NEWSPAPER OWNERSHIP STRUCTURE AND THE QUALITY OF
LOCAL POLITICAL NEWS COVERAGE

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This research sought to ascertain how newspaper ownership structures influence the quality of local political news coverage. More specifically, do independently owned newspapers tend to produce larger quantities of quality local political reporting than do corporately owned and publicly traded newspapers? In the thesis, I develop an understanding of "quality" news coverage as being coverage that is thematic, or providing interpretive analysis and supplying contextual information. Additionally, I tackle the question of quality news coverage from three angles: whether or not independently owned newspapers provide more quality local political news stories per edition than corporately owned papers; whether or not the percentage of quality local political news stories of total political news stories within an edition is higher for independently owned or corporately owned newspapers; and whether or not the percentage of total political news stories of total news stories is higher for independently owned or corporately owned newspapers.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I  INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II  LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local vs. National News</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Media, Learning Effects, and Attitudes</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural Effects: Agenda Setting, Priming, and Framing</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Quality News Is, What Quality News Isn’t</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivations of Newsmaking</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On Profit and Quality</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of Concentration</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III  THEORY</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER IV  DATA AND METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER V  FINDINGS</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER V  CONCLUSION</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 Newspaper Characteristics and Market Variables ................................................. 60
Table 2. Differences between Independent and Corporately Owned Papers ................. 61
Table 3. Effects of Ownership on Number of Quality Local Political News Articles (Dependent Variable: Number of Quality Local Political News Articles) ...................... 66
Table 4. The Percentage of Political News that is High Quality ..................................... 69
Table 5. The Percentage of News that is Political News (Dependent Variable: Percentage of Local News Stories to Total News Stories in a News Edition) ....................... 72
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Dear Mr. Fritts:

I am being called upon to contact my congressman and anyone else I might know in Congress to urge them to pass a bill that will, among other things, lift national radio ownership limits. The language is very interesting. In word and in tone it clearly implies that radio as an industry might not survive if this legislation is not passed. The young man who just called me said that for radio to remain competitive, "it is vital that we get this legislation passed."

Remain competitive?

Please understand that I am a spirited capitalist. I don't begrudge anyone a profit. I don't begrudge a huge, obscene, make-me-green-with-envy profit – so long as the making of that profit doesn't do damage to the marketplace in which it was made. Mr. Fritts, I agree that radio broadcasters need some relief on ownership limits. The current limits are antiquated. I support modifying the ownership rules. I support modification to the national ownership limits. But totally lifting national limits goes too far. If enacted, this legislation is going to set off a "land rush that will ultimately harm the industry. The law that brings the change the NAB so fervently supports is going to be accompanied by another law -- the law of unintended consequences.


Gleiser's predilections, set forth in this letter to the National Alliance of Broadcasters the year prior to the passage of the 1996 Telecommunications act, presaged political and media scholars' concerns regarding the consequences of media consolidation and concentration (Gleiser 1996). The 1996 Telecommunications Act, designed to ease the restrictions limiting the size of media empires, lifted previous ownership limits on radio stations, permitting owners to amass up to eight commercial AM and FM stations in
a single radio market with 45 or more commercial stations. The act further allowed television station owners to hold up to 12 stations in a single market, and granted owners of cable systems license to proffer services to the public only previously offered by telephone companies (Graber 1997, 42). Gleiser's predictions, that the passage of such a bill would cause many independent station owners to sell their enterprises to large conglomerates, bringing about a “Draconian focus on costs,” that would spur a steep decline in innovation and product development, and leave “a small cadre of very highly paid morning shows and major marquee' names,” essentially panned out to be true (FCC 2001).

By definition, independently owned media are those owned by a single individual, company, or family, and are not publicly traded; corporately-owned news outlets are those owned by larger companies and are publicly traded, and are subject to the dictates of investors.

Incidentally, the trend toward media consolidation and conglomeration has not been relegated to the broadcast media, and neither have the consequences. Rather, the last few decades have been marked by sweeping changes in the ownership structures of broadcast and print media outlets through consolidation and media mergers. As pertains to print media, at the time Gleiser penned this letter, more than 80% of American daily papers were already controlled by national and regional chains, (Graber 1997, 42) a stark reversal from fifty years before, wherein 80% of newspapers were independently owned. In this study, I intend to address whether this tendency toward the concentration of
newspaper ownership results in a quantifiable decrease in the quality of the informational product, with particular emphasis on political news.

Political and media scholars have not been remiss in noting the trend toward media concentration, or the possible ramifications this tendency toward consolidation might entail - not just for the media industry – but for democracy itself. To date, evidence suggests that media consolidation does, in fact, have deleterious consequences for the quality of news coverage (Arnold 2004; Kaniss 1991; Downie and Kaiser 2002, Bagdikian 1987). Some scholars suggest that media outlets owned by a larger parent corporation adhere more closely to the profit objective than do independently owned enterprises, as financial expectations and profit directives are handed down from the parent company.

The local team is given its profit orders. The local publisher is told precisely how much he or she must produce in profits for each three-month period. It is not keyed to the needs of the local community, except as a guess at maximum possible extraction, but is derived for the total system's impact on Wall Street. Every quarter the profits must increase (Bagdikian 1987, 78).

As the profit objective trickles down through the news organization, it invariably affects the journalist, as editors pressure journalists to cover stories that will boost their ratings, and management cuts the cost of news production by eliminating news bureaus, pulling funding from investigative projects, and generally slashing news budgets. Effectively, these budgetary constraints and profit goals encourage the production of fragmented, episodic, lifestyle and entertainment news, rather than in-depth news accompanied by issue analysis (Kaniss 1991; Downie and Kaiser 2002).
Although much anecdotal and qualitative evidence has been brought to light, few studies have empirically explored the consequences of media consolidation on the quality of political news coverage. To my knowledge, no studies have provided quantitative evidence of the effect of media consolidation as relates to the quality of local political news. In this study, I intend to explore, quantitatively, how ownership structures of local newspapers influences the quality of local political news coverage.

In pursuing this topic, I have first defined quality news coverage in a two-fold manner. Despite the long-standing normative debate as to what precisely constitutes quality political news, in broad strokes, scholars agree that quality news ought to provide enough information to allow individuals to engage in rational self-governance (Zaller 2003, 111); and should also provide deep interpretive analysis (thematic news), rather than focus on concrete events without regard to underlying trends (episodic news) (Ansolabehere, Behr, and Iyengar 1993, 52).

With this definition of quality in mind, I examined fourteen corporately-owned and fourteen independently-owned, small-to medium-sized daily newspapers across the country, available through Newsbank. I randomly selected ten issues per year for each newspaper, and examined each issue for the ratio of Associated Press stories and lifestyle and sports news features to local political news. This aims to drive at comprehensiveness, or the first factor of quality news coverage.

Secondly, for each local political news story, I determined whether the coverage is thematic, providing in-depth issue analysis, episodic, with little analysis or explanation as to how the event fits into the bigger picture of public life, or a mixture of the two.
Episodic news is that which is oriented around concrete events, situationally specific, with little analysis or explanation as to how the event fits into the bigger picture of public life (Ansolabehere, Behr, and Iyengar 1993, 51). Episodic coverage is usually “hard news,” depicting occurrences in a “fast-paced” and “compelling” manner (Ansolabehere, Behr, and Iyengar 1993 52). Conversely, thematic news is constructed around deep, interpretive analysis of long-term issues affecting public life. The media's use of episodic or thematic frames has grave implications for democratic accountability, in that continuous streams of disjointed information prevent citizens from developing coherent and nuanced understandings of public issues and their root causes, making it difficult for individuals to accurately assign responsibility for social ills or effectively hold officials accountable for their actions (Iyengar 1991, 9).

I anticipate the consequences of corporate ownership for local political news will be much the same as for national political news - namely, that corporately owned newspapers will tend to provide episodic and less comprehensive coverage of local political issues than independently owned newspapers.

This study specifically focuses on local newspapers because of their ability to set precedents for the daily news cycle, as well as their ability to publish larger quantities of in-depth information than broadcast media (Downie and Kaiser 2002, 64). Local newspapers play a particularly important role in supplying voters with information regarding lower-level elections (local broadcast and the national media fail to provide adequate coverage of these elections). Newspapers often constitute the sole source of
information regarding local politics, as local broadcast news stations do not have the time to devote to issue analysis (Mondak 1995, 99).

This study focuses on local newspapers, because like the national media, local media have the potential to set the public and institutional agenda and influence the direction of urban policy (Kaniss 1991, 216). If the national media exert such influence over the mechanisms of accountability in national politics, the local media play an equally vital role. Without adequate news coverage of positions legislators take on important issues (and how thoroughly those issues are described), how those legislators contribute to policy making, how critics evaluate legislative performance, and what candidates are running, democratic accountability cannot take place (Arnold 2004, 11). The local media is the sole provender of such information (Ansolabehere, Behr, and Iyengar 1993, 49). Beyond this, if the local media is best suited to provide coverage of the activities of Congressmen at the federal level, they are certainly best suited to provide coverage of state and local politics. Like the national media, the local media have the potential to set the public and institutional agenda at the local level, and influence the direction of urban policy (Kaniss 1991, 216). Smith finds that high levels of public concern for certain issues at the city level mirror the amount of coverage devoted to those issues in the local media (1987, 388). Like the ability of the national media to sway the attitudes of individuals with regard to government performance, the local news is able to shape individuals’ attitudes with regard to local policies (Scheufele, Shanahan, and Sei-Hill 2002).
As previously mentioned, scholars have examined the effect of corporate ownership of media organizations on the quality of political news at the national level, and a few scholars have conducted case studies at the local level (Kaniss, 1991; Downie and Kaiser 2002), but to my knowledge, no one has conducted a quantitative study of the effects of corporate ownership at the local level- a topic which I am convinced merits further investigation.

This topic merits further investigation because the media’s continued (and increasing) adherence to profit goals may be incompatible with its democratic role as a transmitter of information and an instrument of accountability. People “through frequent elections, are the source of authority for government and are the primary safeguard against its abuses” (Vinson 2003, 4). If accountability is the pillar of American democracy, the media is its base (Downie and Kaiser 2002, 8). Without timely, relevant, and quality information, citizens cannot make informed decisions regarding their best interest. Without it, individuals could neither gauge their best interest, nor determine how well their elected representatives enact their (the constituent's) best interest. Although each individual within the electorate may not utilize quality, in-depth information in the formation of their decision calculus each election, the availability of quality political information is an essential ingredient to democracy. Without free access to information, democracy fails.

As Baker (2007) points out, quality information is normatively important to democracy inasmuch as the one person one vote principle is necessary to democracy. The institutional principle of one person one vote, “turns out not to provide actual equal
political power, but that was not its point. Rather, a normative conception of democracy requires that the structure itself embody or at least be consistent with respect for citizens' equal claim to be recognized as part of the self-determination process,“ (Baker 2007, 6). So it is also necessary that all individuals have access to in-depth and accurate information when making their decisions, even if citizens fail to utilize it in practice. Even if individuals primarily rely on party identification or information relayed through their social networks to reach their decisions, accurate information conveyed through the media at some point played a role in the process by which they arrived at their conclusions (Arnold 1993).

The following chapter contains an overview of what scholars have identified as the media's normative and actual functions in democracy; what extant research reveals about the media's effects on individuals' attitudes and learning; how structural features of the media in society lead to priming, framing, and agenda setting; what measure of quality most accurately gauges the media's adherence to its role in democracy; what motivations lie at the bottom of the news-making process; how profit concerns affect the quality of news; and the history of media concentration in the United States. Chapter III develops a theory explaining how ownership structure influences profit orientation in the news room, thereby affecting the quality of local political news coverage. Chapter IV outlines the data and methodologies employed in this study as well as results, and Chapter V provides a brief summation of the findings of the study, potentials flaw of the study and proposals for future research.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars have established a solid expectation regarding what the media ought to do, but how do the media actually function relative to democracy? Even if the media disseminates accurate and thorough information, does it influence the way audiences see the world and make judgments? Does the news media actually serve to check the actions of elected officials? In the following sections, I provide scholars’ answers to each of these questions, and how these issues should inform scholar’s views about how “quality” news should be defined, and what it should accomplish.

First, I address what research shows about the normative and actual functioning of the media in democracy. I then segue into a discussion pertaining to the efficacy of media messages in informing citizens' electoral decisions, the media's capacity to prevent politicians from making decisions discordant with constituency preferences, and whether or not other voting heuristics (party identification) undermine the importance of media messages. I then discuss what scholars have discovered about the way the media shapes attitudes and influences audience opinions.

The intention behind this discussion is to develop an understanding of what quality news should accomplish. Without looking through a specific lens to assess quality, “quality political news” is a nebulous concept, subject to anyone’s conjectures. In the world of journalism, “quality news” can mean any number of things: writing style, organization, graphics design, the erudition of the language employed, a lack of...
verbs,' the relevance of the topic itself, etc. Arguments advanced under the auspices of ill-defined concepts signify nothing. Thus, for the purposes of this study, quality political news entails the fulfillment of the media’s normative role as it relates to maintaining democratic society.

The American media's foremost democratic purpose is to transmit information and messages between elected officials and their constituencies, as well as between members of the citizenry (Cook 1998, 82). This function is requisite in geographically dispersed and highly populated democracies, as few individuals have the time, resources, or inclination to gather first-hand the relevant information requisite to making informed decisions about their best interest. Information is costly (Downs 1957, 141). Instead of incurring such personal costs, citizens rely upon the services of paid journalists to do the job for them (Arnold 2004, 7). Because of this near-absolute reliance, it is “impossible to study the presidency, the Congress, the Supreme Court, federal departments, bureaus, and agencies with any claim to a comprehensive understanding without heeding the news media,” (Sparrow 1999, 12).

The media doesn't just facilitate the process of electoral accountability by transmitting information, but by serving as a “crucial sluice between public opinion formation and state will formation,” (Baker 2007, 7). In other words, democratic accountability operates by two machinations: the ability of citizens to elect their officials and the ability of public opinion to modify representatives' behaviors while in office, “for fear of electoral retribution,” (Arnold 2004, 11). In this way, the media has the potential
to sway public opinion, influence policy makers, and alter the course of policy-making outside of the electoral context (Kaniss 1991, 216).

Even from the perspective of elected officials, the media serves a valuable purpose. Without the media, elected officials would have a tough time explaining their actions to the public or educating their constituents on complex policy matters, especially when the "public good" is difficult to recognize (Vinson 2003, 5). Explaining the intricate details of bills to constituents, and how each amendment to an item of legislation as it rolls through the legislative process might result in a “yes” or “no” vote might present a difficult task for legislators.

Legislators deal with a host of such items each session. Without the media, informing publics on the motivations behind their actions on legislation, or even fully informing them about the content and implications of pending legislation, would require that politicians inundate constituents with pamphlets, letters, and invitations to public meetings. It is likely only the politically attentive would notice. The media ensures political messages are disseminated to the largest audiences possible. Incumbent electoral strategies often rely on the media to transmit messages about how they have represented the particular needs of their districts as well as their policy stances on issues crucial to their districts (Mayhew 1974, 53).

Scholars have developed numerous theories pertaining to the role of information, citizens, and representatives in a democracy. By whatever processes information translates from public opinion into legislative decisions, electoral efficacy, popular judgment, and representativeness can only advance as citizens have greater access to in-
depth political information (Graber, McQuail, and Norris 2008, 185). Simply, democratic accountability cannot take place if adequate news coverage of positions legislators take on important issues (how thoroughly those issues are described), how legislators contribute to policy making, how critics evaluate legislative performance, and what candidates are running, is not available (Arnold 2004, 11).

Local vs. National News

Interestingly, the national media seldom provides details regarding the positions of legislators, legislative performance, and candidate platforms (Vinson 2003, 7). The local media is the sole provender of such information (Ansolabehere, Behr, Iyengar 1993, 49). Studies show that national news outlets’ coverage of Congress primarily focuses on the institution as a whole, rarely devoting space to the coverage of individual members. When the national media cover individual members of Congress, the attention is usually devoted to scandal, controversy, or party leaders. This makes local media the prime link between constituents and their elected officials (Vinson 2003, 7). Arnold's study shows that coverage of individual representatives by local newspapers is a regular event, with the typical newspaper publishing about fifteen articles per month that mention a local representative, and showing no bias in coverage along the lines of ideology (2004, 61). Most papers cover roll-call voting extensively, though many fail to thoroughly analyze policy conflicts or provide continuous coverage of representatives' positions on issues before said issues come to vote (2004, 122). Papers extensively cover representatives working to protect local constituency benefits (2004, 153).
Beyond this, if the local media is best suited to provide coverage of the activities of Congressmen at the federal level, they are certainly best suited to provide coverage of state and local politics. According to Graber (2007), the national media essentially neglects local and state political actors. Disregarding the debate regarding the net impact of national media messages on national politics, research has revealed that local media has great potential to set the public and institutional agenda at the local level, and influence the direction of urban policy (Kaniss 1991, 216). Smith finds that high levels of public concern for certain issues at the city level mirror the amount of coverage devoted to those issues in the local media (1987, 388). The local news is able to shape individuals’ attitudes with regard to local policies (Scheufele, Shanahan, and Kim 2002).

The Media, Learning Effects, and Attitudes

As the above arguments articulate, the media's importance to democracy is based on the premise that the media enables citizens to form public opinion through the dissemination of information, which then “influences and ultimately controls public will formation,” and eventually guides the course of legislation (Baker 2007, 7). Baker's statement addresses the issue in broad strokes. Mapping the intricate processes of how information translates into public will formation and democratic accountability has proved something of a challenge for scholars. Since the early 1950s, scholars have developed three models to explain the effect of media messages on individuals’ attitudes and learning.
The first model, or the minimal effects model, maintained that media messages had little influence over individuals. The minimal effects model claims that pre-existing beliefs determine what messages audiences choose to pay attention to, and what messages the audience would disregard (Leighley 2004, 149). Yet by the mid 1960s, scholars were questioning the validity of this model in the face of a rapidly changing methodological landscape (Ansolabehere, Behr, and Iyengar 1993, 135). Up till this point, researchers relied primarily upon surveys to ascertain the effects of media messages. However, it is difficult (if not impossible) to draw causal inferences from survey data. During the 1960s, researchers began to employ a variety of techniques toward gaining leverage over the issue.

New methods yielded new results. The contingent effects model emerged. Like its name, this model specifies that only certain types of media delivering certain types of messages will significantly influence certain types of people (Leighley 2004, 150). On top of this, researchers have also uncovered evidence that learning from the media is an incremental process, and relatively small in comparison to the amount of media individuals consume. Further, some scholars believe Americans' factual ignorance pertaining to government and international affairs probably stems more from apathy than from sheer stupidity (Leighley 2004, 170). Although this model has many adherents, some scholars claim that the electorates’ widespread ignorance pertaining to politics stems less from lack of attentiveness, but from the incoherence of media messages. “Recent research is beginning to paint a portrait of the news as fragmented, analytically superficial, hard to remember, and difficult to use meaningfully” (Bennett 1983, 2).
While some scholars attribute individuals' lack of recall ability to faulty memories, and some to the faulty conveyance of information, others claim scholastic definitions of “learning” are faulty. Proponents of the “on-line” model of learning claim that though citizen's knowledge base may not be greatly subject to penetration by media messages, the media still exert influence over individuals’ political attitudes. According to this view, individuals attach emotional meanings to new messages, discard the “facts” of the message, and add that emotional charge to their composite emotional evaluation of the issue with which the message is oriented (Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995, 321).

Whether the on-line model, contingent effects model, or minimal effects model is truly ascendant, the literature more generally supports the idea that media use affects political attitudes, regardless of an individual's ability to recall specific facts presented within media messages. Iyengar and Kinder (1987, 119) claim that television news molds individuals' perceptions of the salience of national issues, influences their attributions of responsibility for social problems, and determines the criteria by which they judge the performance of national leaders (1987, 119). Similarly, Smith, (1987) in her examination of the extent to which local news coverage influences individuals' opinions about local government performance, finds that newspaper coverage has a one-way effect on public attitudes toward government, and that public attitude toward government causally precedes public concern about issues (1987, 390). Scheufele and colleagues discovered that not only does local media use bear a strong correlation to individuals' strength of attitudes toward their local government, but also with individuals' level of involvement in local politics (Scheufele, Shanahan, and Kim 2002, 435 ).
finding runs slightly contrary to evidence revealed by the study conducted by Stevens, Alger and Sullivan, which attempts to trace the link between civic involvement and media use through examining four local television stations in Minnesota. According to their logic, since Minnesota is the “social capital capital,” its citizens probably have access to large quantities of high-quality news. Instead, they find that Minnesotans’ involvement in politics has little do to with news consumption, as Minnesota's local television news falls short of providing adequate local political coverage (Stevens, Alger, and Sullivan 2006, 79). The results of this study imply that high quality news is not necessary for a politically-engaged citizenry. However, it does not address the effect of high quality news on the quality of citizens' political engagement or how well citizens can identify their preferences with existing candidates and emerging policies. Even if the politically and civically engaged citizens of Minnesota did have high levels of political knowledge, this study in no way negates the importance of high quality news on a broader scale. Since the citizens of Minnesota tend to be more politically and civically engaged, they are more likely to obtain political information through more circuitous routes than citizens living in areas with lower levels of civic engagement.

Structural Effects: Agenda Setting, Priming, and Framing

The literature also points to three structural sources of media influence over public opinion: agenda-setting, priming, and framing. The media's ability to set the institutional public agenda is inextricably tied to its “gatekeeping” function (Graber 2007, 92). Though paid to collect the news in proxy of ordinary individuals, news
organizations too are constrained by time, resources, and space, and so cannot present to audiences the universe of newsworthy events. Editors daily face the task of finding out what, when, and where the news is. In this process, newsworthy events are bound to slip under the radar. Even when (and if) editors achieve full awareness of what is news, they still face the task of making judgment calls about which stories to squeeze into a limited space - and which stories to cut.

Reporters must also make judgment calls about what information and quotes to include in their articles. Editors typically give reporters a specific number of “inches” a story should fill on a news page. Writing to target facilitates the layout and design process, and ensures that stories, once submitted, will not be edited down to the “right” size. Reporters frequently must decide how to fit a legal pad full of factual details into a 400 word article.

At every level, these judgments play a monumental role in politics, as readers consume only the news that publishers, editors, and reporters deem most relevant. Audiences learn how much weight to assign to various political issues from the amount (and variety) of information they receive in the news media (McCombs and Shaw 1972). In this sense, journalists act as 'gatekeepers,' deciding what information enters the public realm (in what quantities), and what information does not. Most all information circulating in the public domain has at one point passed through the media filter, and has the potential to influence the publics' perceptions of issue salience and impact which issues the government chooses address (Leighley 2004, 179). No such potentiality exists
for unreported information. This hypothesis, though so logical it hardly warrants further examination, has much support from scholarly research.

In their seminal study of the agenda-setting hypothesis, McCombs and Shaw (1972) iterate that the media's realm of influence does not lie so much in changing individuals' opinions regarding specific issues, but in defining which issues are most prominent in political campaigns. Their study reveals that, “voters share the media's composite definition of what is important, strongly suggesting an agenda-setting function of the media” (1972, 184).

The agenda-setting hypothesis has also played out in racial attitudes toward immigration. Branton and Dunaway find that the rash of local media coverage of immigration in 2006 led individuals across the nation to believe immigration was a major threat to the nation, especially individuals living in close proximity to the Mexico border (2009, 15). Their study also revealed a relation to a media market's proximity to the Mexico border and increased coverage of immigration (2009, 17). Though the causal arrows of this study are difficult to discern, (i.e., was the increased media coverage an artifact of individuals' increased perceptions of the salience of immigration issues?) they find that public opinion fluctuated along the lines of media coverage: as media coverage waned, so did individuals' perceptions as to the importance of the immigration issue (2009, 21).

As regards crime, Iyengar and Gilliam's experimental study (1998) shows individuals' perceptions and fears of African American and Hispanic youth increases after watching a newscast in which they are exposed to a five-second mug shot of a
minority offender. Exposure to the five-second minority mug shot also leads to drastic increases in whites' and Asians' support for harsh crime policies and racial stereotypes (1998, 46).

In another well-known study, Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder (1982) employ experimental data to determine whether the media actually sets the public agenda. They conducted two experiments: the first tested the agenda-setting capacity of the media in respect to U.S. defense, and the second experiment examined the agenda-setting effect in relation to U.S. defense and preparedness, pollution of the environment, and inflation. The results of their experiment revealed agenda-setting effect in regard to pollution and defense matters, but no such effect for inflation (it was already a looming problem at the time) (1982, 851). Also of interest, they discovered that individuals who were less politically involved were most likely to share the media's notion of what issues were most salient (1982, 854). As a whole, these results suggest that the media's agenda-setting abilities are greatest when dealing with “non-obtrusive” issues with which citizens have little direct experience (Leighley 2004, 179).

In their study of presidential leadership strategies, Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake (2011) examine how delivery of nationally televised addresses affected the public’s and media’s Iraq policy agendas from 1989-2008. They discover that such focused presidential strategies have no direct influence over the public’s agenda. Instead, they find that the media drives the public’s concern for the issue, and heightened public concern influences the likelihood that a president will deliver a televised speech regarding the foreign policy matter. They find, however, that televised presidential
addresses do increase media attention to Iraq, which then influences the public’s agenda. They conclude “the media are a central and intervening linkage between the president and public given that the president appears able to indirectly lead the public through the news media,” (Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2011).

Baumgartner and Jones (1993) further propel our understanding of the importance of the agenda-setting hypothesis for democracy. Theoretically, stability in government depends on the rules of who is included or excluded from political monopolies (1993, 19). Policy losers, or those excluded from power, can overthrow policy monopolies only if they can galvanize public opposition by redefining the lens through which the public views an issue (1993, 20). Rarely do policy losers attempt to contradict existing facts espoused by policy monopolies; instead, they attempt to shift the lens through which policies are viewed, as the tone of debate surrounding an issue can change dramatically if there's a shift in focus (1993, 113). The American media is of inestimable value in this process, due to its capacity to set the public agenda (1993, 105). Policy entrepreneurs, or those excluded from policy monopolies, attempt to gain the attention of the media by capitalizing on the media's desire for conflict and drama (1993, 118). Baumgartner illustrates these points through the historical coverage of smoking and the use of pesticides by the national media. Initially, the media gave these two issues positive coverage, in accord with the economic objectives of the policy monopolies behind these industries. However, policy entrepreneurs (detractors from the two industries) were able to gain rapport with the media, and in turn shift the focus of the debate from the economic benefits of these issues to the risks associated with tobacco and pesticide use.
Entrepreneurs gained the attention of the media, the media shifted the public agenda, and in time, the demands of the public wrought policy change.

The priming hypothesis is an immediate outcropping of the agenda-setting hypothesis, and refers to the media's capacity to influence what criteria individuals use to judge the performance of elected officials (Leighley 2004, 178). This concept siphons its logic from the attribution theory developed by social psychologists, which “aspires to provide a systematic account of how ordinary people explain the mundane puzzles thy encounter in everyday life,” (Iyengar and Kinder 1987, 82). This theory operates on the assumption that “the role of any particular cause in producing an observed effect will be discounted if other plausible causes are also present,” (Iyengar and Kinder 1987, 83). For instance, individuals would be less likely to blame officials for urban poverty if the media portrayed the root cause as being individuals' lack of self-efficacy in urban centers, rather than governmental neglect. The news shapes individuals' judgment of officials' performance in three ways. First, the media influences which issues are most salient to the public; by so doing, they cause audiences to assign greater weight to those issues when evaluating officials' performance; and third, the way the media frames responsibility for those issues markedly influences where individuals lay culpability. In their 1982 study, Iyengar, Peters and Kinder not only test whether the media sets the public agenda, but also if by so doing the media alters the plumb lines citizens use in evaluating the president's performance. As mentioned earlier, their results supported the agenda-setting hypothesis. In regard to the effects of agenda setting upon individuals' evaluation of the president, they found “a president's overall reputation, and to a lesser
extent, his apparent competence, both depend on the presentations of network news programs” (1982, 853). Krosnick and Kinder (1990) also test the effects of media priming, finding that news coverage influences “only the aspects of public opinion that are directly implicated by the story,” and citizens who had low levels of political knowledge were most vulnerable to priming effects (1990, 501).

**What Quality News Is, What Quality News Isn’t**

Now with a solid understanding of the media’s normative importance and its capacity to influence the public agenda in place, it is possible to revisit the issue of “quality” news. As mentioned earlier, “quality” must be understood in terms of how the media advances the goals of democratic accountability. Scholars have debated what type of news best fulfills this objective for decades.

While a few scholars and many mainstream media critics tend to fixate on whether or not ideological biases taint media messages, a much more crucial dispute circulates amongst political and media scholars to date. The primary contentions regarding quality hover around whether “soft” or “hard” news; “burglar alarm,” or “monitorial” news coverage; or “thematic” or “episodic” news best fulfill the information needs of citizens determining their best interest. These concepts, rather than dealing with ideology, center on the frames the media employs in presenting the news, the comprehensiveness of news coverage, and the analytical strength of the news.

Some scholars claim quality should be judged in terms of “hard” or “soft” news. To clarify, soft news is defined as being factually unsubstantial, sensational, personality-
centered, less grounded in recent events, and more incident based (Patterson 2000, 3). According to Baum (2002), soft news consists of, “a set of story characteristics, including the absence of a public policy component, sensationalized presentation, human-interest themes, and emphasis on dramatic subject matter” (2002, 92). Programs like *Hard Copy*, *Inside Edition*, and the *Oprah Winfrey Show* are prime examples of media outlets providing informational content that constitutes “soft” news. Hard news is that which is timely, relevant, and informative. Many scholars have lamented the rise of soft news in the media industry, claiming that it distorts individuals' perceptions of reality by devoting inordinate attention to rare (but more glamorous) threats, while ignoring looming, everyday problems; sensationalizes disasters (Kaniss 1991, 48); appeals to individuals' baser interests; and devotes more attention to politicians' campaign strategies than their policy platforms (Kaniss 1991, 47). Further, detractors claim that there is a limited amount of news space: as the use of soft news increases, it pushes news with greater informational content out of the picture. By so doing, the media is limiting the public's scope of information, thus restricting the quality of public deliberation (Patterson 2000, 3).

Despite these qualms, others suggest that the soft news is good for democracy, as it hooks otherwise inattentive audiences into the news. The more individuals reeled in, the more will be exposed to the hard news content presented elsewhere within the broadcast/or newspaper (Kaniss 1991, 49). Baum uncovers evidence that individuals who do not express interest in political or foreign policy events, yet view soft news regularly, glean more information about high-profile political and foreign policy events
than individuals who express no interest in political and foreign policy events yet do not regularly consume soft news (2002, 105). Baum argues that soft news coverage of political issues through “cheap frames” lowers the cost of paying attention, making political information into an incidental byproduct of viewing entertainment programs (2002, 98). His study also shows that soft news consumption has the greatest impact among the least politically engaged in society, and the least amount of impact among the well-educated and politically engaged (2002, 105). He also finds that inattentive citizens who consume soft news are more able to vote consistently with their preferences than inattentive citizens who consume no news (Baum, 2006). In another study, Baum (2003) also argues that increased exposure to soft news may impact individuals' attitudes and political decisions, without necessarily influencing their long-term factual knowledge about particular political decisions and events (2003, 187). This finding seems to bolster the argument in support of soft news, but is in fact a double-edged sword. Soft news may increase the knowledge levels of the politically disengaged, but has no impact on the knowledge levels of the politically engaged. If soft news continues to drive hard news to the periphery, politically active citizens will have less information with which to make their decisions.

Zaller wards away criticisms of the increased use of soft news by asserting quality news ought to provide sufficient information for democratic self-governance. He criticizes the “full news standard” endorsed by other scholars (which aspires to “sober, detailed, and comprehensive coverage of public affairs”) because it fails to reach those voters of greatest consequence in presidential elections (low-information swing voters);
and is impractical for democracy, as it demands of citizens more than they willingly give (2003, 114). Instead, Zaller proposes a third model of quality news coverage – the “burglar alarm” standard. By this standard, “journalists should regularly cover important issues in ways that are intensely focused, dramatic and entertaining, with the goal of calling public attention to matters requiring attention in excited and noisy tones,” (2003, 122). By this standard, citizens are kept abreast of the most vital information, by which they are able to make informed decisions regarding matters most urgent.

Though appreciably benevolent to both the public and the media, Zaller's argument in favor of more streamlined media coverage overlooks a couple of problems. The first being the media mostly already adheres to the burglar alarm standard. However, mingled with the sirens warning citizens of imminent danger, are the false alarms, “ringing about dubious problems, unseemly scandals, and daily threats to health and safety…” (Bennett 2003, 131). The media, in order to attract audiences through dramatic, entertaining coverage, constantly sound the alarm on issues of little consequence. In this bedlam, not all citizens might easily distinguish between real problems and false alarms (2003, 134). Secondly, if the media reacts to political events rather than pro-actively monitoring the political field, it may fail to notice and sound the alarm on less conspicuous but no less threatening dangers. Furthermore, the burglar alarm only sounds when the danger is imminent, once the burglar has crossed the threshold. As Bennett says, “waiting until conflict breaks out is an imperfect trigger,” (2003, 134). Many catastrophes can be prevented or stymied if the problem is identified in advance.
Further, Zaller’s burglar alarm standard is built on a certain assumption regarding peoples' news preferences. In fact, market researchers and media consultants alike have long assumed individuals prefer “easier to digest” news (Patterson 2000, 5). Patterson disagrees, claiming the media's increasing use of soft news to attract viewers has led to the decline in news audiences in the long run. His two-year survey reveals that Americans tend to believe the news has declined in quality, and that Americans generally prefer hard news (Patterson 2000, 6). Furthermore, he also finds that hard news consumers are much heavier consumers of news, and are much more likely to express a negative opinion about the quality of news than soft news consumers. Individuals who tune in to the news do so to gain information, rather than be entertained (Patterson 2000, 7). Insofar as news outlets replace hard news with soft news coverage, audiences will continue to decline. Some might contend these Patterson's findings are skewed, as people would be likely to obscure the truth of their news preferences in the interview setting. Yet Belt and Just (2008) also tackle the issue from a different approach. They examine whether audiences' low informational tastes drive the sinking quality of local television news coverage of public affairs, or if the tabloidization of the news stems from other factors. According to Belt and Just, quality local TV journalism should be “hard news,” focused on significant events, based on original reporting, balanced, drawn from authoritative sources, and relevant to the community. Using a commercial success index and a composite measure of quality, their study reveals that quality journalism sells. Higher quality newscasts glean higher ratings, at least for the 154 local television news stations involved in their study (2008, 204).
Media bias, the use of soft vs. hard news, and the burglar vs. monitorial standards for judging quality all have their proponents and detractors. Constructing an adequate measure of quality from one or all of these disparate ideas would be a tricky task indeed. However, one determinative aspect of quality which almost every scholar accedes to is the necessity of thematic, contextual coverage. The media's use of episodic or thematic coverage is what I consider the most consequential factor in the news quality debate. Episodic news is that which is oriented around concrete events, situationally specific, with little analysis or explanation as to how the event fits into the bigger picture of public life (Ansolabehere, Behr, and Iyengar 1993, 51). Episodic coverage is usually hard news, depicting occurrences in a “fast-paced” and “compelling” manner (Ansolabehere, Behr, and Iyengar 1993, 52). Conversely, thematic news is constructed around deep, interpretive analysis of long-term issues affecting public life. Thematic coverage necessarily provides contextual information and digs deep in its attempts to uncover the root causes of social phenomenon. Jerit (2009) finds that the use of contextual information in news stories diminishes the political knowledge gap between persons of high and low socio-economic status. Specifically, when Jerit interacts individuals’ education levels with their consumption of contextual news, she finds the effects of education on an individual’s knowledge base diminishes. Her finding holds for both print and television users (2009, 448).

As noted earlier, whether citizens hold politicians, society, or individuals responsible for the outcomes and resolution of social ills determines their political preferences. According to Iyengar and Kinder (1991), the media's use of episodic or
thematic frames greatly influences how citizens attribute responsibility, thus greatly influencing the “reward-punishment” nature of the electoral cycle. The media's use of episodic or thematic frames has grave implications for democratic accountability, in that continuous streams of disjointed information prevent citizens from developing coherent and nuanced understandings of public issues and their root causes, making it difficult for individuals to accurately assign responsibility for social ills or effectively hold officials accountable for their actions (1991, 9). Bennett claims that the instability of Americans’ political opinions and lack of political knowledge results from reliance upon media messages that do not present a lucid picture of the political world. Rather, evidence suggests the media increasingly presents news in an incoherent, “fragmented, analytically superficial, and hard to remember” format (Bennett 1983, 2). “The parallels between news fragmentation and public opinion characteristics suggests that the public’s true failing has been to follow the news and take it seriously” (Bennett 1983, 20).

This aspect of quality, though perhaps the most important to the workings of democratic accountability, tends to get drowned out by the more voluble debate over whether soft or hard news constitutes quality, whether monitorial or burglar alarm coverage is adequate to keep citizens abreast of political happenings, and whether the media introduces ideological bias into its messages. Yet for the purposes of this study, quality political news is defined in terms of how well a media message provides contextual information and thorough analysis of a political happening, rather than simply reporting the hard-and-fast details of a political event.
Motivations of Newsmaking

Evidence suggests the media exerts a broad influence on society, in both subtle and conspicuous ways. If the media can steer the course of popular judgment by determining which issues gain public saliency – the question remains – what criteria and motivations lay at the bottom of the news-making process? What factors determine whether a news organization will produce tabloid news or quality news? Scholars and critics have amassed a preponderance of explanations for what guides the media’s motivations for providing news. Synthesizing this multitude of explanations, a few models of the news media and its motivations emerge.

The first of these models, the reporters of objective fact model, views the media as an unobtrusive institution, merely serving the function of a conduit for information flows between elites and the public (Leighley 2004, 9). In this vein, journalists strictly follow editorial criteria of newsworthiness, report only facts, and fully divorce their personal values from the news gathering/news reporting process (Leighley 2004, 50). The second model espoused by scholars, the neutral adversary model, upholds the notion of the “watchdog press,” wherein reporters painstakingly monitor the actions and policies set forth by government officials (Leighley 2004, 10). Accordingly, reporters take an active stance in the creation of news by pursuing lines of investigation which will render public officials accountable for their actions (Leighley 2004, 50). A third model, the public advocate model, bears remarkable resemblance to the trusteeship model of representation. In this sense, reporters, acting as the “unelected representatives of the people” select news with a view to defining public debate as they believe best serves the interests of the
public. Thus, news is a mirror reflection of the normative values maintained by journalists, which are directly influenced by their personal social, religious, and political ideologies (Leighley 2004, 51). Another model, which waxes and wanes in popularity depending on national tides, is the propagandist model. Advocates of the propagandist model claim the media is but the tool of those in power. Journalists pay ultimate deference to and follow the dictates of those in power. News is what elite interests say it is (Leighley 2004, 10).

The final model, which has attained nigh universal credence among scholars, is the profit-seeker model, wherein media organizations operate as private businesses and adhere to no overarching agenda other than profit generation (Leighley 2004, 11). News organizations do not select news with a view to fulfilling their democratic function. The economic marketplace rather than the marketplace of ideas drives news production. According to Entman (1989) the news product does not differ from any other consumer good in so far as it is contoured to fit the laws of supply and demand.

On the supply side, news organizations take cost efficiency measures in order to minimize production costs, and on the demand side respond to consumer tastes in order to gain audiences and advertisers (Entman 1989, 17). In other words, there are two principle guidelines by which news organizations determine which stories make the news: accessibility and appropriateness. The first factor, accessibility, refers to the “feasibility and the cost of covering particular events or issues.” Appropriateness concerns the “suitability or 'fit' between events and the particular needs of the reporters' medium or audience,” (Ansolabehere, Behr, and Iyengar 1993, 51).
Scholars have delved into the veins and capillaries of the news-manufacturing process to understand how the profit objective influences news-making decisions. Hamilton (2004) claims that news organizations, rather than relying on traditional staid-and-fast news-value criteria, determine what information to report based on how well that information reflects the preferences of advertisers' target audiences. In the early days of radio, programming was funded and sponsored by businesses aiming to increase sales. Sponsorship laid the groundwork for the current system of subsidizing programming and production through commercials. When television developed, it inherited this advertising logic. Since television stations and networks receive funding through advertisements, the primary goal of television stations and networks is to attract larger audiences, often in ways contrary the public interest. The profit logic has altered news standards, as news directors have sought to accommodate larger audiences through producing low quality news (Baker and Dessart 1998, 137).

Since news outlets derive the majority of their profit from selling advertising, they cater to the tastes of advertisers' target audiences: thus, information is provided only when it is profitable to do so. News organizations typically generate much more profit through advertising revenue rather than individuals’ subscriptions to their news services. This brings about an interesting supply and demand dynamic, as news organizations work to “deliver news audiences to advertisers” (Bennett 1983, 3). Rather than necessarily appealing to the broadest audiences possible, news organizations tend to appeal to as large a pool of advertisers as possible. Since the “quality” of an audience is always in the forefront of advertisers’ considerations, this objective naturally trickles down through the
news organization (Bagdikian 1987, 116). This principle sometimes skews the news in the direction of susceptible age groups and those with the greatest purchasing power. News organizations tend to 'pass over' stories that might appeal to or serve some utility for individuals of 'less desirable' socioeconomic brackets, as reporting such news yields little marginal returns (Hamilton 2004, 105). From this vantage, the media's goal of profit maximization is not a recent occurrence; rather, it began with the transition from the partisan to the independent press at the turn of the century. This transition marked the beginning of the relationship of the press to advertisers, as at this time the media began to rely on advertising revenue rather than party subsidies (Cook 1998, 33).

Downie and Kaiser (2002) similarly address the way profit-seeking objectives have shaped the news making process. In recent years, corporate owners and boards of directors have placed increasing pressures on journalists and editors to enhance the appeal of news, with a view to attracting more advertisers. This has resulted in a shift in the news paradigm and the development of new news values. The news now strives to attract more audiences by appeasing Americans' appetite for celebrity news, substituting the pontifications of pundits for facts (2002, 231); treating “entertainment as news, and news as entertainment” (2002, 234); and replacing government, political, and foreign news with health, weather, and lifestyle news (2002, 238).

Though these alternative standards of newsworthiness expounded upon by Hamilton and Downie and Kaiser may not consciously affect reporters' news coverage decisions, profit maximization is of paramount importance to owners and managers. Invariably, this objective trickles down through the news organization to influence
reporters. According to Kaniss, decisions made at the top of the news hierarchy create an “environment of incentives and constraints,” which influence what stories journalists pursue (1991, 72). If management reduces the budget for the city hall beat and applies the difference to the lifestyle or sports beat; or if editors consistently place certain types of stories on the front page, while ignoring others, journalists will learn to pursue those stories which management deems 'valuable,' and drop less fruitful pursuits (1991, 73).

Sigelman (1973) also explores how the policy objectives of news leadership pass down to reporters in the absence of blatant coercion. Particular to this case study, Sigelman examines how two newspapers' recruitment, socialization and control practices influence the newsman-newsleadership relationship and introduce bias into news gathering and reporting processes, despite journalistic aspirations toward serving the public. Sigelman finds that newspapers devote little time and resources to socializing new recruits: what socialization does occur happens through the editorial revision process, and in “cub” reporters' associating with “veteran” reporters (who tend to have opinions highly supportive of the newspaper's policies) (1973, 138). According to Sigelman, since news organizations do not blatantly impose organizational policy on new recruits, but organizational policy is inculcated by “veteran” reporters, reporters are favorably disposed (and conform) to newspapers' leadership agenda while retaining their faith in the institutional myths of public duty (1973, 140). Thus, reporters are seldom confronted with professional vs. organizational commitment dilemmas. Furthermore, working arrangements also encourage this conformity to news-leadership objectives. Many significant decisions about a story assignment are made well before the reporter
begins his coverage, and after a reporter has completed a story, the story is subject to the editing process. Through the revision process reporters learn what constitutes acceptable coverage- and in pursuit of conflict avoidance, curtail coverage of topics which are viewed as objectionable by news leadership (1973, 147).

On Profit and Quality

Many media scholars agree that the commercial interests of the media are incompatible with its public functions (Graber, McQuail, and Norris 2007, 211). The media delivers the product they perceive people demand, rather than providing in-depth, objective, analytical coverage of pressing political issues. This entails news coverage which typically highlights the active, dramatic, and emotionally-charged aspects of an event without provision of context or explanation as to how the event fits into the larger picture (Bennett, 19). Action and drama news usually sacrifice detail and analysis for the sake of the “sexiness” factor (Kaniss 1991). According to Bennett, the news is fragmented, with “almost all stories suffering from the absence of meaningful connections to each other,” leaving citizens the task of deducing just how political, social, and economic events tie into each other, and what impact this might have on their lives. And to further appeal to audiences’ preferences, news reports seldom escape beyond the bounds of mainstream viewpoints (1983, 19).

The profit objective manifests itself not only audience-driven journalism (Sparrow 1999, 83); but profit pressures also result in newsroom cutbacks (Dunaway 2009, 9), “boosterism” (Downie and Kaiser 2002, 87), a decline in enterprise news
stories, reliance upon wire services (Gladney 1990, 70), and questionable relationships with advertisers (Kaniss 1991, 50). The combined limitations of time and money exacerbates the fragmentation of the news, as reporters with little resources can more easily focus on concrete events than provide in-depth issue analysis which require both time and money (Ansolabehere, Behr, and Iyengar 1993, 52). Sparrow claims that the profit objective has so infiltrated newsrooms, that broadcasters seek “images over ideas, emotion over analysis, exaggerate when necessary, avoid extensive news gathering, and cut wages” (1999, 89). Hamilton asserts the profit objective has caused broadcast news to be skewed to the ideological left, as advertisers' target audiences (young, female audiences and marginal viewers) tend to be more liberal (2004, 106).

Fear of isolating valuable audience bases tends to influence the media to publish news that does not disturb the status quo. “The news media discourage outspokenness, initiative, and revelation in the coverage of national politics. They thrive on telling stories about new persons, new events, and new ideas, but they interpret the new information in known terms and perspectives,” (Sparrow 1999, 176). News organizations' norms of objectivity also hinder quality news production (Leighley 2004, 94). Journalists, in an effort to report objective, balanced news, attempt to seek out two sides to every story; in doing so, they typically balance out the opinion of one official source against another. Thus, journalists’ treatment of public issues in the news often reflects merely the range of official debate (Howell and Pevehouse 2007, 159).

Journalistic reliance upon official sources is also the consequence of the reactive nature of news. Journalists' livelihoods depend on the occurrence of news. Financial
constraints limit their ability to regularly conduct enterprising investigations, and so they frequently rely upon government officials to provide structured accounts of public proceedings. This reliance upon official sources makes them susceptible to the tactics of politicians attempting to enhance their public image. Officials realize the constraints under which journalists operate, and thus stage events, perform publicity stunts, and shape their messages and actions to cater to the production values of news organizations in order to gain coverage. In short, “standards of newsworthiness begin to become prime criteria to evaluate issues, policies and politics,” (Cook 1998, 163). This tendency of officials to calibrate their messages and actions to the needs of news organizations is nowhere better illustrated than in Presidential strategies of dealing with the press. Presidents increase domestic travel in order to receive more favorable and extensive news coverage by local press (Barrett and Peake 2007), hold press conferences, press briefings, and provide production facilities and technological accommodations for reporters covering the white house (Cohen, 2010; Cook, 1998; Leighley, 2004). Such techniques on the part of officials cause journalists further reliance upon official sources, which skews their coverage of issues in favor of the government.

Kaniss also claims that news organizations' physical proximity to government agencies further encourages this tendency to rely on government officials for their sources (1991, 80). Further, she asserts that news firms interest in regional economic growth (1991, 52), publisher's/owners ties to the local business community (1991, 56), and journalists' “fear of numbers” tend to cause journalists to tote the official government line (1991, 58).
Kaniss largely attributes these profit pressures (at least at the local and state level) to the rise of competition between television, radio, newspapers, and news magazines for regional audiences. As more media sources crop up and further fragment the news audience, news outlets must increasingly consider the profit objective when making news decisions, which leads to an overall decline in quality (Kaniss 1991, 71). Similarly, Arnold (2004) finds that newspapers competing for the audience market share within the same region publish fewer articles about local representatives and their lawmaking activities than do newspapers with a regional monopoly. Further, he finds that competing papers tend to mirror each other’s type and quantity of coverage of legislators (Arnold 2004, 219).

Lacy and Simon (1993) differ, claiming that direct competition between newspapers in the United States results in a more competitive marketplace of ideas. More competition fosters heavier investment by news organizations in developing quality news products, the creation of larger news holes, less reliance on wire services, more original (enterprise) reporting, and more local news (1993, 105). Conversely, newspapers with a monopoly in their market may cut expenditures, quality, and greatly alter content with little repercussions in the short run (Baker 2007, 60).

History of Concentration

Lacy and Simon lament the trend of increasing concentration across markets, as it diminishes competition, and creates the possibility for unaccountable news organizations (1993, 132). By 1997, 80% of all newspapers had succumbed to chain ownership and
over 99% of towns had but one newspaper. By 2002, half of America's newspapers were controlled by the ten largest newspapers (Graber 2007, 36). Lacy and Simon identify four trends in newspaper ownership structures that contribute to newspaper market concentration. First is the ascent of the newspaper chain, which began in the 1960s just as many family-owned newspapers founded in the early 1900s were suddenly subject to inheritance taxes as their initial proprietors passed away. The large inheritance taxes often led families to sell their newspapers to newspaper chains in order to accrue enough money to pay the tax (Bagdikian 1987). Newspaper groups typically offer ample compensation, leading some financially stable newspapers to sell to chains (Lacy and Simon 1993, 135). The capital gains tax also constitutes another tax-related incentive for independent newspapers to sell out to chains, since money gained from the sale is usually taxed at a lower rate than yearly profits (Baker 2007).

Tax laws not only encouraged family-owned papers to sell to chains, but the internal revenue service made a ruling that provides a particular tax incentive for chains to purchase other newspapers. According to Bagdikian, “a company's accumulated annual profits enjoy a forgiving tax rate if the profits are for a “necessary cost of doing business.” The IRS decided that a newspaper using its accumulated profits to buy another newspaper is a necessary cost of doing business (Bagdikian 1987, 10).

In 1970, the government also intervened with the Newspaper Preservation Act, which exempted certain newspapers from antitrust suits. The act legalized joint operating agreements between two newspapers competing in a single market wherein one paper is in “probable danger of financial failure,” (Lacy and Simon 1993, 207). Though intended
to halt the trend of newspaper closures in large cities, this act effectively barricaded new competitors from entering the market, and in the end, failed to save many foundering newspapers (Lacy and Simon 1993, 207).

The second trend in newspaper ownership, the rise of publicly owned and traded newspapers, also centers around an effort to diffuse the expense of business operations, inheritance and income taxes. Rather than merely selling to chains, some owners began to sell their newspapers to publicly owned groups whose stocks were available for investors to buy, sell, and trade, making newspaper management vulnerable to the demands of stockholders (Bagdikian 1987).

The last two ownership trends, the increase of cross-ownership media organizations and the growth of conglomerates (combinations of media and non-media entities), more directly arise from the government’s handling of the media market in the last two decades. Though the government has traditionally taken a hands-off approach toward the regulation of the print industry, recent legislation has even further loosened the protections stemming media concentration.

The government has seldom dabbled in the regulation of the media industry due to a fear of impinging on the media’s first amendment freedoms, and the belief that the media market will, in time, self-correct. According to Baker and Dessart (1998) these motivations have led to the government's mishandling of media regulation. The treatment of media organizations as similar to other corporations in the market has caused profit logic, rather than the public interest, to dominate the content of programming. The government's relationship to the media primarily began with the passage of the Radio Act
of 1927 and the Federal Communications Act of 1934, which granted licenses to radio stations on frequencies within the limited radio bandwidth on the basis of the public interest. The 1934 Act was to “make available, so far as possible, to all the people of the United States a rapid, efficient, nationwide, and worldwide wire and radio communication service with adequate facilities at reasonable charges, for the purpose of the national defense, and for the purpose of securing a more effective execution of this policy…” This Act, which established the Federal Communications Commission, was the first official acknowledgment of the media’s peculiar role in society— not just as competitive corporations, but as stewards of public interests. The act was designed to promote the public interest, but what that public interest was, the government never clearly defined, and never stringently enforced (1998, 15).

The next major piece of legislation, the Telecommunications Act of 1996, was motivated by an entirely different spirit than as guided the formulation of the 1934 Act. This act supposedly sought to spur greater competition among cable services by eliminating numerous restrictions on ownership of TV, radio, and cable stations. Although advocates of the legislation claimed that repealing many of the ownership restrictions would enhance competitiveness within the industry, subsequent studies have shown the act did nothing to halt the trend of media concentration. A 2001 FCC study found that although the number of commercial radio stations had increased by 7.1% since the passage of the act in 1996, the pool of content providers had significantly dwindled by 25% within the same period (FCC 2001, 2). Even by the FCC’s own admission, this entails nothing good for the public interest, as “it is unrealistic to expect true diversity
from the merged entity. The divergence of their viewpoints cannot be expected to be the same as if they were antagonistically run,” (Baker 2007, 69).

Despite this admission, the FCC further rescinded ownership restrictions in 2003, allowing media companies to own multiple broadcast stations in conjunction with other types of media outlets. The act allowed a single media company to own as many stations as could reach 45% of households nationwide; eliminated the restrictions preventing media companies from owning both a newspaper and television station within the same market; and allowed owners to own multiple stations within a single market (CNN/Money 2003). Despite FCC Chairman Michael Powell’s reassurances that the measure would “advance [sic] the goals of diversity and localism,” the 1996 and 2003 FCC acts have clearly fostered concentration and further homogenized the news (Graber, McQuail, and Norris 2007, 213). The 1996 and 2003 FCC Acts heavily lean in favor of the business interests of the industry, hearkening back to the Chicago School of Economics’ understanding of antitrust, wherein concentration is understood to be harmful when a corporation obtains power over price (Graber, McQuail, and Norris 2007, 57). Although this view of antitrust may be legitimate from a purely commoditized orientation, application of this standard to the news business cannot be justified in light of the media’s social and political significance. The unsuitability of this standard is amply demonstrated in the FCC’s use of the “Diversity Index” to reach their 2003 decision (Baker 2007, 77). The FCC constructed this index to determine the amount of diversity within a market; in doing so, they not only assumed the absolute substitutability of all news formats (defining a media market as all forms of media within a geographic
region), but accorded each news organization equal weight within its own category of media. This implies that individuals daily use all available news formats, rather than just one or two, and that each news organization within its own category receives an equal portion of audience attention (Baker 2007: 83). The Diversity Index may serve as an adequate measure of concentration from a commodity perspective, but cannot serve a standard for determining when concentration becomes injurious to the media’s socio-political functions. Although the index was cited as rationalization for the 2003 decision, the elimination of legal regulations preventing cross-media ownership only exacerbated the tendency for the media to coalesce into the hands of a few powerful conglomerates (Graber, McQuail, Norris 2007, 219). The decision to repeal media ownership regulations is in large part responsible for the accelerated rate of media concentration, and evidences the government’s historical predisposition to favor the commercial interests of the media (Leighley 2004, 33).

Taken together, the literature demonstrates a tendency of the government to take a hands-off approach toward regulating the media industry, allowing news organizations to maximize profits through consolidation and conglomeration. The literature has shown that news organizations are in the business of making money, which is an underlying factor guiding the motivations behind which stories news organizations decide to pursue and whether or not they employ thematic or episodic news frames in doing so. This may have some implication for democracy, since research suggests the use of thematic or episodic frames greatly determines how individuals understand political issues and attribute responsibility for social problems.
CHAPTER III
THEORY

Media concentration, although not apparent from the proliferation of available news choices, necessarily shrinks the pool of content providers. A media company with various holdings within a single market has incentive to diversify content, rather than operate its news holdings antagonistically. This fosters the illusion of diversity while increasing the power of a single owner over news content (Baker 2007, 71)

A recent trend by the nation's largest newspaper chains to streamline operations and reduce production costs evidences this concept. In July 2011, Gannett officials rolled the newspapers' copy editing, layout, and design processes into five consolidated production centers. Essentially, stories written by local journalists will be wired to their news organizations' centralized production facility, where the copy editing and layout processes will take place, a role traditionally filled by in-house editors. Editors bear the responsibility of fact-checking, editing for spelling and grammatical errors, writing captions for photos, designing the news page, and determining which stories receive highest priority within the newspaper (Channick 2011).

Gannett's decision to consolidate the editing process for 80 local newspapers into five centralized hubs has already led to the elimination of 700 positions at the local level. The Tribune Co., which has consolidated its copy editing processes for the last year, claimed the move has saved between $8 and $9 million. Media General, which began
consolidating the copy editing and design process two years ago, said streamlining the process has saved the company more than $1 million in 2010 (Channick 2011).

Though the move spells millions in savings for newspaper chains like Gannett, vice president of news at Gannett, Kate Marymont said, “We have some savings, but very modest. This is really about building quality.”

The centralizing process has culminated in a fury of concern by local journalists and media scholars. “You have the real concern about how much accuracy, how much local knowledge, how much institutional knowledge you're losing in the craft of copy editing,” (Channick 2011). As evidence surrounding the controversial nature of the move, a journalist writes (www.gannettblog.com 2011):

...How will design centers bring quality to the print product? They'll likely be using templates and I doubt some manager in Des Moines or Loisville will break deadline to redo a page for breaking news with 14 other papers lined up like aircraft on the flight deck. Vertical photo tonight? Nope. Our template is horizontal on Tuesdays... I'm just glad I no longer work for this rapidly failing company. Cut, consolidate, fire good journalists. That's a real record for success.

The recent trend by newspaper chains like Gannett, the Tribune Company, and Media General to streamline production costs clearly evidences how content diversity may fall prey to profit pressures applied by large parent corporations. Yet not only is media concentration detrimental from the perspective of content diversity, but many claim the increased profit pressures may result in a decrease in news content quality.

Scholars have found evidence that independently-owned news organizations drastically diverge from corporately-owned papers in their aspirations (Leighley 2004, 81). According to Downie and Kaiser, independent, family-owned newspapers are those “most likely to encourage their editors' ambitions, give them adequate resources and
support aggressive, intelligent journalism,” rather than pursue the bottom line (2002, 76). Conversely, news organizations with publicly traded stocks are open to the scrutiny of investors. According to Bagdikian, chains impose stiff profit goals on their holdings, with explicit instructions as to how to achieve greater profits. The corporately-held newspaper chain is not “keyed to the needs of the local community, except as a guess at maximum possible extraction, but is derived for the total system's impact on wall street. Every quarter the profits must increase (Bagdikian 1987, 78).

In a personal interview conducted August 15, 2011 with Don Hudson, long-time managing editor with the Gannett-owned *Clarion Ledger*, “Without a doubt, profit pressures are greater for corporately owned newspapers. Corporate papers must report to boards of directors and stockholders.”

Empirically, Schaffner and Sellers’ findings support the claim that ownership structure influences news coverage, in that chain-owned newspapers devote less coverage to House members than non-chain owned newspapers (Schaffner and Sellers 2003, 52). According to Dunaway, corporately-owned newspapers are far more likely than independently owned papers to provide “horse race” campaign coverage rather than issue-based coverage of candidates (2008, 1198). Issue coverage details candidate's policy stances, whereas horse race coverage merely details candidates' campaign strategies. Intuitively, issue coverage provides the information necessary for voters to make informed decisions on Election Day (Dunaway 2008, 1196). This strong relationship between ownership and strength of coverage is largely resultant from pressures by corporate owners to squeeze more profit out of news production.
Hudson, who served as managing editor for more than seven years with the Clarion Ledger and now serves as the executive editor at the independently-owned Decatur Daily explained the scenario:

Corporate papers are looking for more savings, more and more automation. What's going to be left of the local newspaper when all the cuts are made? You're handed down a number for the budget, and you figure out how you're going to work it out. The result is often jobs cuts...The elimination of jobs is hurting quality by cutting from the ranks of management. You're losing immense amounts of knowledge...You lose good, solid content editing skills. And it's more work for others to pick up... Corporate budget cuts also reduce enterprise reporting. We used to have investigative reporters in the industry, but now we're moving them over to cover daily assignments just to get the daily newspaper out. A lot of daily newspapers run AP wire stories due to lack of reporters. Realistically, a lot of papers are asking for two to three stories per day. In some cases five to six. Reporters are having to produce a lot more, which makes them susceptible to error. But journalists feel their jobs are threatened, so they work harder than ever before to keep their positions.

Logically, reporters assigned the task of submitting three stories daily will face difficulties covering issues thoroughly. Reporters must pepper potential sources with phone calls and e-mails, with little guarantee they will get the chance to speak to an authoritative source in a timely fashion. Providing deep analysis of political issues, or any issues, proves something of a challenge when sources holding important information are out to lunch or unable to respond the day the article is due. This scenario almost eliminates the potential for enterprise reporting, and nearly guarantees that coverage of political issues will be reactionary and lacking in depth or analysis. Episodic coverage of the hard-and-fast details of an event is likely to prevail over thematic coverage under the circumstances in which reporters working for corporately-owned newspapers face.

The portrait painted by Hudson concerning the state of the industry is dire. Yet scholars corroborate his observations. According to Downie and Kaiser, the sun is
setting on the days of the feisty, independently-owned news organization. Early in the history of American media, families owned most papers, but in the 1980s, the age of the newspaper chain dawned. These chains, dominated by profit logic, pressure newspaper editors to wring out every possible drop of profit from their newspapers through shrinking news staffs, slashing wages, and decreasing the number of printed pages. According to Downie and Kaiser, medium and small dailies are put into particularly dire straits by this trend (2002, 85). Downie and Kaiser examine in detail several cases where medium-sized dailies were bought by a publicly traded corporation: Gannett. After being purchased by Gannet, each of these newspapers' traditions of aggressive, quality reporting were abandoned, and replaced by the tendency to produce short, “boosterism” stories that failed to hold local governments accountable.

Overall, evidence suggests that corporate ownership decreases the competitiveness of the media market, increases news organizations’ adherence to profit logic, and in turn diminishes the quality of political news. According to McQuail and Siune, (1998) the elimination of competitors within a media market brings about a significant reduction in the quality and amount of local political news, whereas the introduction of competition within a market increases the quality and quantity of political news. Not only do consumers pay more for media products in a monopolized market, but if the dominant player is owned by a parent corporation, the parent corporation can eliminate competition by subsidizing that particular news endeavor to undercut competitor’s prices. Competition also increases the responsiveness of media companies to the public (1998, 46).
Zaller claims this increased responsiveness of the media to the public throws a wrench in the quality of news coverage. For Zaller, increased competition “undermines the ability of professionals to provide what they consider a quality product,” as news organizations operate under the assumption that public tastes verge more toward emotional and less intellectually stimulating news (1999, 5). For this reason, Zaller claims local news quality has diminished, as features stories and entertainment news increasingly replace news stories, more pictures are included, and larger font is used (1999, 12).

Zaller may blame competition for these maladies, but if anything, the trend toward media consolidation has diminished market competition. Serious in-depth reporting has historically wrought financial stability within the newspaper industry. The neglect of this type of coverage in favor of more audience-engaging news does not signal an increased competitiveness within the market, but the efforts of newsmakers to increase short term profits with a view to pleasing their parent corporations and investors. “Wall street investors look for dividends and rising stock prices every day or every three months and are not moved to behave today by consideration s of the more remote future,” (Bagdikian 1987, 201). Parent corporations squeeze profits out of their media endeavors by providing the news product they think audiences appreciate and demand.

Extracting a candid confession from journalists and editors regarding the tendency to pander to audience tastes would prove difficult, if not impossible, as the practice most likely is not a conscious one. Yet as Kaniss points out, decisions made at the top of the news hierarchy create an “environment of incentives and constraints,” which influence
what stories journalists pursue (1991, 72). Yet again, Sigelman's study (1973) points to the way in which journalists might adhere to the profit objective in the absence of blatant coercion, since he argues that newspapers' recruitment, socialization and control practices influence the newsman-newsleadership relationship. Drawing the idea out to its final conclusion, if corporately-owned newspapers are subject to greater profit pressures than independently owned newspapers, it seems as though they would be more likely to cohere to audience tastes (Hamilton 2004). Media consultants throughout the years have operated under the idea that audiences prefer more dramatic, emotional, “sexy” stories. Often such news coverage is episodic, rather than thematic in nature. The inclusion of more episodic news into the newspaper necessarily excludes the inclusion of more thematic news, due to a limitation on space in the news hole. For this reason, it seems reasonable to predict that corporately owned newspapers would produce less thematic news than independently owned newspapers.

Further, if corporately-owned newspapers extract profit through carving out sizable chunks of the news budget by eliminating jobs, decreasing wages, and limiting the number of pages containing non-advertising content, it would seem they would not produce as much high-quality news as their less profit-pressured independent counterparts. Coupled with editors’ demands for dramatic, attention-grabbing stories, and the constraints of time, limited funds, and large workloads, reporters seldom have the capacity to thoroughly cover political news events. Again, thematic coverage requires a good deal of time and money spent in research, which reporters operating under heavier workloads and pending deadlines do not have.
Formally:

H1: Corporately owned newspapers will be less likely than independently owned local newspapers to provide thematic coverage of local political issues.

Due to budgetary constraints and the elimination of positions in the newsroom, I suspect corporately owned newspapers would more generally produce less local political news than independently owned newspapers. I predict corporately-owned newspapers will more heavily rely on Associated Press stories, and produce stories oriented around subjects requiring less analysis than political issues.

H2: Corporately owned newspapers will have a lower ratio of quality to low quality local political news than independent newspapers.

H3: Corporately owned newspapers will produce less comprehensive local political news coverage than independently owned newspapers.

An important factor yet unmentioned is how newspaper circulation might affect profit orientation. Corporately-owned newspapers are not necessarily the only newspapers under the gun when it comes to profit. Small, lower-circulation newspapers might very well operate under the same limitations as corporately-owned newspapers, but for very different reasons. A newspaper with a small circulation may not readily attract a large number of advertisers. With low amounts of revenue coming in through advertising, the news organization may be unable to hire an adequate number of reporters and editors to provide quality news coverage. In efforts to boost readership and attract advertisers, they may even attempt to adhere to audience tastes and neglect coverage of more important issues. Thus, I also suspect circulation size might have an intervening influence on the quality of news coverage.
CHAPTER IV
DATA AND METHODOLOGY

In order to test my hypotheses, I have selected 28 small to medium-sized newspapers located in the five regions of the United States, made available through Newsbank. Small newspapers are classified as having a circulation less than 30,000, medium newspapers are classified as having a circulation ranging from 30,000-139,000 (Gladney 1990). I decided to incorporate newspapers from politically and socially diverse locations in order to enhance the external validity of this study. Newspapers included in this study are based in Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Maine, Virginia, Maryland, Florida, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, California, and Washington.

Fourteen of the newspapers selected are corporately-owned, and 14 are independently owned. I selected cases to ensure each of the two categories contain newspapers with roughly comparable circulation sizes and excluded weekly and bi-weekly newspapers from the analysis, since weeklies tend to feature less time-relevant articles and more lifestyle stories than daily papers. I also selected cases to ensure variation along the lines of newspaper competition, a factor cited by Zaller (1999) as affecting the quality of news content. Newspaper competition was determined by the presence of other newspapers within the primary areas of coverage. For instance, a newspaper that canvassed four cities in its news coverage would be judged as having competition if one of those cities had a daily newspaper, or if another newspaper in the
area also covered the news in that city. Although the FCC implicitly claimed that
different types of media (radio, television, magazines) are virtually interchangeable, I
align with Baker's assumption that they are not, and judge competition solely on the basis
of newspaper-to-newspaper competition (2007). Chain-owned newspapers with
“competition” from another paper owned by the same parent corporation were not
classified as competitive, since, as Baker notes, parent companies are unlikely to run their
holdings antagonistically (2007). None of the newspapers selected are nationally
circulated, as this study focuses on the effects of ownership on the content of local
political news.

I randomly selected ten dates throughout the year of 2010 on which to conduct my
analysis. I did not randomize ten dates for each newspaper during 2010, in order to
account for the presence of nationally newsworthy events that may have drawn broad
coverage by most media outlets, local or national. I did not exclude Sunday newspaper
editions from the analysis, although articles within Sunday editions are less time-relevant
than weekday editions. However, this does not preclude the publication of in-depth
political news on Sunday. Even if newspapers did publish less political news on
Sundays, most newspapers' readership increases on Sundays. From the perspective of the
media's democratic functioning, I think it unwise to exclude Sunday editions from the
analysis, on the mere qualm that Sunday editions do not reflect typical weekday news
coverage.

I selected news published within 2010 to ensure the study was as timely as
possible; however, the selection of this particular year presents something of a problem.
Since the 2007 recession, newspapers across the nation have sustained extensive financial losses, which have resulted in further newsroom cutbacks. I am not certain whether independent or corporate newspapers have been more or less affected by the recession, or whether independent or corporate newspapers would be more or less likely to fire employees in the face of financial strain. If both independent and corporately owned newspapers have suffered equal losses during the recession, I do not foresee this as having an effect on the results of this study. However, if corporately owned newspapers have been more affected by the recession, measures enacted to cope with financial losses may be mistaken for profit pressures. If independently owned papers have incurred greater losses than corporately owned newspapers, my results will most likely not favor my hypotheses.

For each of the newspapers, I examined each edition that fell on the selected dates. In essence, I examined 280 editions published by the 28 newspapers. Within each edition, I counted the total number of local political news stories and the total number of articles, with the exception of opinion sections and obituaries, which are submitted by the community, rather than produced by local reporters. I counted the total number of local political news stories and the total number of non-political news stories in order to construct the dependent variable for my second hypothesis, which predicts independently-owned newspapers will provide more comprehensive political news coverage than corporately owned newspapers. I decided to do this by comparing the ratio of political news to non political news across newspapers. Since I am comparing ratios, I need not define a threshold at which a publication is considered comprehensive; rather, I
may simply conclude that a particular newspaper provides more or less comprehensive local political news coverage than another. Further, many newspapers are prone to have the occasional slow news day, wherein there is little political news to report, and certainly, highly populated cities have more political news to report than towns with populations in the hundreds. However, I believe I have adequate variation on market factors so as to obviate the need to account for the actual amount of political news available for publication.

As for what constitutes local political news, I include all stories pertaining to state or local politics. Stories regarding legislators and representatives at the federal level are not counted as “local,” as such analyses have already been conducted (Arnold 2004). Deciding whether or not a news story constituted “local political news” required making a few judgment calls. In the end, I decided that all stories pertaining to the expenditure of money by state governments, local governments, school districts, and local and state agencies constituted political news. Any news involving decision-making on the behalf of elected officials, trends regarding policies enacted by local and state governments and agencies, events hosted and promoted by local and state governments, election news, and news involving local political figures also constituted local political news coverage. Events or scenarios that affect local politics, such as declining home values (home values determine the amount of money received by governments through property taxes) and local job layoffs were not counted as political news. Although these factors affect local politics, I had to draw the line somewhere, since multitudes of social and economic factors bear an impact on the decisions of elected officials. The stories in this analysis
therefore focus on the actions and ramifications of decisions made by elected officials, rather than events that may influence their future decision-making processes.

After classifying the news stories as either oriented with local politics or not, I went through the local political stories and determined whether the coverage was thematic, providing in-depth issue analysis, episodic, with little analysis or explanation as to how the event fits into the bigger picture of public life. Episodic news is that which is oriented around concrete events, situationally specific, with little analysis or explanation as to how the event fits into the bigger picture of public life (Ansolabehere, Behr, and Iyengar 1993, 51). As noted earlier, episodic coverage is usually hard news, depicting occurrences in a “fast-paced” and “compelling” manner (Ansolabehere, Behr, and Iyengar 1993 52). Conversely, thematic news is constructed around deep, interpretive analysis of long-term issues affecting public life.

Judging between the two was relatively difficult. Due to the nature of these concepts, articles had to be judged as being thematic or episodic on a holistic basis. Word counts, sentence counts, story source counts, keyword and key phrase searches, and story structure cannot suffice when determining whether an article is thematic or episodic. Thus, each article was read and judged on a case-by-case basis. Stories that reported an incident as having occurred, without providing background information or possible ramifications of the incident are classified as episodic. For instance, an article as appeared in the Bangor Daily News on August 29, 2010 about the decision of local town officials to raise the tax rate by 8.1 percent. The article cites the old and new rate, claims that the city has made cuts, but fails to detail which portions of the city budget
experienced cuts, and whether raising the tax rate will increase the flow of funds to those portions of the budget (Mack 2010). As another example of episodic news, an article regarding a local school district’s decision to consolidate three campuses into one (closing two elementary schools, moving them into the middle school campus) appeared in the Bangor Daily News in April. The story cites the reduction in state funding for the fiscal year and the dollar amount of the current budget, but fails to mention how many students would be affected, how far they would have to be transported, how much money the move would save, and the number of students per classroom (Bowley 2010). Conversely, stories that provide background information surrounding decisions, expenditures, events, and meetings were classified as thematic. For instance, a similar article appeared in the Deseret News regarding a school district facing the choice to close an elementary campus. This article addresses the points that the Bangor Daily News left unexamined (Stewart 2010). An article appearing in the Waco Tribune-Herald on August 26, 2010 regarding a local city council’s decision to pass a two cent rather than 10 cent property tax rate increase accomplishes what a similar story in the Bangor Daily News fails to do. It explains which portions of the city’s budget would be cut, by how much, and why councilmen decided not to raise taxes to the expected rate (Culp 2010). As further examples of episodic news, stories that announced public hearings without reporting the background of what items were being discussed (Staff 2010) and “horserace” election coverage (Firestone 2010) were judged as episodic.

In short, my dependent variables are as follows:

- Dependent Variable 1: The number of quality local political news stories within a newspaper edition.
The data I collected allowed me initially to break down the unit of analysis to the article level, which yielded an N of 1231, since I read 1231 total local political stories in the course of this study. The stories were dichotomously measured as “0” for low-quality or “1” for quality, with a view to running logit analysis. However, the structure of the dataset was not conducive to running logit analysis. I restructured the data for the purposes of running a negative binomial regression, which required the newspaper edition to be the unit of analysis.

- Dependent Variable 2: The percentage of quality, thematic local political news stories of the total number of local political news stories within a newspaper edition.

- Dependent Variable 3: The percentage of local political news stories of the total number of news stories within a newspaper edition.

Primary independent variable, ownership: Independently-owned newspapers that are not chain owned and publicly traded are assigned the value of “0”, while corporately-owned papers which are chain-owned and publicly traded are assigned the value of “1.” I determined ownership during 2010 through information available on Newsbank. I anticipate that independently-owned papers will be more likely to produce quality political news stories, and more likely to produce a higher ratio of political news to other forms of news.

Competition: Newspapers operating in the presence of competition from other newspapers were assigned the value of “1,” and newspapers operating without competition from other newspapers were assigned the value of “0.” I collected this data by determining the primary cities of coverage for each newspaper, and then searching those cities for other daily newspapers. I predict that increases in competition will bear a
positive relationship to the quality of political news, and that the ratio of quality local political news to low-quality political news will increase. I don't believe the presence of competition will increase the amount of political news coverage relative to other forms of news coverage.

Circulation size: Measured as the number of subscribers to the newspaper during 2010. Information for this portion of the study was obtained through Newsbank during 2010. This measure is essentially a proxy measure for newspaper resources. I posit that higher circulation numbers will bear a positive relationship to the quality of political news, since larger circulation numbers are likely to lead to greater amounts of advertising revenue at a news organizations' disposal. I believe increases in advertising revenue will better allow both independently and corporately owned newspapers to cover political news in a more thematic manner. I predict that increases in circulation size will also increase the ratio of quality political news to low-quality political news. Once again, I am unsure as to whether or not an increase in circulation size will yield an increase in the amount of political coverage relative to other forms of news coverage.

Percent of primary market with bachelor's degree: The percentage of the newspaper's primary market having obtained at least a bachelor's degree. Information for this portion of the study was drawn from 2010 census data at the county level. If newspapers do factor in audience preferences in their determination of what news to cover, the overall education level of a market may very well determine how much “infotainment” or serious news coverage is provided. I predict that as the percentage of
the primary market having a bachelor's degree increases, the quality of political news coverage will be greater, and newspapers will devote more coverage to political news.

Per capita income of primary market: Measured as the amount of money made per person in the newspaper's primary market in 2010. Information for this portion of the study was drawn from 2010 census data at the county level. The affluence of a market determines what businesses and how many will advertise with a newspaper. News organizations target those with the greatest purchasing power to appeal to advertisers, which may influence how the news is covered. More specifically, I believe an increase in per capita income in a newspaper's primary market will lead to an increase in the quality of local political news coverage and an increase in the ratio of quality local political news to low quality political news. However, I am uncertain as to how an increase in the affluence of a newspaper's market might affect the quantity of political news coverage relative to other forms of news coverage. Newspapers may be more inclined to produce more leisure and lifestyle news to appeal to a wealthier audience base. Therefore, I predict that as per capita income for a newspaper's primary market increases, the ratio of political news to other forms of news will decrease.

For the first, second, and third dependent variables, I have an n of 280, which is the total number of newspaper editions I read during the course of this study. The following table summarizes the market variables of each of the newspapers employed in this study, and the market demographic variables of each newspaper.
Table 1 Newspaper Characteristics and Market Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>% High School Degree</th>
<th>% Bachelor's Degree</th>
<th>Per Capita GDP</th>
<th>Ownership</th>
<th>Circulation</th>
<th>Competition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bellingham Herald</td>
<td>90.3</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>25,021</td>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>23938</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Columbian</td>
<td>90.7</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>27,382</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>49488</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Argus</td>
<td>85.7</td>
<td>39.9</td>
<td>33,831</td>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>31861</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Bakersfield Californian</td>
<td>71.4</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>19,939</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>65899</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Deseret News</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>24,911</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>76739</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Salt Lake Tribune</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>24,911</td>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>135730</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arizona Daily Times</td>
<td>86.1</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>22,238</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>116345</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alburquerque Journal</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>25,830</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>109963</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria Advocate</td>
<td>79.8</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>23,219</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>34747</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corpus Christi-Caller Tim</td>
<td>78.2</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>21,979</td>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>60858</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waco Tribune Herald</td>
<td>79.5</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>20,160</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>40385</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lubbock Avalanche Journal</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>21,939</td>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>55585</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bradenton Herald</td>
<td>86.5</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>28,418</td>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>48587</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Port Sun</td>
<td>89.9</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>32,768</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>5500</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Frederick News</td>
<td>91.1</td>
<td>34.9</td>
<td>34,746</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>40209</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Star Democrat</td>
<td>88.8</td>
<td>33.2</td>
<td>39,294</td>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>16000</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily Progress</td>
<td>90.5</td>
<td>52.5</td>
<td>35,532</td>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>29964</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangor Daily News</td>
<td>89.2</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>22,813</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>63611</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Chronicle</td>
<td>83.9</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>25,603</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>9491</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Greenwich Times</td>
<td>88.2</td>
<td>43.4</td>
<td>48,394</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>11672</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Republican</td>
<td>83.2</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>24,556</td>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>87500</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Centre Daily Times</td>
<td>92.2</td>
<td>38.4</td>
<td>22,949</td>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>24395</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Butler Eagle</td>
<td>91.1</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>27,646</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>29749</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bellevue News-Democrat</td>
<td>85.7</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>28,469</td>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>53694</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breeze Courier</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>20,673</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>6181</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madison Courier</td>
<td>82.8</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>20,740</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>8848</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Grand Rapids Press</td>
<td>87.6</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>25,018</td>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>143315</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 provides a quick glance at the mean number of quality local political news stories per edition, the mean number of political news stories per edition, the mean
number of news stories per edition, the mean percentage of quality political news of total political news per edition, and the mean percentage of political news of total news per edition, for both independently and corporately owned newspapers.

Table 2. Differences between Independent and Corporately Owned Papers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Independently Owned Newspapers</th>
<th>Corporately Owned Newspapers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean Quality Local Political News Stories Per Edition</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Political News Stories Per Edition</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean News Stories Per Edition</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>40.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Percent of Quality Political News Stories to Total Political News Stories Per Edition</td>
<td>72.2%</td>
<td>72.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Percent of Political News Stories of Total News Stories Per Edition</td>
<td>12.46%</td>
<td>11.75%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A brief glance at Table 2 reveals that independently owned newspapers provide, on average, fewer quality political news stories per edition than corporately owned newspapers, but for both independent and corporate papers, the average percentage of quality political news stories of the total political of news stories is roughly equal. Of interest is the difference in the average percentage of the daily news hole filled with political news between independent and corporately owned newspapers.

In order to test my first hypothesis, that corporately owned newspapers will be less likely than independently owned newspapers to provide thematic coverage of local political issues, I decided to use the newspaper edition as the unit of analysis, in order to run a cross-sectional negative binomial regression on the data. As mentioned before, I wanted to employ a logit analysis to increase the number of observations to 1231, but logit analysis was not feasible for several reasons. First, the articles were not randomly
drawn from the population of newspapers. The articles appeared over a span of one year in newspapers that were carefully selected on the basis of variation on my explanatory variables. Unobserved factors specific to each newspaper and the region wherein it operates could likely influence how political news is covered, and how much is covered. For instance, turbulent relations between a newspaper and city staff could affect the quality and rate of political coverage. Tensions could result in city officials requiring reporters to file freedom of information requests in order to obtain necessary information, which can take days. From the organizational perspective, a particular editor may be more or less willing to publish stories that do not hold public officials to account for their decisions. Although the data do not form a typical time series, it cannot be treated as a pooled cross-section because change over time is not being assessed.

In order to treat the data as time series, I necessarily had to employ a count model, which restricted the number of cases to the number of editions used in this study. The count model allows me to tackle the same question, whether corporately or independently owned newspapers are more likely to provide quality local political news coverage, from a slightly different angle.

Although I would have preferred the use of fixed effects estimation, which “allows for arbitrary correlation between ai and the explanatory variables in any time period,” my explanatory variables do not change over the one-year period from which the newspaper editions were drawn (Woolridge 482). With the fixed effects model, “any explanatory variable that is constant over time for all i gets swept away,” (Woolridge 482).
I decided to treat the data as a cross-sectional time series with the negative binomial count model, otherwise known as the random effects negative binomial model. Random effects estimation “allows for explanatory variables that are constant over time,” while yielding standard errors that are free from the effects of serial correlation caused by unobserved, time-constant factors (Woolridge 490). This advantage is tempered by the assumption that there can be no correlation between the unobserved factors in the composite error term and the explanatory variables. In this study, this would essentially mean that those factors previously mentioned – editorial personality and relations with the city – could not be correlated to newspaper ownership, circulation size, the presence of competition, the percentage of the market with a bachelor’s degree, or a market’s per capita income. Although it is unlikely these unmeasurable factors would greatly be related to my independent variables, there is little way of knowing for sure. Certainly, there are a host of other unobservable factors that cannot be easily accounted for (Woolridge 493). However, if the assumption that time-constant unobserved market and organizational factors are not correlated with the explanatory variables holds, the random effects model can provide accurate standard errors and consistent estimates (491).

Though Pooled OLS with clustered correlation is commonly used with data wherein the explanatory variables change, “only at the level of the cluster, not within the cluster,” I do not think this method suits my data as well as random effects estimation, due to time-specific factors that may alter the way each of the newspapers cover local political news (Woolridge 495). For instance, proximity to the holidays may result in each of the papers’ covering less politically-oriented news. Further, various local papers
across the country may simultaneously be subject to similar lulls in the news cycle, as occurs during the UK’s “silly season,” (Duffy 2005). Because of these time-specific effects, using the random effects model makes more sense than running an OLS regression and clustering by newspaper. I could insert time dummy variables, yet the inclusion of more dummy variables results in a less efficient model. However, in the event that my controls are not sufficient to justify applying random effects estimation, (once again, there can be no unobserved effects correlated with my explanatory variables) both methods are included in Table 3.
CHAPTER V
FINDINGS

According to Table 3, newspaper circulation is the only explanatory variable statistically significant at the .05 level in first model. Holding all other variables constant, a single unit increase in newspaper circulation would result in an increase in the expected number of quality local political articles by .000444%. Although the increase seems minuscule, a circulation increase of 2,252 is expected to add an additional article to the count of quality political articles, holding all other factors constant. Ownership, competition, and the other market variables were jointly insignificant in this model.

In Model 2, which treats the data as pooled yet includes time dummies and clusters by newspaper, circulation and per capita income are both statistically significant at the .05 level or less. Holding all variables constant, a unit increase in circulation would yield an estimated .0005% increase in the expected number of quality local political articles per newspaper edition. An increase in circulation of 2,000 is expected to produce an additional article in the count, holding other factors constant. Per capita income, which in the first model does not meet the typical criteria for statistical significance is not only significant but has a larger estimated impact on the dependent variable in model two. Holding all other variables constant, a dollar increase in a market's per capita income is likely to generate a .004% increase in the total count of quality political news stories produced in a single newspaper edition. An increase of
$250 in a newspaper’s primary market would result in an additional article in the expected count of quality local political news per edition.

Table 3. Effects of Ownership on Number of Quality Local Political News Articles (Dependent Variable: Number of Quality Local Political News Articles)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Random Effects NB</th>
<th>NB with time dummies, clustered paper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.361 (.583)</td>
<td>.042 (.492)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ownership</td>
<td>.109 (.201)</td>
<td>.229 (.198)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circulation</td>
<td>4.44e-6** (2.14e-6)</td>
<td>5.01e-6*** (2.11e-6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>.016 (.194)</td>
<td>-.064 (.223)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Obtained Bachelor's Degree</td>
<td>-.006 (.017)</td>
<td>-.007 (.013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per Capita Income</td>
<td>.000 (.254)</td>
<td>.00004** (.0000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time1</td>
<td>-.425*** (.175)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time2</td>
<td>.169 (.144)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time3</td>
<td>-.926*** (.197)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time4</td>
<td>.091 (.128)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time5</td>
<td>.052 (.139)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time6</td>
<td>.116 (.211)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time7</td>
<td>omitted</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time8</td>
<td>.001 (.101)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time9</td>
<td>-.254*** (.111)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time10</td>
<td>-.550*** (.118)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 300; Standard error in parentheses; *p-value<.1 **p-value<.05 ***p-value<.01
The estimated effect which newspaper circulation has on the number of quality political news articles is as expected in both of the models. In a model not shown, an interaction term was created with the circulation and ownership variables, which was not statistically significant. In other words, regardless of ownership, a higher circulation bears a positive relationship to the number of quality local political news stories in an edition. Naturally, determining whether more quality political news stories results in a larger circulation base, or whether a higher circulation indicates the presence of more resources with which to produce quality news, is beyond the scope of this study.

Interestingly, the larger a newspaper’s primary market’s per capita income is, the larger the number of quality local political news articles is expected to be. As it is unlikely that the number of quality local political news stories printed in a news edition would bear much impact on a market’s per capita income, it is safe to say that higher levels of income in a market result in higher quality political news. This may be due to a newspaper’s attempt to target a more highly educated audience (Lacy and Simon 1993). Although the percentage of a market having obtained a bachelor’s degree is not shown as significant in the models, it is highly correlated with a market’s per capita income. Further, a newspaper with a wealthier audience may generate a greater level of revenue through selling more expensive ads than a newspaper with a market with a low per capita income. This too may result in the availability of more resources with which to produce quality political news.

Unlike my hypothesis predicted, newspaper ownership had no effect on the raw number of quality local news stories produced in a newspaper edition. Newspaper
readers are no more likely to read more quality political news stories in an edition if the
newspaper is corporately or independently owned. Likewise, the presence of competition
in a newspaper's primary market had no statistically significant influence on whether a
newspaper produced more high quality local political news stories than another. The
results of this hypothesis test do not address the ongoing debate as to whether
competition encourages or discourages quality reporting (Zaller 1999; Lacy and Simon
1993).

Most of the time dummy variables incorporated in Model 2 are statistically
significant. I did not anticipate such a strong relationship between the time dummy
variables and the number of quality local political news articles produced in a newspaper
dition. One explanation for this relationship is that newspapers, regardless of location,
may face similar daily news cycles throughout the week. For newspaper editions
produced at Time 1 or Time 3, the expected count is lower than on other dates.

Incidentally, both dates fall on a Monday. Unless a newspaper publishes in the
afternoon, the news printed within an edition reflects the happenings of the previous day.
Little in the way of political news is likely to occur over the weekend. When examining
my third hypothesis regarding the comprehensiveness of political coverage, the
plausibility of this explanation was tested. If percentage of political news of total news
coverage is lower at Time 1 and 3, this explanation may have some merit.

Table 4 contains the results from testing the effects of my independent variables
on the percentage of quality political news published within a newspaper edition. Model
one contains the results from running a random effects OLS regression with robust
standard errors, as well as the estimates from running a pooled OLS with time dummy variables and clustered standard errors.

Table 4. The Percentage of Political News that is High Quality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Random Effects OLS</th>
<th>OLS with time dummies, clustered paper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>40.48*** (15.299)</td>
<td>50.412*** (15.081)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ownership</td>
<td>-1.472 (7.017)</td>
<td>-1.246 (5.359)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circulation</td>
<td>.000 (.000)</td>
<td>.000 (0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>3.824 (6.869)</td>
<td>4.057 (6.832)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Obtained Bachelor's Degree</td>
<td>.069 (.581)</td>
<td>.053 (0.409)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per Capita Income</td>
<td>.001 (.001)</td>
<td>.001* (.0004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time1</td>
<td></td>
<td>-19.414*** (7.664)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time2</td>
<td></td>
<td>-12.877* (6.458)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time3</td>
<td></td>
<td>-17.096* (8.847)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time4</td>
<td></td>
<td>-13.69** (6.475)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time5</td>
<td></td>
<td>-4.442 (6.151)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time6</td>
<td></td>
<td>-15.508* (8.256)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time7</td>
<td></td>
<td>omitted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time8</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.62 (5.766)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time9</td>
<td></td>
<td>-4.692 (7.032)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time10</td>
<td></td>
<td>-12.077 (9.468)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 265; R-squared = .08; Standard error in parentheses; +p-value<.1 **p-value<.05 ***p-value<.01; Dependent variable: Percentage of political news that is high quality.
The most notable result from Table 4, besides the obvious lack of effect of ownership on the percentage of quality local political news published in a news edition, is the positive effect which the per capita income of a newspaper's primary market may play in the production of high-quality local political news. In the second model, per capita income has a p-value of .087, which fails to meet the typical criteria of .05 for statistical significance. However, an examination of this variable's effects may be warranted. Supposing a newspaper's primary market per capita increased by one unit, the percentage of high quality local political news of total political news would increase by .001. Once again, the effect may seem minuscule, but a $1,000 increase is estimated to raise the percentage of quality political news by 1%. Also of interest is the lack of effect which circulation has on the dependent variable.

Table 3 revealed a positive relationship between increased circulation and the raw number of quality political news stories present within a news edition. This may signify that though higher circulation may tend to increase the number of quality news stories, the comprehensiveness of political coverage may not necessarily do the same. The negative and statistically significant effects of the time dummy variables presents an enigma in light of the findings included in Table 3, which seemed to indicate that newspapers were subject to similar news cycles coming out of the weekend. The second model in Table 4 reveals that newspapers editions published at Time 1, Time 2, Time 3, Time 4, and Time 6 were less likely to produce a higher ratio of quality local political news to political news than editions published on other dates. These five dates fall on Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday. This result could be a consequence of news
organizations having less time to cover political news as opposed to other forms of news on these dates. This may be borne out if the results from Table 3 show that the ratio of political news to other forms of news is less at these times. Otherwise, future research on the nature of the news cycle may need to be conducted before a reason for this disparity in the percentage of quality political news from one day to the next can be ascertained.

Turning now to Table 5, which touches the issue of comprehensiveness of local political news coverage, more explanatory variables bear a significant relationship to the dependent variable than in the former models. Most notable is the influence that newspaper ownership has on the percentage of political news in a newspaper edition. According to the results displayed in Model 1, local political news is estimated to comprise 4.63% more of the newspaper edition's content for independently owned newspapers than corporately owned newspapers. In conjunction with the results from the former tests, this means audiences will notice no difference in the sheer number of thematic local political news stories included in corporately owned versus independently owned newspapers. However, a greater percentage of the overall content of independent newspapers is comprised of local political news for independent newspapers, implying that readers of independent newspapers are likely to see greater comprehensiveness of political news coverage than readers of corporately owned newspapers.

As regards the effects of circulation, model two shows that an increase in circulation yields an expected decrease in the percentage of local political news. A unit increase in circulation decreases the percentage by 0.00004%. Although this number is minuscule even when examining an aggregate increase in newspaper circulation of
10,000, it is not so much the degree of impact as it is the direction of impact which is important, especially in light of the findings disclosed in Table 3.

Table 5. The Percentage of News that is Political News (Dependent Variable: Percentage of Local News Stories to Total News Stories in a News Edition)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Random Effects OLS</th>
<th>OLS with time dummies, clustered paper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>15.504*** (5.852)</td>
<td>16.393* (8.316)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ownership</td>
<td>-4.63* (2.685)</td>
<td>-4.636* (2.715)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circulation</td>
<td>-.00004 (0.00002)</td>
<td>-.00004** (.00002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>0.817 (2.628)</td>
<td>0.811 (2.188)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Obtained Bachelor's Degree</td>
<td>0.423* (0.222)</td>
<td>0.423** (0.197)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per Capita Income</td>
<td>-.0003 (0.00029)</td>
<td>0.0003 (0.0004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time1</td>
<td></td>
<td>-1.953 (3.45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time2</td>
<td></td>
<td>-1.14 (3.307)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time3</td>
<td></td>
<td>-3.459 (4.406)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time4</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.393 (3.092)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time5</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.920 (4.059)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time6</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.085 (2.114)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time7</td>
<td></td>
<td>omitted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time8</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.111 (2.908)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time9</td>
<td></td>
<td>-3.566 (2.737)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time10</td>
<td></td>
<td>16.393 (8.316)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 265; R-squared = 0.09; Standard error in parentheses; * p-value < 0.1 **p-value < 0.05 ***p-value < 0.01.
Table 3 revealed that increases in circulation tend to result in higher numbers of quality local political news stories in a newspaper edition. While higher circulation may result in more quality local political news stories, the findings from Table 5 show it results also in a minute decline in the percentage of political news within a newspaper.

As expected, the education variable - the percentage of a newspaper's primary market that obtained a bachelor's degree - had a positive effect on the percentage of local political news stories within a newspaper edition.

In Model 2, none of the time dummy variables reach any degree of statistical significance, including the Time 1 and Time 3 values mentioned earlier. This result dismantles the argument that all of the newspapers incorporated in this study are subject to similar daily news cycles, as well as the argument that news organizations may have less time to cover political news as opposed to other forms of news on Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. Future research should look to examine how the news cycle influences the quality of news.

In sum, my first hypothesis, which predicted that corporately-owned newspapers would be less likely than independently-owned newspapers to provide thematic coverage of local political issues, generated no support from this study. Likewise my second hypothesis, which predicted that thematic political news stories would comprise a lower percentage of total local political news in corporately owned newspapers than in independent newspapers, garnered no support from this study. My third hypothesis, which predicted that local political news would comprise a lower percentage of total
news content in corporately-owned newspapers than in independently-owned newspapers was supported by the findings of this research.

This study also brought a few other interesting findings to light. Although ownership was not found to affect the production of thematic local political news, per capita income in a newspaper’s primary market did have an influence. Higher levels of per capita income are tied to higher levels of thematic coverage, which may reflect an effort on behalf of news leadership to incorporate news which might have more appeal to wealthier, better-educated audiences (since education variables were highly correlated with per capita income).

Further, a newspaper’s circulation bears a positive relationship to the number of thematic local political news articles produced in an edition. This indicates one of two things: either higher quality news stories result in a larger readership base, or a larger readership base generates more resources with which newspapers are able to produce higher quality political news. Interestingly, higher levels of circulation have a slightly mitigating effect on the percentage of a newspaper edition that is comprised of political news. These two results may stem from the fact that a newspaper with higher circulation may produce higher quality, more in-depth articles all around, without regard to the percentage of political news within an edition.

Also, the educational attainment variables bear a positive, significant relationship to the percentage of political news published within a newspaper edition. An increase in the percentage of political news included within a newspaper edition may signify the efforts of news staff to appeal to more educated audiences. Naturally, an increase in
political news coverage results in a decrease in other, perhaps lighter, forms of news coverage.
CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

My research fails to support the supposition that independent newspapers are more likely than corporately owned papers to produce thematic, local political news. Neither corporately owned nor independently owned papers are more prone to producing political news constructed around deep, interpretive analysis of long-term issues affecting public life. In other words, it would seem as though the profit objective that is handed down from corporate owners does not affect how reporters research and write a news story, assuming the profit objective is indeed stronger for corporately owned newspapers than independently owned newspapers, as the literature suggests.

The lack of relationship between quality news and ownership may signal that newspapers do not adjust the quality of the stories in order to conform to audience tastes. It is conceivable that reporters at both independent and corporate papers attempt to provide as high quality coverage as possible, given their time and budgetary constraints. A reporter loaded down with five stories to write in a day, no matter the ownership structure of the newspaper, would likely have a difficult time producing thematic, quality stories. Conversely, a reporter with ample time and resources will likely strive to produce quality work, regardless of the ownership structure of the newspaper they work for.

The results do show that ownership, along with circulation, (as a proxy for resources) and education levels of a market audience do influence the quantity of political
news included within each edition. Taken together, it seems as though news organizations do not set out to pander to audience tastes in regard to how they cover the news, but might determine what news to cover based on audience preferences.

The effect of the profit objective on news production may be mitigated in this study due to the intervention of the national economic situation in 2010. As mentioned earlier, newspapers, like all businesses during this period, experienced financial losses. The losses may have stemmed from declining advertising sales as businesses made cutbacks in their advertising budgets and readers cancelled their subscriptions, or a combination of both. Since both corporately and independently owned newspapers were subject to the same market forces, it is likely both came under pressure to streamline news operating budgets. Regardless as to whether or not a newspaper is owned by an individual owner who places more emphasis on the production of quality news than on the profit objective, if the newspaper is subject to revenue shortfalls, cuts must be made, which necessarily diminishes the quality of the news product.

The monetary constraints felt by newspapers across the United States may also be part of a larger pattern of declining readership, as audiences looking for news can just as easily turn to the internet, television or radio sources for information. That the findings produced in this study do not reflect what other scholars have found regarding the relationship of ownership to quality news in the past may signal the changing landscape of the news market. All newspapers may be facing similar economic constraints due to the changing nature of market competition, thus minimizing the differences in quality between independent and corporately owned newspapers.
Perhaps the most obvious oversight in this research is a failure to record the number of reporting staff at each newspaper, and median reporter salary for each. This would likely be the most direct route to determining whether independently owned or corporately owned newspapers were more beholden to the profit objective from the structural standpoint. It seems likely that if corporately owned papers are more subject to budget cutbacks because of profit pressures, they would be less likely to retain employees with high levels of education and experience. These factors no doubt greatly influence the way news is portrayed. A reporter with limited mathematical skills would most likely be uncomfortable providing an intricate breakdown and analysis of a city’s fiscal budget. A reporter with low levels of education may not have a clear understanding of legal processes and the actual bounds of elected officials' authority. Similarly, an inexperienced reporter would most likely shy away from providing in-depth information regarding a complex legal battle between elected officials. Future studies should compare the number of reporters and reporters’ median salaries for corporately and independently owned papers of equal size to better address this issue.

This study may also fail to accurately reflect the entire picture of a newspaper’s thoroughness of coverage, since dates were randomly selected throughout the year rather than contiguously studied. The random selection of dates does not account for previous coverage of an issue, which may have received extensive in-depth coverage in the past. Further, this study also entirely lays the burden of quality reporting on the news agency producing the news, when in reality the thoroughness of a news report is highly contingent upon the cooperation of sources. Newspapers operating in larger cities may
find it easier to obtain information from local government officials who are more familiar with open records processes than newspapers operating in small cities, where officials may be unfamiliar with the legal policies obligating the disclosure of certain types of information. Although journalists have the freedom in most states to file open records requests, this can be a time-consuming process which impedes the reporting of quality daily news.

All in all, this study sets no baseline for how much quality local political news is sufficient for a news organization to adequately fulfill its role in the process of democratic accountability at the local level. Neither does this study define what percentage of the news hole should be filled with local political news before a newspaper is working in congruence with its democratic function. This study reveals that neither independently nor corporately owned newspapers do a better job at producing quality local political news.

The primary revelation of this study, as pertains to ownership structure, is that political news constitutes a larger percentage of the news hole for independently owned newspapers than for corporately owned papers. Although independently owned newspapers aren’t more likely than corporately owned papers to produce thematic political news, they are more likely to produce more political news.

More broadly, if the literature is correct as regards the ineffectiveness of episodic news in informing individuals' view of public life, the advantage of independent newspapers' more prolific coverage of political news might be mitigated. Prior research has shown that the media's use of episodic or thematic news greatly influences citizens'
political preferences (Iyengar and Kinder 1991). Although the quantity of political news may be greater for independent papers, if the information conveyed is presented in a way does not allow readers to form a nuanced and coherent understanding of political issues, then the additional information may serve only to benefit the most well-educated audiences who are already familiar with the context of the issue at hand (Jerit 2009). If Bennett (1983) is correct in assuming that citizens' lack of political knowledge springs from reliance upon media messages that are fragmented and episodic, rather than lack of consumption of political news, it would seem as though independent newspapers are no better equipped to fulfill the norms of democratic accountability than are corporately owned newspapers. Quantity does not necessarily equal quality.
REFERENCES


