Kahneman, 1991). Another possibility is that the unintentional media bias is inertial, or at least partially inertial. Inertial behaviour is not surprising in a profession whose production process involves various routines. In fact, the mass media tend to regularly address certain people, companies or countries. The reason is clear: the abundance of resources activated by some people, countries and companies increases the probability of notable events that the media can report on. The tendency to cover or debate an issue with regularity can induce the journalists to keep returning to the same subject, regardless of its absolute or relative newsworthiness"[1].

Some theories developed in different disciplines explain this kind of inertial behavior. For example, the concept of status quo bias discussed in the prospect theory is unavoidably linked with inertial behaviour. The status quo bias is the tendency to favour actions and decisions that preserve the status quo, although the bias can be mixed with other non-rational cognitive processes[2]. In the mass media, the status quo can be thought of as a number of issues that regularly appear as information or entertainment content. If, for some reason, the mass media regularly cover certain specific issues, for example people, companies or nations, the inertial/status quo bias can take the form of re-presenting events and stories regarding those issues.

Another theoretical explanation of inertial behaviour in the media can be found in journalism studies. In their seminal study on newspapers and television broadcasting, Galtung and Ruge (1965) proposed a number of factors that define newsworthiness (Harcup & O'Neill, 2001). Two of these factors are relevant for the

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1 A unique and established definition of newsworthiness does not exist. Broadly speaking, being newsworthy means having a number of reasons for which events or stories warrant being reported in the media (Shoemaker, 2006).

2 Some scholars consider "inertial bias" and "status-quo bias" as synonymous. See, for example, Samuelson and Zeckhauser (1988) and Vega-Redondo (1993).

present study. The first, *continuity,* means that a story or an issue that is already in the news gathers a kind of inertia, because media organizations are "already in place" to report the story. In addition, previous reports make the story more familiar and less ambiguous to the public. The second, *reference to elite nations,* means that events and stories regarding dominant nations get more attention than those regarding less influential nations.

The combination of continuity and reference to elite nations can increase the attention that the mass media devote to the most influential countries, namely the largest and the richest ones. Large and rich countries have many inhabitants, large geographical areas and abundant economic resources. These structural characteristics and their potentially infinite combinations increase the probability of events and stories regarding large and rich countries being reported in the media. The high frequency of the newsworthiness and coverage of large and rich countries can have an inertial effect on the behaviour of journalists and editors, who may insist on the same countries for reports and stories. This effect could match a demand-driven media bias. If readers or viewers are more interested in large and rich nations, the mass media will be inclined to satisfy those preferences by covering large and rich nations in the news, although the relevance of the events and stories reported is questionable. The combination of inertial effects and demand-driven biases can expand the coverage of large and rich nations, irrespectively of the newsworthiness of the reported events, and shrink the space and attention devoted to marginal countries.

3 Mega events and Expos: general features and media coverage

Mega events are "large scale cultural (including commercial and sporting) events which have a dramatic character, mass popular appeal and international significance" (Roche, 2000). Mega events (also called *major events* and *hallmark events,*

these terms being synonymous or not depending on the author) are a complex phenomenon, due to their impact on the economy (Hall, 2012; Getz & Page 2016; Gruneau & Horne, 2016), society (Tzanelli, 2015) and places (Essex & Chalkley, 2007; Smith, 2008).

Since the eighties, mega events have gained increasing attention by academic scholars in social sciences and humanities, thus requiring a well-recognized definition of these phenomena. The definition of major events proposed by Ritchie (1984) was adopted during the Association Internationale d'Experts Scientifiques du Tourisme Congress held in Calgary in 1987 (Ritchie & Yangzhou, 1987). The definition of Ritchie (1984) refers to short duration, uniqueness, positive effects on "the awareness, appeal and profitability of a tourism destination in the short and/or long term," and targeting both local residents and potential customers (Ritchie, 1984, p. 2). Over the last decades, studies on mega events have dealt with different categories of events, paying great attention to world's fairs, also known as expos, trade and scientific expositions started in the mid-19th century in order to present the most revolutionary technology inventions to a global audience (Schroeder-Gudehus, 2008). Sociologists and cultural historians delved into the economic and cultural meanings of world's fairs, highlighting the role played by the cultural imperialism of modern great powers (Greenhalgh, 1988), the attempt to promote mass consumption patterns after the Great Depression (Rydell, 1993) and the faith in technological advances to foster social progress (Nye, 1997; Ganz, 2008).

Thus, expos can be seen as technological, cultural, anthropological heritage exhibitions reproducing, in an artificial environment, a selection of reality with an impression (or, maybe, an illusion) of authenticity, so that the «incarnation éphémère d'un fait social total» is depicted (Ballester, 2015). During the first century of their history, expos took place in the largest cities of Western countries (often London and Paris), and conveyed an "imperialistic" approach to the technological

gap between rich and underdeveloped countries (Roche, 2011). In the aftermath of the Second World War, the rise in mass consumerism and the loss of trust in technological progress as a result of conflict-related trauma and the nuclear threat induced a reconsideration of the World's fair. Since the Brussels 58 Expo, the organizing committee has assigned each edition with an ethical and moral theme (Kirchgeorg et al, 2005). Issues such as peace building and tolerance were predominant until the end of the 1970s and during the cold war, whereas environmental concerns and sustainability have prevailed since the 2000 Hannover Expo, when the participating countries approved a protocol for building eco-compatible pavilions.

Today, the reference to shared values can be assumed as a distinctive feature of expos. Nevertheless, expos are similar to other categories of mega events with respect to event management (high professionalization of workers; increasing connection among stakeholders; major impact on host countries through event bundling) and even communication (Power, 2003; Xu et al., 2016). The last aspect includes the media coverage.

Mega events offer an international showcase for participating countries, especially (but not exclusively) from the point of view of nation branding: a wide resonance in the international media is a distinguishing feature and a core objective of mega events (Erfurt & Johnsen, 2003; Hall & Page, 2012). Hence, Roche (1994) stressed the effectiveness of mega events in strengthening a new, positive and possibly long-lasting image of the host country thanks to national and international media coverage. Getting a widespread, positive presence in the media, which is consistent with the goals of the event's organizers, has become a key issue in mega event management. This is mostly covered in the economic field known as the *attention economy* (Lanham, 2006; Nylund, 2009), considering that media offer an increasing amount of content while the attention by the audience is a limited resource (Webster, 2014). Thus, media coverage is essential in order to attract interest from potential visitors and from those who might not attend the exhibition (Arnegger and Herz, 2016).

In the case of expos, previous studies have assessed the benefits of media exposure almost uniquely in relation to the host city or country brand identity (Yu et al., 2012), whereas the impact on foreign exhibitors has gained scarce attention (Winter, 2013). However, an in-depth analysis of the media coverage of foreign participants at expos can be of great interest, given that the pavilions and clusters represent an attempt (not always successful) to combine the traditional (and familiar) heritage with innovation and technology (Harvey & Braun, 1996). Some authors see the pavilion is a "branded space," an experiential product offered to potential consumers (Wang & Sun, 2012). Other authors suggest that the brand image conveyed by each pavilion combines a global perspective, linked to the expo's "mission," with a national perspective, which in turn stems from the construction and de-construction of national country identities (Gutzmer, 2014).

4 Data and descriptive statistics

The organizing committee of Expo 2015 (http://www.expo2015.org/) announced the official participation of 141 countries, including 136 foreign countries plus Italy and four international organizations: the United Nations, the European Union, the Caribbean Community, and the Pacific Islands Forum. In addition, the Expo hosted 10 non-governmental organizations and 25 companies as non-official participants. Among the participants, 53 countries had their own pavilion, while the others shared *thematic clusters*. The pavilions were not necessarily financed by public funds.[3]

We built a unique database combining two sources: the Lexis-Nexis database and the online database of *Repubblica* and

3 For example, India participated through a private initiative under a pavilion of the KIP International School located in the rice cluster (Basmati pavilion).

Corriere della Sera (hereafter, *Corriere*), the two Italian newspapers with the largest print circulation (source: www.fieg.it) and the highest digital audience (source: www.audiweb.it). The period under scrutiny was 1 May – 10 November 2015, that is, from the opening of the Expo up to ten days after its conclusion, in order to consider the final and general remarks on the whole event. We searched for the articles containing the word "Expo" plus a number of synonyms, whose congruence was checked by a group of ten students. After the collection of all the articles about the Expo in the period under review, we selected those that mentioned one or more foreign countries. As a cross-check, we also searched for *all* the articles in the two newspapers that mentioned these foreign countries. We discarded articles that mentioned a foreign country but not in relation to its participation at the Expo (this step automatically excluded all non-participant countries). The final sample included 1 068 articles. We counted the references to each country and the words in the paragraphs regarding the pavilion or the Expo participation of foreign countries. When the same paragraph mentioned more than one country at the same time, we divided the number of words by the number of countries mentioned.

The 1 068 articles in the sample (520 from *Corriere* and 548 from *Repubblica*) mention 109 countries that participated at the Expo (Italy excluded). Twenty-seven participants did not receive any mention in the newspapers, while another thirty-six had mentions only in one newspaper. Overall, 56 363 words were devoted to foreign countries with an average of 53.63 words per mention. Table 1 shows the most mentioned countries by mentions and total words.

Table 2 shows that the 67 largest (according to GDP) and richest (according to GDP per capita) countries have many more mentions and words than the 68 smallest and poorest countries (of course, the quantiles of largest and richest countries are not the same). At the same time, the smallest and poorest countries had fewer pavilions. The mean difference is

Table 1:   Most covered Expo participants in online newspapers

Rank	Country	Mentions	Country	Words
1	Japan	58	USA	3 521
2	USA	47	Japan	3 447
3	United Arab Emirates	44	Russia	2 627
4	Brazil	42	Netherlands	2 118
5	Germany	36	Zimbabwe	2 091
6	Switzerland	32	Switzerland	2 043
7	Austria	29	China	1 762
8	China	27	South Korea	1 716
9	South Korea	26	Angola	1 424
10	France	25	UK	1 397

always significant. Table 2 suggests that ownership of a pavilion gave the largest and richest countries a higher media coverage.

5   Empirical analysis

5.1   Quantitative slant towards small and poor countries

We explore the issues raised in the previous section using the following baseline OLS equations:

where the dependent variables m_i and w_i are, the mentions of the pavilion of

$$m_i = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 GDP_i + \alpha_2 GDPpc_i + \alpha_3 P_i + \alpha_4 D_i + \varepsilon_i$$

$$w_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 GDP_i + \beta_2 GDPpc_i + \beta_3 P_i + \beta_4 D_i + \mu_i$$

country *i* and the words dedicated to the Expo participation of country *i,* respectively. Our main explanatory variables are the Gross Domestic Product *(GDP_i)* and the Gross Domestic Product per capita *(GDPpc_i)*. The dummy variable P_i denotes whether or not country *i* had its own pavilion. Other non-observable factors may also have affected the media coverage. Some of these are captured via the variable D_i which measures the distance in kilometres from Milan to the capital city of each participant. The geographical distance ap-

Table 2:   Breakdown of countries by size and income per capita

Size	Pavilion	Articles	Words	Income per capita	Pavilion	Articles	Words
Large countries	47	900	46 980	Rich countries	44	865	44 181
Small countries	5	155	8 804	Poor countries	8	190	11 603
t-test	6.85	5.63	9.53		6.07	4.70	7.65

Note. The table includes 135 countries because no macroeconomic data is available for the Vatican City (mentioned in 13 articles).

Table 3:   Main regression. Quantitative slant towards large and rich countries. Pooled data

Dependent variables	Regression I		Regression II		Regression III	
	mentions	words	mentions	words	mentions	words
GDP	0.174***	0.426***	0.174***	0.426***	0.217***	0.279***
	(0.027)	(0.068)	(0.026)	(0.068)	(0.046)	(0.062)
GDPpc	0.030	−0.285*	−0.008	−0.311**	0.224**	0.150
	(0.059)	(0.149)	(0.058)	(0.151)	(0.105)	(0.143)
pavilion	1.066***	2.015***	−0.724	0.822		
	(0.164)	(0.412)	(0.506)	(1.328)		
distance	−0.102	−0.653***	−0.102*	−0.652***	0.038	−0.156
	(0.063)	(0.159)	(0.060)	(0.159)	(0.077)	(0.106)
GDP growth	−0.045	0.970	−0.113	0.453	−0.829	0.113
	(0.063)	(0.959)	(0.260)	(0.572)	(0.784)	(0.206)
sqm			0.249***	0.166	0.201***	0.102
			(0.067)	(0.176)	(0.062)	(0.085)
constant	1.235**	7.922***	1.289**	7.958***	−1.170	4.776***
	(0.590)	(1.477)	(0.563)	(1.478)	(0.808)	(1.105)
Adj. R²	.69	.62	.72	.62	.50	.33
n	135	135	135	135	52	52

Notes. Dependent variables are the natural logarithm of (mentions + 1) and (words + 1).

proximates the institutional, cultural and linguistic differences between the Italian journalists and the characteristics of the foreign pavilions. Of course, the distance may involve contrasting effects. On the one hand, a small distance means a higher familiarity with the foreign country's habits and costumes, and thus a greater ability to write about its Expo experience. On the other, a distant foreign country may arouse the journalist's curiosity in the pavilion and increase its media coverage. The same can be said about the products available in the pavilion. Being aware of them makes writing the article easier, but at the same time lowers the curiosity of the journalist. As a control variable, we included the GDP growth in 2014: a fast-growing economy grabs the attention of the mass media and may increase the coverage during mega events. Table 3 shows the results of the OLS regressions, sorted by mentions and words.

Regression I shows that newspapers devoted more articles and more words to the largest countries. In addition, the countries that took part in the Expo with their own pavilion had a higher probability of a large news coverage. On the other hand, the impact of economic wealth and growth is less evident. Finally, journalists were more inclined to write about neighbouring countries, although this effect is significant only for the words used to describe the foreign pavilions.

In order to investigate the importance of the physical characteristics of the pavilions in more detail, regression II includes the square meters occupied in the Expo area by each pavilion *(sqm)*. More precisely, *sqm* is the natural logarithm of (square meters + 1) in order to maintain the whole sample. This specification shows that the "quality" of the pavilion, approximated by its area, is important as well as the fact of having a pavilion, at least in terms of the

total number of articles. The impact of the *GDP* does not change. Larger countries had, on average, more mentions and more words within the articles devoted to the Expo. The model significance is rather high in all specifications.

To more precisely assess the effect of the pavilion quality on the media coverage, regression III considers only the countries with a proprietary pavilion (thus excluding *pavilion* from the explanatory variables). Again, the size of the pavilion significantly affects the number of times a country is mentioned but not the words used within the reports.

In conclusion, assuming that the size of a pavilion is an adequate proxy of its quality, larger countries had, on average, pavilions that were more attractive which affected the number of mentions in the newspapers. At the same time, the higher quality of the pavilion only partially explains the higher number of words that newspapers systematically devoted to large countries.

5.2 Qualitative slant towards small and poor countries

More mentions and more words do not necessarily mean that the newspaper reviews of foreign countries' participation at the Expo were favourable. In order to explore the qualitative aspect of reportage we used the paid assistance of 15 students, who were asked to read the sample articles and evaluate each country mention using the following classification: positive (+1), neutral (0), negative (–1). At the same time, the authors of this paper conducted a separate but identical analysis and then compared our evaluations with those of the students. The classifications were highly congruent. Figure 1 shows an overview of the distribution of country mentions, by economic size, GDP per capita and evaluation. The average evaluations of the largest and richest countries were, respectively, .338 (s. d. 0.598) and .336 (s. d. 0.604), while the average evaluations of the smallest and poorest nations were .152 (s. d. 0.692) and .188 (s. d. 0.660). A t-test confirmed the significance of the difference in means (two sided, *p*-value = .001). In brief, the

large and rich countries enjoyed a superior coverage in online newspapers, from a quantitative and qualitative perspective.

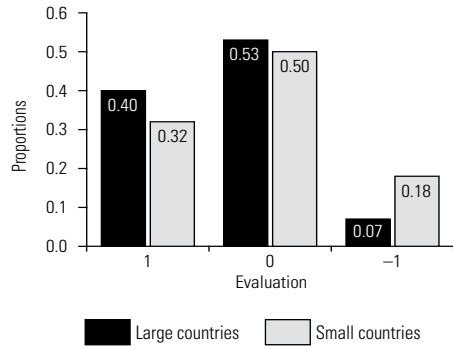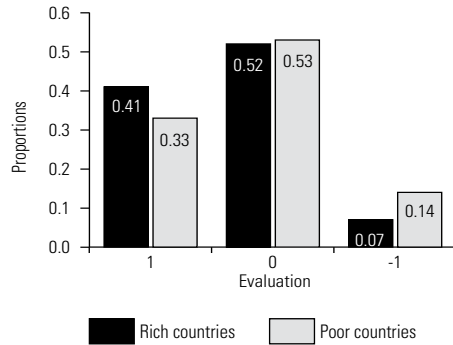Figure 1:   Distribution of the country mentions, by GDP and evaluation

Figure 2:   Distribution of the country mentions, by GDP per capita and evaluation

6   Robustness check and channels of the slant

This section addresses potential omitted-variable biases and explores the possible channels of a slant towards small and/or poor countries. First, we consider the theories of media slant based on the content differentiation of newspapers. Then, we address the potential bias of certain journalists.

Table 4:   Quantitative slant towards large and rich countries. Corriere vs Repubblica

Dependent variables	Corriere		Repubblica	
	mentions	words	mentions	words
gdp	0.146***	0.391***	0.128***	0.334***
	(0.021)	(0.067)	(0.027)	(0.072)
gdp_{pc}	−0.024	−0.321**	0.045	0.055
	(0.047)	(0.149)	(0.059)	(0.160)
pavilion	−0.687	1.169	−0.979*	−1.151
	(0.417)	(1.307)	(0.519)	(1.402)
distance	−0.107**	−0.637***	0.047	−0.093
	(0.049)	(0.156)	(0.062)	(0.168)
gdp growth	−0.015	0.879	−0.143	0.518
	(0.213)	(0.803)	(0.200)	(0.487)
sqm	0.191***	0.112	0.265***	0.414**
	(0.055)	(0.173)	(0.068)	(0.185)
constant	1.311***	7.775***	−0.405	1.316
	(0.464)	(1.453)	(0.578)	(1.561)
Adj. R^2	0.68	0.59	0.65	0.53
n	135	135	135	135

Notes. Dependent variables are the natural logarithm of (mentions + 1) and (words + 1). Explanatory variables *gdp gdp$_{pc}$* and *gdp growth* in natural logarithm. Variable *sqm* is the natural logarithm of (square meters + 1). *Pavilion* is a dummy. *** .01, ** .05, * .10. Standard deviations in parenthesis.

6.1 Newspaper differentiation

Various theoretical and empirical papers have discussed the slant of newspaper editors in reporting event and stories. The reasons are multi-fold. For example, a newspaper may wish to confirm the beliefs and expectations of readers in order to consolidate its market share (Mullainathan & Shleifer, 2005; Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010). In addition, links with politicians, institutions or interest groups can affect the content of newspapers (Baron, 2005; Anderson & McLaren, 2012). Finally, newspapers may devote more space and better evaluations to those companies that invest in the media and purchase a significant amount of advertising space (Reuter & Zitzewitz, 2006; Ellman & Germano, 2009). Thus, *Corriere* and *Repubblica* might have specific though unobservable reasons to favour large countries against small ones. Table 4 replicates the main regressions separately for *Corriere* and *Repubblica* and confirms the slant towards small countries in both newspapers. Regarding the qualitative media slant, a t-test confirms that the large and rich countries participating at the Expo obtained a more positive evaluation in both newspapers (two sided, *p*-value = .001).

6.2 Sensationalism

Baron (2006) argues that certain journalists, in order to increase their visibility and the probability of accelerating their career, are inclined to over-dramatize some events or to keep on writing about the same specific issues. During the six months of the Milan Expo, some journalists were permanently appointed to follow the event and describe the characteristics of the foreign pavilions. If one or more of these special reporters intended to artificially expand the space devoted to large countries and/or exaggerate the quality of their pavilions, the results of the empirical analysis would be biased. We thus followed Friebel and Heintz (2014) and sorted the articles in the sample into four categories: (articles with) unknown author, known author, known author with more than 5 articles, known author with more than 10 articles. We replicated the main regressions (shown in Tables 3 and 4) and found no significant variation in sign, magnitude and significance of the coefficients.

7 Conclusions

This study has analysed the media coverage of foreign exhibitors at the Milan Expo 2015. We estimated the influence of the economic size and wealth of a country on the magnitude of newspaper reports, in terms of articles and words devoted to each country. Having a proprietary pavilion certainly attracted the interest of newspapers. However, the data also show that the largest countries obtained more coverage in the two most important online newspapers, while the result is less robust for the richest nations. The results hold after controlling for pavilion quality, approximated with the surface used in the Expo area. At the same time, newspapers devoted fewer words to those countries further away from Italy. The difference between large and small countries is also significant from a qualitative perspective: the largest and richest countries received reports that were more favourable.

A possible criticism of our findings regards their interpretation. If the mass media devote more space and more positive reviews to the pavilions of large and rich countries, a simple reason may be that those pavilions were "more attractive" than the others. In other words, the size of the pavilions is an imperfect proxy of their quality. However, objectively measuring the quality of a pavilion or of similar structures is not easy. Lacking the data on the number of visitors and their reactions to the pavilions, the quality of the pavilions needs to be assessed indirectly. In addition, this objection could be extended to all studies that find a media bias in newspaper or newscast reports. If these reports cover more and better certain "items," the higher quality of such objects could explain their higher newsworthiness[4].

Although many studies assess the quality of the object of the reports including many "control variables," the relationship between the coverage of an issue and its "quality" can always raise a pseudo-Hegelian argument that frustrates the efforts to capture the media bias.

Various limitations of the paper open the way for future inquiries. This paper does not consider the feedback of the Expo visitors. A study of the pavilion entries would assess the quality of the pavilions more precisely, and facilitate a comparison of the visitors' reviews with the evaluations of the mass media during the event. Secondly, it would be interesting to explore the readers' perception of media bias. In Section 2 it was highlighted that the media bias can have ex-ante and ex-post effects. During an expo or similar events, journalists can usually visit the site before the official opening and provide reports on the characteristics of the event and their own personal experience. One interesting aspect is that many citizens and media users have an opportunity to assess first-hand whether or not the reports are biased, for example by discovering that the mass media ignored some elements of the events that they found interesting. If the reports present a certain amount of bias, citizens could modify their decision to visit the event or change how they were going to visit it. In addition, media users could abandon the biased media, switching to alternative information platforms.

An issue regarding the "quality" of newspapers coverage is the possible use of national stereotypes by journalists. The use of stereotypes to describe or analyze an event pertaining a foreign country is rather common in the media (Seiter, 1986; Gorham, 1999; Park, 2002). When food is the debated issue, as it was at the Milan Expo, stereotypes are frequent. Of course, the media coverage could spread a ste-

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4 For instance, if an empirical analysis shows that the American mass media devote more coverage to Democrats than Republicans (e.g., Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2010), one could argue that the arguments of the democrats are more "interesting," "useful" and "better expressed" and therefore that the media are not biased, rather they follow events and stories that are highly important

for readers or viewers. Alternatively, if the mass media dedicate more attention to male athletes during the Olympics (e.g., Eastman and Billings, 1999; Higgs et al., 2003), one could observe that the quality of male performances is higher and thus that it is reasonable to devote more attention to them.

reotyped image of well-known countries to meet the audience expectations. At the Expo, stereotypes can be a consequence of the contents displayed by national pavilion, which are supposed to offer a familiar image of each country to reduce consumers "food neophobia" (Jang & Kim, 2015). Stereotyped expressions can have a significant impact on the "tone" of the articles and therefore on the perception of readers. Future research must assess this important though complex issue.

Finally, the empirical findings are restricted to the event under examination. However, the issues raised in this paper could be extended to similar events, that is, events that entail the "equal" participation of many countries that differ in terms of GDP and GDP per capita. For example, many scholars have explored the relationship between mass media and the Olympic Games, focusing on gender discrimination and the overrepresentation of American athletes (Kinnic, 1998; Billings & Eastman, 2002, 2003; Higgs et al., 2003). In sport events, the empirical analysis could search for a disparity in the coverage of large and small countries, "other conditions being equal" (that is, for a given extent of participation and results).

Broadly speaking, expos, as well as sporting events provide an opportunity to focus on marginal countries. Unfortunately, the mass media continue to cover the dominant countries in more detail. In addition, during an event like an expo, the mission of the event itself, which is inclusive and democratic, tends to be disregarded. On the one hand, the freedom of the press must maintain their independence against private or public interference. On the other, scientific research must detect and measure the asymmetries that affect the information content and the work of journalists and editors. In general, there are numerous sources of media bias and this bias can be conscious or unconscious. Economic theory and decision science consider the potential bias derived from a preference for the status quo, which has also been defined as inertial bias. This paper has demonstrated that an inertial bias can also affect the mass media, in the context of an event that was *unique* and *equal* for all the entities that took part in it. Future research will investigate whether the inertial media bias also affects economic and social issues, and how such a bias shapes people's perception of the very same issues.

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