



The State of

THE AMERICAN NEWSPAPER

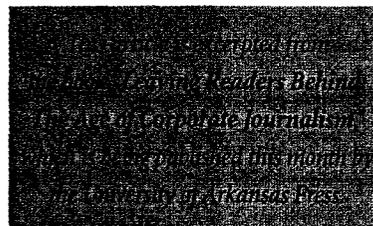
"I believe in the profession of journalism. I believe that the public journal is a public trust; that all connected with it are, to the full measure of their responsibility, trustees for the public; that acceptance of lesser service than the public service is a betrayal of this trust."

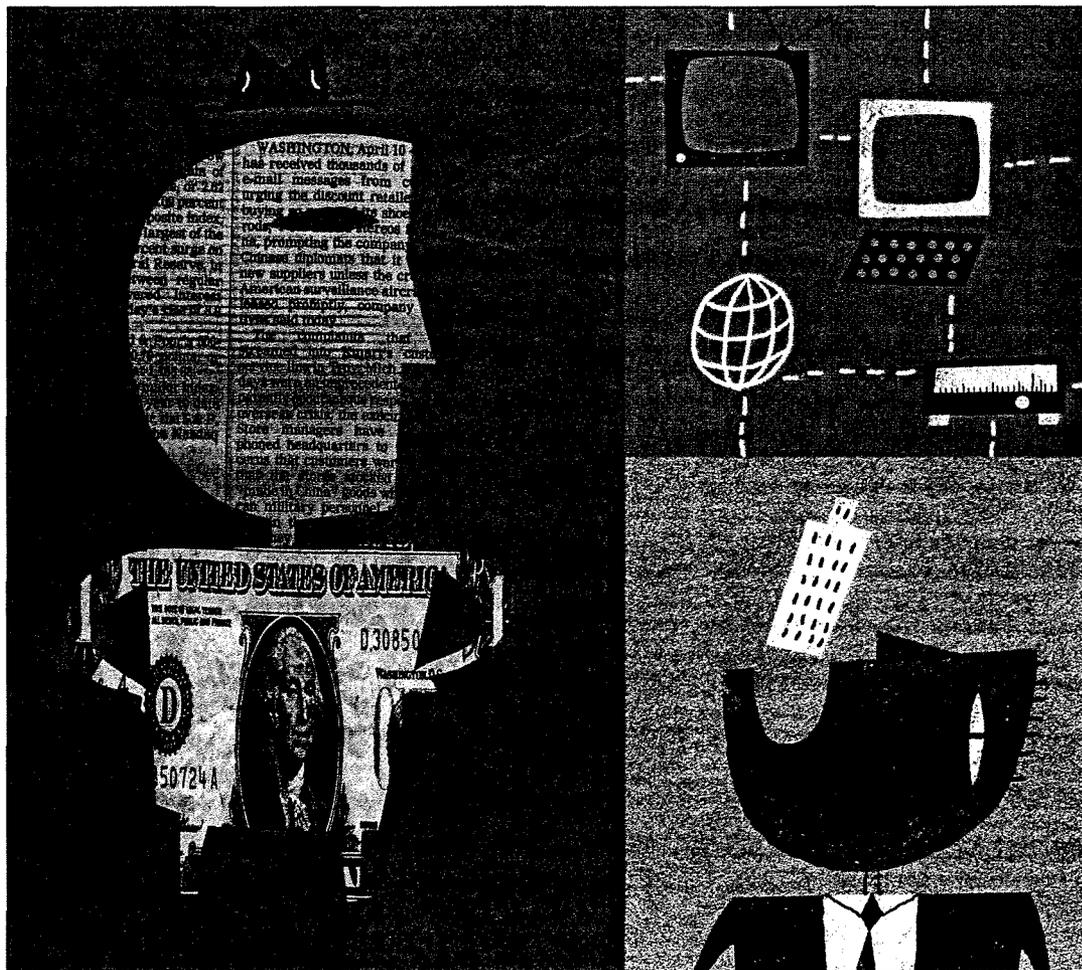
WALTER WILLIAMS
The Journalist's Creed
1914

The Age of
Corporate Newspapering

LEAVING READERS BEHIND

BY THOMAS KUNKEL AND GENE ROBERTS





ILLUSTRATIONS BY JAMES YANG

Newspaper owners and publishers like to say that ink courses through their veins, but it's really paranoia. They are world-class worriers, and with decades of practice is it any wonder? After all, they were convinced that Hollywood was going to kill them off, then radio, then television, then cable. Now the Internet has them fretting about New Media and personal data appliances the same way they once worried about Teamsters and direct mail. To be a newspaper publisher is to know perpetual angst. You can't enjoy it when advertising is up because you know it will go down, just as you can't enjoy it when the

"We stand for excellent service to customers and communities, a fair, respectful and learning environment for all our employees and a strong return for our shareholders. This responsibility is shared by each of us in Knight Ridder, regardless of title or function."

**KNIGHT
RIDDER**

*Statement of
Strategic Intent*

1991

cost of newsprint is down because you know it will go up. A boom is nothing but a bust waiting to happen.

So you worry—all the way to the bank. The American newspaper industry today is a \$60-billion-a-year, diversified colossus with profit margins triple the norm for U.S. industry as a whole. As writer William Prochnau put it not long ago, “A funeral for newspapering? It would draw more stretch limos than lined up for Elvis.”

Despite what you might have heard, then, it's not a genuine question whether newspaper companies will survive in our ever-shifting, hypercompetitive communications landscape. They will, their genius for adaptation and self-preservation evolved to a level that Darwin would relish. They are that well-tested—and, it should not be forgotten, even better bankrolled.

Meantime, a far more compelling question goes unasked: As this evolution plays out, what might it ultimately cost us, the newspaper-reading public?

Judging from the evidence so far, the answer is: a lot.

The simple fact is that the American newspaper industry finds itself in the middle of the most momentous change in its 300-year history, a change that is diminishing the amount of real news available to the consumer. A generation of relentless corporatization is now culminating in a furious, unprecedented blitz of buying, selling and consolidating of newspapers, from the mightiest dailies to the humblest weeklies. Intended to heighten efficiency and maximize profits, this activity is at the same time reducing competition and creating new ownership models. Perhaps most alarming, it is revolutionizing, to the point of undermining, the traditional nature and role of the press. Today's thoroughly modern newspaper executive sees himself less the “public trustee” of Walter Williams' famous creed than the New Age guardian of shareholder value described in Knight Ridder's committee-written “Statement of Strategic Intent.” Roll over, Ben Bradlee.

This is not to say that all the change in the industry has been bad, or that there aren't wonderful newspapers out there. There are, from the New York Times and Washington Post on one coast to the Los Angeles Times and San Jose Mercury News on the other. In between are dozens of good, some exceptionally so, papers. But many of these metropolitan regionals—still the key disseminators of information for tens of millions of Americans—are not as good as they should be, or in the case of such papers as the St. Louis Post-Dispatch and Des Moines Register, as good as they once were. Indeed, one can argue that considering there are nearly 1,500 daily papers in the United States, and considering that most of these are handsomely profitable, the percentage of excellence is abysmally low. Today's typical daily is mediocre, with a strong overlay of provincialism. And industry trends are only making matters worse.

That may help explain why newspapers largely failed to report the seismic activity shaking up their own backyard. Or at least they did until, in early 2000, a tremor out of Southern California was too big to be ignored. This was the takeover of mighty Times Mirror—publisher of the L.A. Times, Newsday, the Baltimore Sun and other respected papers—by Chicago's Tribune Co. With Wall Street having decreed to corporate America that you either Get Big or Get Out, the industry and its analysts generally applauded the \$8 billion deal, which also included a handful of lucrative televi-

sion stations. And they practically salivated over the synergistic possibilities; imagine what an enlightened conglomerate could do with these combined resources in print, broadcast, online and cable!

But few addressed what the takeover said about the increasingly quaint notion of local ownership, the most important outlet for news in our second-largest and most sociologically complex metropolis would now be governed out of a skyscraper 2,000 miles away in a city that can be fairly characterized as the anti-L.A. Nor did they speculate much about how it might fuel the industry's increasingly monopolistic practices, nor how in recent years the government's antitrust watchdogs have been fairly blasé about this whole business of media consolidation. (In acquiring Times Mirror, Tribune also got television stations in virtually all its major newspaper markets. As such, it was gambling that the Federal Communications Commission will be more permissive than in the past about cross-ownership—a bet that at this writing certainly seems well-placed.)

Nor did they assert what the Times Mirror acquisition really represented: the absolute triumph of corporate newspapering. Simply put, it was the biggest, baddest deal in a world that has become a deal-maker's paradise.

This is a world where conglomerates now rule unchallenged. Where independent papers, once as ubiquitous on the American landscape as water towers, are nearly extinct. Where small hometown dailies in particular are being bought and sold like hog futures. Where chains, once content to grow one property at a time, now devour other chains whole. Where they are effectively ceding whole regions of the country to one another, further minimizing competition. Where money is pouring into the business from interests with little knowledge and even less concern about the special obligations newspapers have in our society.

The amount of activity is simply dizzying.

Just look at giant Gannett. After a multibillion-dollar burst of acquisitions in the first half of 2000, Gannett, which already was the nation's largest newspaper company in

A generation of relentless corporatization is now culminating in a furious, unprecedented blitz of buying, selling and consolidating of newspapers. Intended to heighten efficiency and maximize profits, this activity is reducing competition and is revolutionizing, to the point of undermining, the traditional nature and role of the press.

terms of circulation and sales, grew itself from 74 daily newspapers to 99. Most conspicuous was its swallowing of the Pulliam family's Central Newspapers Inc., which if nothing else practically guarantees that consumers of Phoenix's Arizona Republic and the Indianapolis Star may never get the kind of papers they have long deserved. Regardless, Gannett can now brag that it produces one out of every seven newspapers sold in America. Along with Knight Ridder and the newly fattened Tribune, these three chains now claim a quarter of all the daily newspaper circulation in the nation.

Consider the phenomenon that is Community Newspaper Holdings Inc. Bankrolled by that First Amendment bastion the Alabama state employees' pension fund, CNHI didn't even exist until 1997, but it already owns 112 daily newspapers reaching from Alamogordo, New Mexico, to Tonawanda, New York. The year 1998 saw the emergence of another instant chain, Liberty Group, created by a leveraged-buyout king whose other holdings have included bus companies, pharmacy chains and home-improvement centers. Liberty has acquired 68 dailies. It's too soon to know what will happen with these two newborn companies, but so

populous New Jersey, the Newhouse and Gannett chains between them now own 13 of the state's 19 dailies, or 73 percent of all the circulation of New Jersey-based papers. (It may be our most monopolized state—a new license-plate slogan, perhaps?—although it would be given a run by not-so populous Oklahoma, where CNHI alone owns 24 of the state's 43 dailies.)

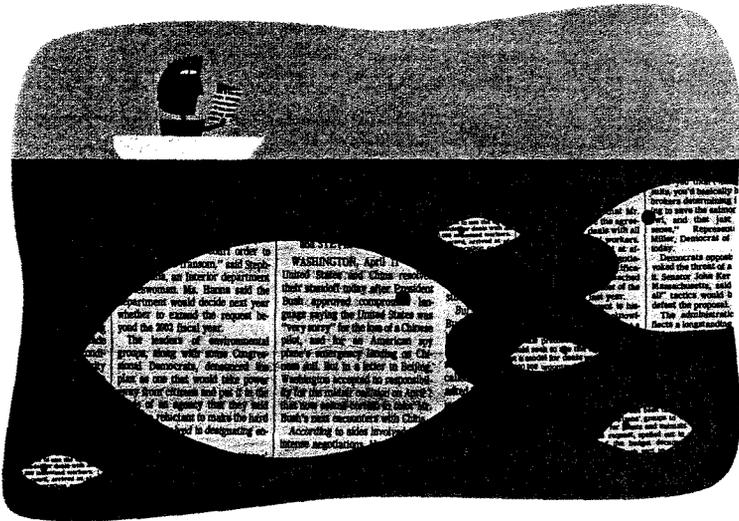
To date there are at least 125 major newspaper clusters around the country, involving more than a fourth of our daily papers. These clusters are as small as two papers but typically involve five or six, and not uncommonly as many as eight. There are countless others if you throw in weeklies, which lend themselves more naturally to the cluster concept. Proponents point out, correctly, that in some (unusual) cases a clustering arrangement has kept alive an otherwise failing newspaper. But even then the clustered management removes major decisions from that town, which is to say, it puts the paper one step further away from its readers.

By definition clustering reduces competition, with fewer companies operating in the same area, and taken to its logical conclusion it can dramatically reduce the number of editorial voices as well. This was seen recently in suburban Westchester County, just outside New York City. Over the years Gannett had collected 10 small local dailies there and operated them as a cluster, though it maintained their individual nameplates and identities. But in 1998 the company yielded to temptation and melded them into one vanilla-flavored metro, the Journal News. Now, the Journal News without doubt is a better paper than any of its small predecessors. Yet would anyone argue that this consolidation wasn't a severe blow to those communities' respective identities? Does anyone beyond its corporate minders really believe that the confederated Journal News "cares" about, say, Tarrytown more than the old Tarrytown Daily News did?

No matter. The Tarrytown Daily News was sacrificed on the altar of efficiency, and other luckless nameplates are sure to follow.

But when it comes to media efficiency, the absolute latest new thing is not consolidation or clustering but synergy, which is the leveraging of different kinds of media holdings to enhance one another. Tribune Co., as was evident in its Times Mirror takeover, has established itself as a pioneer in this field, using its newspapers as content factories for online sites, local television stations and cable news outlets, all under common ownership. "I am not the editor of a newspaper," declared Howard Tyner, then editor of the Chicago Tribune and subsequently promoted to oversee all the company's papers. "I am the manager of a content company. That's what I do.... We gather content."

Such an observation is de rigueur for modern newspaper editors; to say otherwise is to speak heresy. Never mind that the Chicago Tribune's circulation has eroded steadily from its peak of 1 million decades ago to 658,000 today, or that the daily once fond of calling itself "The World's Greatest Newspaper" is no longer even considered in the top 10 in America. (There are days, some Chicagoans argue, when it isn't even the best paper in town.) It doesn't matter if the obligation of feeding an omnivorous hydra-headed news machine may have helped take the edge off the paper, because this synergy idea is catching real fire. Down in Tampa, Media General has gone so far as to put its news-



far they have paid more attention to rigorous bottom-line management than to distinguished journalism.

The nonstop trading of small-town dailies may seem creative and exciting to newspaper brokers and financial analysts, but think how unsettling it is for those who actually subscribe to these papers, or work for them. Consider the Northwestern (circulation 23,500) in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. Here is a paper that prided itself on being in hometown hands since the Johnson administration—the Andrew Johnson administration. But in 1998 it was sold not once but twice, within the space of two months. Two years later it was sold again. Four owners in less than three years.

But more than the transactions themselves, it is the thinking underlying them that is having such a profound impact. Most of these sales are being driven by a relatively new concept known as clustering, in which a company purchases properties in close proximity to one another or to its existing papers. This allows the company to consolidate a number of functions, chiefly on the business side but sometimes editorial as well, for maximum efficiency. So it is that in

paper, the Tribune, in the same building with its local television station and online operation, the better to exchange stories and, ostensibly, resources. (It's still unclear what the newspapers get out of the bargain other than garish weather maps sponsored by the local TV meteorologist.) Tampa's has become the most sophisticated model for this kind of thing, and as such is drawing enormous interest from other newspaper companies.

Under the Tampa model, and presumably in most major city rooms of the future, news decisions for all these outlets are made in a coordinated way, sometimes in the same meeting. In effect the same group of minds decides what "news" is, in every conceivable way that people can get their local news. This isn't sinister; it's just not competition.

But you'd better get used to it, because the real momentum is just beginning. Indeed, should the consolidation of the newspaper industry continue at its current fevered pace, it won't be long before the nation effectively is reduced to half a dozen major print conglomerates. The flamboyant William Dean Singleton, CEO of MediaNews Group, one of the chains that has championed this new order, flatly predicts, "You will see a lot fewer newspaper companies in five years." No one has contradicted him.

This is not another pointless lamentation on the Citicorping and Wal-Marting of America. All change has implications. Some are intended, some not; some are beneficial, some not. If it is regrettable that the corner five-and-dime and your neighborhood S&L have been driven out of business by the giants, it's also likely that at the end of the day you have more hardware selection and banking services at your disposal than ever before.

News, however, is a different commodity. It is unique to any given place; what happens in Portland, Maine, is of little consequence in Portland, Oregon. But unlike other realms of business, in the newspaper industry, consolidation—in tandem with the chains' desperation to maintain unrealistic profit levels (most of these big companies now being publicly traded)—is actually reducing the amount of real news being gathered and disseminated, most conspicuously at the local and state levels, where consumers need it most. This is because consolidation has resulted in far fewer news outlets, and the economic pressures have resulted in fewer reporters with fewer inches in the paper to say anything.

Concentration has other ramifications, less easy to document but no less real. For starters, it too readily facilitates a kind of corporate group mind-set. Sometimes this is a good thing; in recent years, for instance, it has resulted in a doubling of sports coverage and a fourfold increase in space devoted to business. More often than not, however, notions turn into convictions with no supporting rationale. Years back the idea took hold in the industry that readers found coverage of government "boring," and that foreign news was hopelessly "irrelevant," even though empirical evidence shows both suggestions to be canards. Coverage of government at every level has since been in retreat—about which more in a moment—and foreign news is quietly disappearing from mainstream newspapers. Indeed, most of the nation's dailies—perhaps 95 percent—practice journalistic isolationism. They devote twice the space to comics as they do to

international news. They take the weather almost as seriously as momentous events from abroad.

This new media environment also fosters a kind of creepy coziness, where activity that once would have been dismissed as preposterous is now commonplace. Times Mirror can lend Dean Singleton \$50 million to help MediaNews purchase the Los Angeles Daily News—hometown rival to TM's own L.A. Times—so that a stronger competitor won't. The publisher of Hearst's San Francisco Examiner promises to stem his paper's criticism of Mayor Willie Brown if Hizzoner doesn't oppose Hearst's takeover of the rival Chronicle. The entire business side of the L.A. Times can climb into bed with a major advertiser, the Staples Center, and no one in a leadership position appreciates its blatant impropriety. At a time when rank-and-file journalists are being held to higher standards of conduct than ever, what kind of screwy, hypocritical message does such activity convey?

Meanwhile, budgetary strictures and multimedia



demands leave newsrooms more sorely pressed than ever. Our favorite example—and maybe a poster child for the beleaguered journalistic fraternity—is the police reporter for the paper in tiny Cumberland, Maryland, where the staff was stretched so thin that he had to have the local police fax him the day's crime reports—the ones they wanted him to see, of course, as opposed to the ones he might really need to see. This sort of thing isn't as uncommon as one might suppose.

In other words, what's happening in the newspaper world is more than inside baseball, of interest only to journalists and Wall Street analysts. It has a cost to average Americans that grows increasingly clear. And that cost, in the form of diluted and less serious, less substantive news, could be high for a nation whose democracy literally depends on an informed citizenry.

In an effort to assess what is happening, an enterprise calling itself the Project on the State of the American Newspaper spent more than two years producing the most comprehensive examination of the industry in history. Underwritten by the Pew Charitable Trusts, the work was an initiative of the Project for Excellence in Journalism, a Washington-based organization led by media critic Tom Rosenstiel, committed to bringing about accountability and reform in the news business.

The Project's goal was simple: Hire some of the nation's top journalists to apply the same scrutiny to the newspaper industry that newspapers have historically applied to other business sectors. These correspondents, virtually all of them newspaper junkies who came of age at major metros themselves, spent on average six

months reporting and writing. They traversed the nation from New York to San Francisco, from Oklahoma City to besieged little Oshkosh. Their reports, 18 in all and most running to 15,000 words or more, were published serially in this magazine. Given the megadeal that was presently to follow, it was fitting that the series debuted in the spring of 1998 with Ken Auletta's profile of Tribune Co. and concluded in early 2000 with William Prochnau's exam-

Budgetary strictures and multimedia demands leave newsrooms more sorely pressed than ever. What's happening in the newspaper world...has a cost to average Americans that grows increasingly dear. And that cost, in the form of diluted and less serious, less substantive news, could be high for a nation whose democracy literally depends on an informed citizenry.

ination of the Los Angeles Times, where a highly touted effort to build a "newspaper without walls"—that is, without the traditional barrier between business and editorial—had just collapsed in the rubble of the Staples Center fiasco.

The point of the series was to get past the city rooms and into the business suites, to analyze the people and the forces that, for better and worse, are remaking the newspaper landscape. Where possible, the reporters were to quantify these changes. Beyond that, they were to discuss their implications, for industry and customer alike.

Some of their specific findings were terribly sad. A good example was the story of the Asbury Park Press, New Jersey's second-largest newspaper. Over the years the Press had carved out a reputation as one of the most enterprising independent papers in the nation. It did this by deploying an editorial staff of 240, quite robust for a paper with a circulation of 159,000, and by approaching its patch of the Jersey Shore with the amalgam of concern and affection that generally is possible only under local ownership.

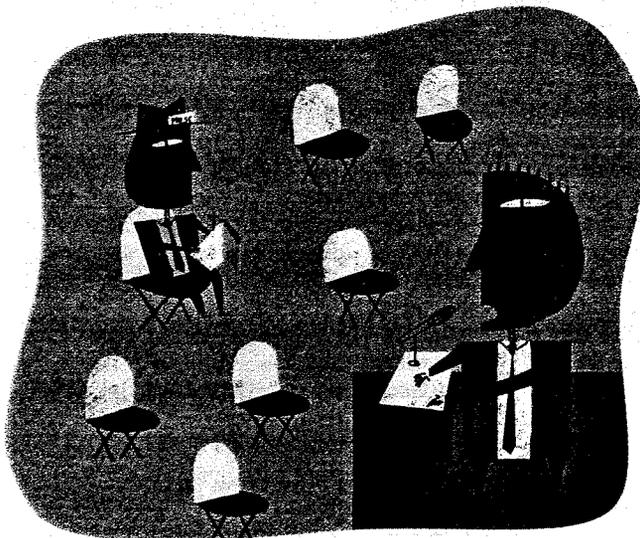
Then in 1997, the Press was sold to Gannett. As is typical in such cases, the company promised no diminution of editorial quality. Just as typically it moved to effect precisely that. Within a year the Gannett-appointed publisher, Robert Collins, had slashed the newsroom staff from 240 to 185, significantly reduced the space available for serious news (though plenty was available for a new weekly pets section), and presided over the exodus of many of the Press' most talented people to its competitors. Hewing to well-documented Gannett principles, the paper shortened stories, de-emphasized government news and ordered reporters to "localize" pieces to the point of absurdity.

The year after his emasculation of the paper, Collins was named Gannett's manager of the year and praised by his corporate bosses for remaking the Press "into a decisive, results-oriented enterprise."

What happened in Asbury Park was a blunt but not especially exceptional example of what is occurring around the country. Prosperous Gannett applies the knife in this way because that is its corporate culture.

But other companies doing such cutting say they have no choice, and often that is true. Why? Simple economics. One reason the newspaper market has been so heated is that properties are fetching record prices. The high prices put tremendous pressure on new owners to pare costs in order to make their debt payments. And as anyone in the business can tell you, there really are only two major cost centers in newspapering: people and paper.

Which helps explain the eviscerations at the papers of the Journal Register Co., whose primary owner is the Warburg Pincus investment bank. The company has squeezed properties like its Times Herald in Norristown, Pennsylvania, so hard that today the paper runs about half as many pages as it did before the Journal Register acquired it. A paper that once prided itself on comprehensive coverage of local government now lets many important meetings go uncovered, and accounts of others often appear days after the fact. "I have nothing good to say about it," Mayor Ted LeBlanc says of the Times Herald. He has stopped subscribing.



Other examples abound. Out in California, Knight Ridder hacked away at newsroom positions and salaries after it acquired the feisty little Monterey County Herald, while MediaNews did the same in its highly contentious acquisition of the Long Beach Press-Telegram. Thomson Co. was notorious for its knifework at all its papers before it abandoned them recently for the even more profitable and infinitely less messy world of online information.

In Atlanta, meanwhile, Cox's cost-cutting showed up not only in the consolidation of the Journal and Constitution editorial staffs, but in how they were used. This became clear in 1998 when the Project on the State of the American Newspaper conducted the first-ever comprehensive survey of newspaper coverage of state capitals. The Project documented a strong nationwide retreat from such coverage throughout the decade of the '90s—sometimes to the point of near abandonment—at precisely the time when state government was gaining new power and exerting more impact than ever on the average American. The survey of full-time reporters at all 50 state capitals found a total of only 513. To put that in perspective, more than 3,000 media credentials are issued each year for the Super Bowl. And more than 50,000 lobbyists are registered with state governments. That's about 100 lobbyists for every overworked, underpaid press watchdog. The survey revealed that, over a decade, newspaper commitment to statehouse coverage fell in 27 states, among them New York, Michigan, Connecticut and Illinois. In fast-growing Georgia, statehouse coverage had almost disappeared off the radar.

This was particularly distressing because the Journal and Constitution had a proud legacy of blanketing the statehouse like kudzu. A generation ago when the Legislature was in session, 10 or 12 reporters, columnists and editorial writers could be found trolling the Capitol's marble corridors. By the spring of 1998 the combined papers were down to three full-time state government reporters. Things reached such a pass that reporters with little background or expertise had to be parachuted in to cover stories on an emergency basis—with predictable results. As Rick Dent, then press secretary to Gov. Zell Miller, explained, "They'll get assigned a welfare piece. I'll have to spoon-feed the information to them.... But I'm an advocate. I'm not going to give you the whole side of the story.... They say, 'Who else should I talk to?' Well, hell, I'm not going to tell them to talk to the people who are on the other side."

The statehouse survey garnered considerable national attention, and follow-ups the next two years revealed a modest if discernible increase in full-time statehouse reporters: up to 543, or nearly a 6 percent increase. But the Journal and Constitution still had only three reporters on the beat.

A similarly disturbing situation was found to exist in Washington, D. C. A 1999 survey of 19 key departments and agencies showed a wholesale retreat in coverage of the federal government. Regular reporting on the Supreme Court and the State Department, for instance, dropped off considerably throughout the '90s. At the Social Security Administration, whose activities affect literally every American, only the New York Times was maintaining a full-time reporter. And incredibly, at the Interior Department, which controls 500 million acres of public land and oversees everything from the national park system to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, there were no full-time reporters around.

What was happening here? Why had government reporters gone from being newsroom stars to pariahs?

Mostly it was because their editors, under financial pressure from their publishers and under industry pressure to do more expansive lifestyle coverage, allowed themselves to believe that readers found "incremental" government news inherently boring. Of course, that kind of coverage *does* result when witless reporters are allowed to approach it that way, but in truth readers have never stopped, nor will they stop, appreciating intelligent reporting of public affairs.

The foreign story suffered the same fate as the government story, which is to say it wound up deep inside the paper, or out of it altogether. The Indianapolis Star, a fairly typical mainstream paper, published 23 percent less foreign news in November 1997 than in the same month 20 years earlier. In a comparative survey of 10 metro newspapers, the Project found that the percentage of newshole devoted to international events dropped from 5 percent in the mid-'60s to just 3 percent in the late '90s—by which time the United States had become the world's lone superpower, and events overseas were having a more direct impact on the average American than ever before.

Another issue the series brought to light was the incredible vulnerability of our hometown papers. Half the newspapers in America have a circulation of less than 13,000, and they are a precious national heritage. But these small dailies are being especially whipsawed by the new ownership models. After documenting every newspaper sale from 1994 through July 2000—713 transactions in all—the Project found that two-thirds of the time it was one of these community papers that was changing hands. In that six-and-a-half-year window, 47 percent of all hometown papers turned over—some of them, like Oshkosh, three or four times. And since with each swap a paper typically is more highly leveraged, budgets got tighter, and content of necessity became expendable.

Nor has the selling frenzy been confined to daily papers. It has also spread to the nation's 8,000 weekly newspapers. Weeklies once were too small and parochial for the major chains to bother with, but the big boys have gotten over that

Half the newspapers in America have a circulation of less than 13,000, and they are a precious national heritage. But in a period of six-and-a-half years, 47 percent of all hometown papers changed hands—some of them three or four times. And since with each swap a paper typically is more highly leveraged, budgets got tighter, and content of necessity became expendable.

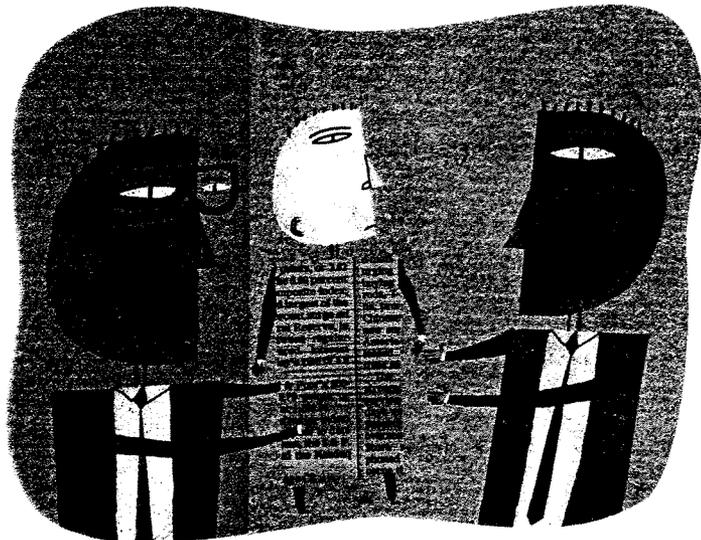
attitude in a hurry. When Pulitzer recently bought the 38 Suburban Journal weeklies and niche publications that ring its flagship St. Louis Post-Dispatch, it was only the latest big company to turn a nuisance into a synergistic opportunity. In city after city—Washington, Baltimore, Cleveland and Dallas, to name just a few—metro papers have been purchasing the community weeklies that surround them. Today the major owners of daily newspapers, such chains as CNHI, Gannett, Journal Register and Liberty, are also among the largest holders of weeklies. Times Mirror even purchased the weekly in Hartford, Connecticut, that was begun years ago precisely to give readers there an alternative to the daily paper, Times Mirror's Hartford Courant. The point is, the corporatization of the weeklies further erodes the number and diversity of editorial voices.

Other changes in the industry are much less noticeable to the public but are no less harmful. For instance, the chains increasingly are pressuring top editors—primarily through their wallets—to focus more and more on corporate goals, and less and less on the news. At too many papers these days, the editor is just another replaceable face in a management constellation. The business side is in clear control, and its influence is being felt in unwelcome ways in the news pages. Deci-

each paper, and he or she was the ultimate authority over both the news and business sides. Even then, to minimize the risk of the business side running roughshod over the newsrooms, Knight selected many of his publishers from the editor ranks. But within a decade, with the founder dead and buried, the business-side executives were filling the top roles. In Gannett and other companies a similar process played out, albeit more swiftly and more sweepingly.

Knight, legendary curmudgeon and Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist, not only tolerated but actively supported argument and debate among editors and businessmen; he believed he would more likely get the truth if all felt free to have their say. But times change. A few years ago, when the editor of Knight Ridder's paper in Columbia, South Carolina, differed with his publisher about the direction of local coverage, he was told point-blank that dissent was not in his job description. And Gannett circulated a memo to its editors that put it succinctly: "The publisher is responsible for the entire newspaper, including the quality of the news report."

So much for the walls between news and business.



sions about editorial emphasis, the size of reporting staffs, special sections, newshole—more and more these are being made either by committee or by corporate fiat. The diminution of editorial authority has resulted in great frustration, and many editors simply have left. "I think in that process a lot of editors were really beaten down," said John Carroll, former editor of the Baltimore Sun and the person Tribune brought in to run the L.A. Times. "They were demoralized. And some of them just never got back up off the canvas."

It wasn't ever thus. Once it was the norm in chains that a paper's chief business executive was called general manager or business manager, or more rarely, president, and usually this person had no authority over the newsroom. When the formidable John S. Knight was building the newspaper empire that was the forerunner of Knight Ridder, his editors and general managers reported separately to corporate headquarters. This arrangement began to fade in the late '70s, but it didn't disappear totally until the late '80s. Under the new system, a local publisher served as the top official of

Of course, there is nothing inherently evil about corporate newspaper owners, any more than there is anything inherently angelic about local ones. Most any print journalist old enough to remember typewriters—and it wasn't that long ago when an IBM Selectric was the epitome of high tech—has worked for at least one independent owner with the scruples of a loan shark. (Ask readers in Oklahoma City about the "blessings" of independent ownership, as their Oklahoman enters its ninth decade of benighted leadership under the Gaylord family.) Besides, newspaper chains are hardly a new phenomenon. Hearst, Pulitzer, Scripps—to a one the glorious, notorious print titans of the early 20th century made their fortunes and consolidated their immense influence by stringing metropolitan papers together, and Adolph Ochs couldn't invent the New York Times as we know it until he had first turned around the lowly Chattanooga Times.

Nevertheless, for the first half of the 20th century these chains, while inordinately powerful, were more the exception than the rule. Independent newspapers dominated the nation. A community of any size might have two or even three. Were many of these operated by boosters, shills and scalawags? Absolutely. But others were courageous and civic-minded. And even in the worst cases competition could be counted on as the great leveler, feeding the community's vitality and ensuring that at least a modicum of honest information reached the populace.

By the '60s, however, that was changing—slowly at first, then with the vigor of a Goss Metroliner whirring to life. The story of the modern newspaper industry is one of relentless chain-building, consolidation and corporate centralization.

It should be said that in the beginning, this development was not necessarily a bad thing. One can make a strong argument that as the large chains mushroomed, they very often improved the newspapers they bought, sometimes sharply. Certainly this was the case in Philadelphia, Miami, Macon, Lexington and other cities where Jack Knight took control of papers. Long Island's Newsday, already a fine paper when it was acquired by Times Mirror in 1970 from Harry Guggen-

heim, blossomed and matured under its Los Angeles owners. Applying steadily evolving technological improvements and other efficiencies to their new properties, such chains in a couple of decades were able to ratchet up their profit margins while simultaneously bolstering editorial content.

Along the way society was changing, and so was the industry. The automobile, the booming suburbs and television altered commuting and reading patterns, and the marginal big-city papers began to fall by the wayside. (Not all that worry we talked about earlier was heedless, you understand.) As afternoon dailies especially became expendable, more and more communities suddenly found themselves one-newspaper towns. And those that survived this great shakeout realized something that the oil-and-steel crowd had known for years: A monopoly can be a beautiful thing.

Philip Meyer, a longtime industry executive who now holds the Knight Chair in Journalism at the University of North Carolina, and other industry critics have made this point before, but it's worth revisiting. The economic model of a newspaper, all things being equal, should resemble that of a supermarket—high volume, low margin. You make money because you produce something inexpensively that the masses consume day after day after day. But suddenly newspapers were no longer in a conventional situation. If yours were the only supermarket in all of Dallas, you could surely charge whatever you wanted for milk and eggs. Likewise, because they became monopoly institutions, newspapers got to the point where they could boost profit margins to 20, 30 and in some usurious cases 40 percent. These are dizzyingly high margins for any type of commerce. They are also addictive, to owners and stock analysts alike. "That easy-money culture has led to some bad habits that still haunt the industry," Meyer observed. "If the money is going to come in no matter what kind of product you turn out, you are motivated to turn it out as cheaply as possible. If newspapers are under pressure, you can cheapen the product and raise prices at the same time. And, most important, innovation is not rewarded."

Certainly that became the industry's default position, especially in economic downturns. Newspapering has traditionally been considered a cyclical industry, doing better when times are better—and advertising, therefore, is stronger. And while the analysts didn't expect growth from newspaper companies when the economy was weak, they did expect their executives to tighten their belts.

Then a dynamic new kind of newspaper CEO arrived on the scene to demonstrate to Wall Street and the world that such cycles could be defied. And damned if he didn't do it.

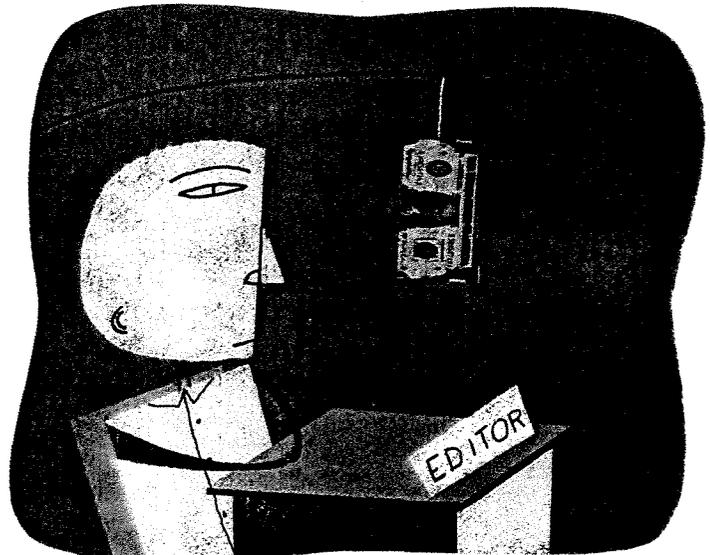
(Al Neuharth) had grown up on the editorial side of the newspaper business, earning a reputation for being as tough as he was flamboyant. As the influential leader of Gannett, he was less interested in Pulitzers and editorial excellence than in financial performance. And he managed to string together an astounding 86 consecutive quarters in which every period had higher profits than in the same quarter of the preceding year. Neuharth's performance radicalized profit expectations. But he had constantly expanded his company, carefully buying noncompetitive papers usually in cities with booming growth. The rule for his publishers was simplicity itself: Make your quarterly profit goals and prosper; miss them and you'd better start looking around.

The message spread through the industry like a new gospel. Before long even newspaper companies in stagnant or non-monopoly markets were being pressed to duplicate

Neuharth's profit performance. The results in some cases were draconian cuts in the newshole and news staffs. Editors, who found more and more of their compensation tied to the company's financial performance, became all too proficient with the scalpels. "The first time you have to take a hundred thousand out of payroll, it's a fascinating exercise," said former Milwaukee Journal Editor Sig Gissler. "The fifth time you have to do it, it's lost its allure.... You come in and start killing the nearest snake."

In Neuharth's wake, there was no longer any ambiguity about priorities for the publicly traded companies. News was no longer the paramount value, simply a vehicle to achieve the paramount value, which was financial return. Talking about Jack Knight's old company, a Merrill Lynch analyst in 1998 nicely summed up the new paradigm. "KRI's historic culture has been one of producing Pulitzer Prizes instead of profits," she wrote, "and while we think that culture is hard to change, it does seem to be happening."

So in newsroom after newsroom, the cutting continued. If a paper was large enough, it might operate in this fashion for quite a while before anyone but journalists would notice the difference in the product. But by the late '80s, and even



more dramatically in the '90s, it became clear that there was a limit to how long you could pile annual earnings gains upon annual earnings gains without damaging newspaper quality. Naturally, newspaper executives didn't want to admit that any more than Detroit wanted to admit it was producing inferior automobiles in the 1970s. Still, the business had reached the point where it was threatening to eat its own seed corn in the pursuit of short-term financial performance. And the evidence was there in the paper—in thinner and blander news reports, in the disappearance of a columnist or a statehouse reporter, in the folding of a Sunday magazine, in stories that simply never got covered. In the '90s, daily papers in the main "had become less distinctive institutions, less connected to their communities, more homogenized, often led by people whose only instinct seemed to be to increase shareholder wealth," said David Laventhol, who served as publisher at both the L.A. Times and Newsday. "Journalistic and community achievements seemed secondary."

At the dawn of a new millennium, this kind of bottom-line pressure shows no sign of abating. On the contrary, newspaper executives wake up most days to stagnant stock prices and Wall Street analysts who, if they mention newspaper companies at all, do so in the dour manner they reserve for “mature” industries—even those staid, unsexy ones that still manage to return 24 percent profits.

Off to one side, the print folks look out in awe at the growth of online, trying to figure out whether it represents their future or their demise. To the other they see a white-hot media environment where Microsoft partners with NBC; America Online swallows up Netscape, then Time Warner; CBS merges with entertainment giant Viacom; Yahoo! shops for partners, as does AT&T, as do the Baby Bells. It's confusing, migraine-inducing stuff, and newspaper executives are no more immune than the rest of us to a culture that says if you're not moving—somewhere, somehow—you're dead.

Editors, who found more and more of their compensation tied to the company's financial performance, became all too proficient with the scalpels. News was no longer the paramount value, simply a vehicle to achieve the paramount value, which was financial return.

So they are moving—by merging, by clustering, by cutting, by reorganizing, by synergizing with a vengeance. They are in such a rush that they are sorting out their destinies even as they fulfill them.

Needless to say, that is not exactly the ideal procedure. Were these same executives able to suppress their quarter-to-quarter anxiety and step back for a broader perspective, they might actually see the contemporary newspaper landscape for what it is: a remarkable opportunity. In the great media shakeout, newspapers stand as the last vestige of local news, something that will never go out of demand. One by one the other media players—local TV, local radio—have left the field. The local franchise most newspapers own has never been more valuable.

It's true that no one is exactly sure what will come of

the familiar pulp-and-ink product that lands at the door, though it likely will prove more enduring (romantics might even add endearing) than we are led to expect from the seers, some of whose more outlandish notions of the communications world to come have the ring of those “helicopter in every driveway” predictions of the old Futuramas. Still, it seems a safe bet that newspaper companies will continue to

go along as they are now, delivering news and information in a variety of formats, some of which doubtless even the futurists have yet to conjure.

It seems equally clear that such news will be more personalized, faster and increasingly married to other technologies. In other words, the old media will adapt to complement the new, as has ever been the case. And who knows? The Internet, far from being the villain of the piece, may turn out to be the print media's salvation, allowing newspapers to capitalize on their franchises with maximum efficiency. Now that we're finally getting past the first initial hysterical reactions to dotcom fever, the early signs are somewhat encouraging. It turns out that even on the Internet, profit counts more than hype—and newspapers know a thing or two about making profits. There are surveys suggesting that newspapers are actually employing their Web sites more quickly, and more imaginatively, for breaking news than such vaunted Internet “portals” as Yahoo! and MSN. At the same time, not only hasn't the Web's widely anticipated siphoning of print classifieds occurred, but until the current downturn newspapers were still showing strong gains in lineage. And if overall readership is still shaky and slightly eroding, it remains relatively stable, especially in light of the millions of viewers who are abandoning the network news programs.

All in all, then, this may prove to be a golden time for newspapers—if they have the courage to advance rather than retreat, if they invest in content, and if they remain mindful of what made their commodity special in the first place. “Why does a community desire to have its own medium?” asked the publisher of a small weekly in Washington state. “I kind of like the idea of the First Amendment. It's not owned by the press. It's owned by the public.”

Not long ago Washington Post columnist Richard Cohen addressed the subject of the turmoil in the news media and the question of what can happen when a newspaper forgets that it has a higher obligation than a satisfying return on investment. “News is not a product like a tire or a paper towel,” he wrote. “It is what we journalists say it is. The reader has to believe.... A newspaper's ‘brand’ is trust—trust in its judgment, its independence, its values. That's what remains constant. The news changes every day.”

Indeed, what Walter Williams asserted decades ago is still true. A newspaper is a kind of public trust—and to be trusted it has to be there every day, constantly monitoring, constantly watching, constantly providing information that is not only useful but truthful. That is an expensive and ongoing commitment. Radio, television, even digital interlopers like Microsoft and America Online have already demonstrated that they are unwilling to make that kind of commitment, in terms of putting enough trained, skilled information-gatherers on the ground. Should newspaper companies be tempted to follow their lead, as some already have, we will wind up with that most terrible of ironies—communities that are, in the middle of the so-called Information Explosion, less informed than ever. ●

Thomas Kunkel is dean of the Philip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland and president of American Journalism Review. Gene Roberts, longtime executive editor of the Philadelphia Inquirer and former managing editor of the New York Times, is a professor of journalism at the college.



This study was produced by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, an affiliate of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. The study uses empirical data to measure the quality of local TV news and compare those results with ratings.

SPECIAL REPORT: LOCAL TV NEWS

GAMBLING WITH THE FUTURE

Local newsrooms beset by sponsor interference, budget cuts, layoffs, and added programming

Local TV journalism is on dangerous ground.

In a survey of 118 local news directors, more than half report that advertisers try to tell them what to air and not to air — and they say the problem is growing.

To meet profit demands, many news directors report they are having to produce a thinner and cheaper product by adding news programs while cutting their budgets.

News directors say consultants are only providing the most generic solutions. One in five also say their consultants discourage them from covering certain kinds of news.

Gimmicks that once seemed to bump ratings — every story seemed “shocking” — don’t work any more. And stations don’t know what to do in their place.

Everything is up for grabs. Too much is for sale.

Is there a way to succeed in such an environment?

The Project for Excellence in Journalism’s ongoing content study of local television news

suggests there may be. Based on data collected from 189 stations over four years, we have isolated five characteristics that commercially successful stations share.

Adopting these practices won’t guarantee financial success, but statistically they will give a station the highest likelihood of achieving it.

The elements:

- Cover more of the community
- Demonstrate more enterprise
- Source stories better

- Air more long stories and fewer very short ones

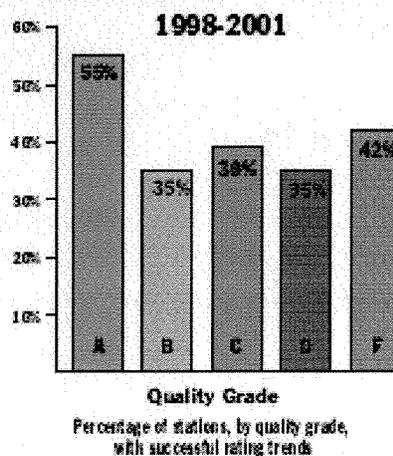
- Hire more staff and give them more time to develop stories

The problem is that these ideas run counter to the prevailing wisdom in local TV. Some are overrun again and again by short-term budget demands. And some rarely enter the newsroom conversation.

These findings and many others are part of Year Four of the local television news study by PEJ, a think tank affiliated with the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism and funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts.

In the stories that follow, the Project offers troubling findings about sponsor interference (**News for Sale**), new evidence of the impact of quality (**Quality Sells**), the practices that viewers respond to (**The Magic Formula**), a glimpse at the typical newscast (**The Look of Local News**), budget problems (**Thinner, Cheaper, Longer**), a comparison of network versus local TV news (**The Patriarch vs. the Family Circle**), and more. •

DOES QUALITY SELL?



NEWS FOR SALE

Half of stations report sponsor pressure on news decisions

BY MARION JUST AND ROSALIND LEVINE, WITH KATHLEEN REGAN

How much is your local TV news influenced by the people who buy ads?

In a survey of 118 news directors around the country, more than half, 53 percent, reported that advertisers pressure them to kill negative stories or run positive ones.

And many of these news directors say the problem won't go away. "Sales is getting more and more influence on newscasts," said a news director from one medium-sized market. "Sponsorships, coverage suggestions, on-air mentions."

The pressure to do puff pieces about sponsors occurs "constantly," "all the time," "everyday," "routinely," and "every time a sales person opened his/her mouth," news directors reported in a major survey of local news stations.

It is "getting harder every year" to maintain the wall between sales and news, reported another news manager.

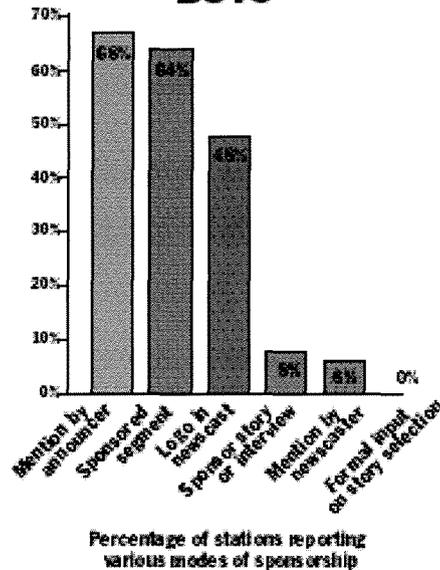
These are some of the findings of the survey of 118 news directors around the country, conducted between June and August 2001. The sample represents a significant proportion of the approximately 850 stations that broadcast news. The answers have a margin of error of plus or minus 5 percentage points. News directors in all but two cases wanted their comments to be anonymous for fear of retaliation for criticizing their companies.

News directors also reported their TV consultants (outside companies hired by stations to critique newscasts and improve ratings) issuing blanket edicts about what to cover and what not to cover in order to attract the most advertising dollars.

Together, the findings and comments raise questions about the journalistic independence of local television news.

The number of stations that indicate sponsor pressure this year confirms a problem we first saw in our 2000 study. Last year a third of the news directors in a limited sample of 20 stations reported ad-

WHAT SPONSORSHIP BUYS



vertisers trying to influence what gets on their broadcasts. Although that sample was small, when coupled with the comments by news directors, the evidence suggests the problem is getting larger.

Breaking down the sponsor suggestions more specifically, 47 percent of news directors this year said sponsors tried to get them to provide favorable coverage.

And 18 percent of news directors — almost one in five — say sponsors try to prevent them from covering stories, a problem that is more acute in smaller markets. "Interference is common," one news director told us.

When it comes to advertisers trying to compel positive stories about themselves, 16 percent of stations said that they had been asked to cover sponsor events. Another 8 percent covered events that were partnerships between the station and the advertisers; 12 percent said the sales or advertising staff requested positive coverage of sponsors.

Some news directors take a benign view of sponsor pressure. As one put it, if the story has "a valid 'news' angle," they will

cover it whatever the source. "Advertisers have the same right to pitch their stories to the news department as anyone," said another news director.

At most stations, however, news directors admit that advertisers get something more than just commercial time for their money. In over two-thirds of stations, for instance, news sponsors are named by the announcer or identified with a particular news segment.

At about half the stations surveyed, the sponsor logo appears in the newscast. None of the stations in our sample reported that sponsors were allowed involvement in story selection, but a handful of stations gave sponsors interviews or mention in the body of a newscast in exchange for their support.

A news director in a large market said the biggest change in the newsroom this year was "pressure from sales because of the economy."

More alarming is the idea of sponsors discouraging stories or even getting them killed.

A half a dozen news directors singled out local car dealerships and auto manufacturers as the focus of squashed stories. "We don't aggressively go after car dealers," one news director admitted. Another reported a "negative story on an auto dealer canned under pressure from client."

News directors also mentioned health investigations at local restaurants as vulnerable. At two stations, for instance, stories were killed when they reflected poorly on restaurant sponsors. Two other news directors said grocery stores tried to get them to drop investigative stories.

Another news director described how pressure came from within the station (the sales department) and without (the local restaurant association) but "news prevailed."

In fact, a number of news directors felt able to withstand interference from "sales reps who don't understand the business." Some volunteered that they were supported by their general managers so that "the sole and final decision is with the news department."

One news director commented that he received "zero pressure from the general manager," and another reported that even in the face of loss of sponsorship, management "always backed up the news department."

What emerged was the sense that the relentless push by advertisers and sales departments inevitably yields small concessions from beleaguered news directors. Even without overt pressure news directors may feel obliged to compromise just to keep their jobs.

SMALL MARKETS, BIG PRESSURE

The problem of sponsor interference in our sample was more acute in medium-sized and small markets. In one case, "Sales sold sponsorship to [a] local retail group, which required 'positive' stories on retailers (i.e. thinly veiled commercials)."

Another news director complained that "[the] sales department books our live trucks for live sales remotes, which air in commercial breaks within certain newscasts." One live truck out of service, one less opportunity to cover breaking news. And commercials that look like news thrown in for good measure.

While only a third of news directors in the very largest markets reported sponsor pressure to provide positive coverage, fully two-thirds of news directors in the smallest markets feel those pressures.

A quarter of news directors in small markets, those under 376,000 households, report that they have been pressured to censor their news. One news director in the Rockies described the situation as "a very large problem in this market."

Pressure on newsrooms is aggravated by the fact that small stations cannot afford their own lawyers. As a result they try to avoid stories that might prompt legal action.

One news director described an incident where the station "obtained copy of a Department of Human Services report on abused foster child. State law holds it 'confidential.' We would have been hauled to court if used [report] and refused to reveal source. Source broke the law by handing it to us." This small station did not feel it could cover the story.

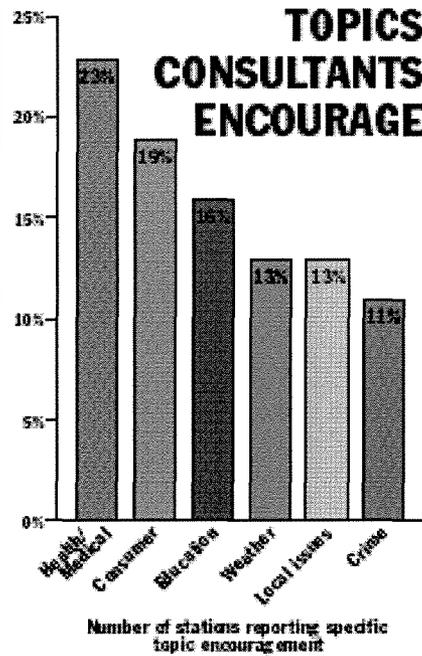
Other small-market stations also reported staying away from stories that dealt with social service agencies in their states or cities. Several news directors avoided stories where a libel suit was threatened or even where "one individual was named" in a negative way.

CONSULTANTS

Pressure on news content comes not only from outside the newsroom, but also from those who are invited in — the ubiquitous news consultants. Most stations use independent consultants.

About half the stations surveyed use outside consultants periodically or for special topics and 21 percent solely rely on consultants drawn from their parent company. About two-thirds of the stations in our survey report that consultants visit their stations two to four times a year.

What kind of advice do these consul-



tants have to offer? A common complaint is that consultant recommendations are not tailored to the needs of individual stations. More than half of the stations report that the advice they receive is "mostly" or "entirely" general, usually focusing on presentation rather than content.

Not surprisingly, the maxim "you get what you pay for" holds true for consultants. While 59 percent of stations in large or very large markets get advice made to fit their particular situation, only a third of small-market stations have access to that kind of consultation.

News directors are not overcome with enthusiasm about consultants, but most tell us that consultant advice is at least some-

METHODOLOGY

The study this year examined broadcast news programs in 14 cities, 43 stations in all. We also studied the three broadcast network evening news programs. Taping occurred during a February sweeps week and an April non-sweeps week. A team of professional coders analyzed 6,472 stories from 470 broadcasts, or 235 hours of local news. The results were then statistically analyzed by researchers Princeton Survey Research Associates and at Wellesley College and interpreted by a team of journalists.

Our definition of quality is the same established by our design team of local TV news professionals. We stress the basics: a newscast should cover a broad range of topics, focus on the significant aspects of the news, be based on original reporting, provide credible information, use multiple sources, balance stories with multiple points of view, and contain locally relevant stories. We continue to use the system devel-

what useful. Consultants played a role in a wide range of activities, everything from developing a station's news "philosophy" to recruiting and coaching on-air personnel.

More than half of stations (52 percent) say their consultants actively push covering certain kinds of news. When they did so, they tended to tout "soft news" — health and consumer issues.

Nineteen percent of stations reported their consultants did something we consider even more worrisome, discouraging covering certain kinds of news.

News directors told us that sports was the topic consultants most often discouraged, but they said that politics and local business coverage had also been singled out.

Consultant advice to give more time to health and less to sports seems pitched to make local news more attractive to female viewers.

News directors are more positive about advice from general managers than the kind they get from consultants. They rarely see managers as "interfering." Several GM's mentioned in our survey were former news directors. Others commanded respect because of their experience and expert knowledge of the news.

A number of news directors said general managers suggested story ideas "like everyone else." But of course, as one news director remarked, "They are not everyone else."

Increasingly, it seems, advertisers aren't either. •

Marion Just is a professor of political science at Wellesley College and a research associate at the Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy at Harvard. Rosalind Levine is an attorney in Boston. Kathleen Regan is a student and research assistant at Wellesley.

oped by separate teams of university scholars and professional researchers to grade newscasts by a point system matched to these criteria. As in years past presentation is a very minor factor. So that grading can be accomplished objectively, stories score well based on an accumulation of the simple journalistic values mentioned above.

This year's study also included a national mail survey of news directors, conducted between June and August 2001. A random sample of 196 news directors was selected from an enumerated list of television stations. One hundred eighteen news directors completed the surveys for a response rate of 60 percent. The sample of 118 respondents represent 107, or more than half, of the 210 local television markets throughout the country that produce news. Results are therefore reported unweighted. The survey has a margin of error of plus or minus 5 percent, which means statistically that in 95 samples out of 100 the results will not differ more than 5 percent from those reported here.

popular material, outweighing coverage of the tax plan 5 to 1.

In all, only 16 stories out of nearly 6,000 discussed the tax-cut debate in Washington or its possible effects on the local community.

GOING GLOBAL

This year, our study also coincided with two international incidents involving the military — the sinking of a Japanese fishing boat by a Navy submarine and the collision of a U.S. EP-3 spy plane with a Chinese fighter jet. As a consequence, defense issues jumped to the No. 3 topic on local newscasts. Although our sample included four stations in Honolulu, the home base of the submarine involved in the sinking, these stories were covered heavily throughout the country. This may be a sign that when public concern demands it, a national story will capture the attention of local TV, overriding the “local-only” mantra that so many stations promote.

Unfortunately, the data point to unsettling conclusions. Despite the increased coverage of defense issues, there is little energy or imagination evident on the air.

Just 12 percent of all defense stories were based on breaking news. Nearly twice that, 23 percent of the stories, were news conferences, and 43 percent were covered using feed material. About half these stories connected the national story to the viewing audience, but local stations were almost equally likely to simply pass along the latest updates without explaining their local effects. The locals mostly duplicated the networks rather than supplementing them with more nuanced, original coverage.

The events of September 11 will present an even greater challenge. The demands of a prolonged war on terrorism, much of it to be fought in covert operations in far-off countries, will strain already decimated newsroom budgets.

The nation looks to local news for information. A poll by the Pew Research Center this summer found that local news sources were a more popular news source than the networks, though not as popular as cable channels. But there is reason to worry whether newsrooms will prove deserving of the public's confidence. •

Lee Ann Brady is senior project director at Princeton Survey Research Associates. Atiba Pertilla is a research associate at PEJ.

THINNER, CHEAPER,

To pad profits, broadcasters cut budgets and staff while adding programs

BY MARION JUST, ROSALIND LEVINE, AND TODD BELT

The terrorist attacks in New York and Washington galvanized their local stations and brought into relief the challenge of providing all-out breaking news coverage.

Based on what news directors around the country say about their budgets, it's questionable whether most stations would be able to respond just as quickly and thoroughly.

Even before September 11, stations were being asked to do more and more with less — and that was forcing them to put a cheaper and thinner product on the air, according to a national survey of people who run local television newsrooms.

There's an intensifying “fear-loathing of stock-based companies laying off for profit-only reasons,” and a “feeling that their decisions are very short-sighted,” reported one news director.

We surveyed news directors at 118 stations around the country between June and August 2001, a significant portion of the 850 stations that do local news. We promised confidentiality to news directors in return for information about their budgets, fiscal decisions, and their comments on the news business. Here is some of what they had to say:

- Half of all stations had either budget cuts or layoffs in the last year. The average budget cut was 8 percent.

- Sixty percent of stations had to make unscheduled budget cuts within the course of the last fiscal year.

- Two-thirds of stations added broadcast hours.

- Fifty-seven percent had to produce the same or more news despite layoffs, budget freezes or budget cuts.

“Budget cuts, frozen positions, less money and more responsibility,” explained one news director, describing the atmosphere at his station. Another news director estimated a “loss of news gathering ability of 10-12 percent due to cuts.”

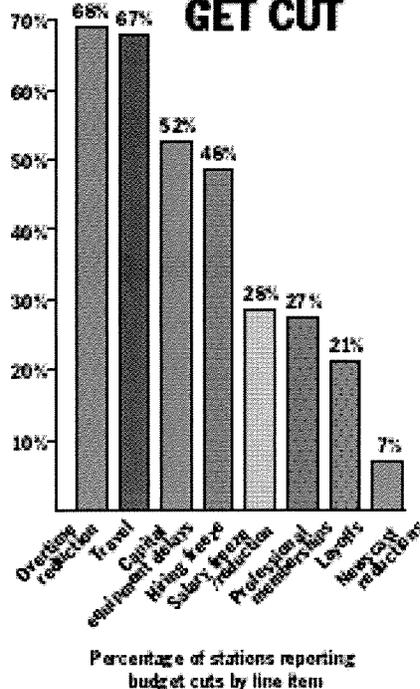
Much of the pressure on broadcasters has come from declining ad revenue as the country slipped into slow growth and near recession. But only seven percent of the news directors surveyed reported that their stations had responded to declining revenue by reducing the number of newscast hours.

Quite the opposite. Producing news is still cheaper than buying syndicated entertainment programming.

Events since September 11 will likely make things worse. An analysis by CMR, a company that tracks ad spending, found that local affiliates lost \$93 million in advertising the first week after the terrorist attacks. Major sponsors like airlines and car dealers are pulling back. A new war on terrorism will further tax news budgets. Meanwhile, virtually all stations are facing investments ranging from \$3 million to \$8 million to convert to digital broadcasting.

The belt-tightening already in place came in various ways. Overall, 68 percent

WHERE BUDGETS GET CUT



LONGER

of stations limited overtime, 48 percent imposed hiring freezes, and 21 percent resorted to layoffs. Travel has also been cut severely and capital purchases have been put on hold indefinitely.

While these actions satisfy the short-term demand for maintaining or increasing profit margins, the cuts may backfire.

In 1999, the survey data, when matched with ratings, found that adding staff is the best way for a local news operation to invest resources to build ratings.

With smaller staffs, coverage of breaking news is bound to suffer. Enterprise or in-depth coverage, the kind our studies have shown TV viewers appreciate most, becomes less likely. In the words of one news director, budget cuts mean that "sometimes we don't commit as much resource to certain discretionary stories." Another indicated that budget cuts meant a "major reduction in use of part-timers. Thus full-time staff is stretched, less time for investigative work, special projects."

Not surprisingly, 54 percent of news directors fear that budget cuts have substantially hurt their station's news-gathering ability. As one news director noted, "The cutbacks have made a lean staff malnourished."

Another commented: "Freeze on capital & hiring freeze has us shorthanded..."

Even when there are no staff cuts, quality may be affected, said some news directors. The problem, one noted, is "retaining qualified desk managers and talented producers, attracting skilled persons with the salary we have budgeted."

Small stations are suffering the most. Many had few resources to begin with and the demand for more newscasts puts them in a terrible bind.

One news director in a small-market described the situation as "Tough!... 2.5 hours a day with a 19-person staff." More than 40 percent of stations in small markets rely on their reporters to produce two or more news packages a day. Half of the reporters in small markets routinely shoot or edit their own video, significantly more than those in larger markets.

News directors sounded frustrated, even angry, about their stations' strategies. "We added product (newscasts) then three months later reduced staffing through a hir-

ing freeze and we're still producing the additional newscasts," reported one news manager.

Many news directors echoed the concern about the impact of budget cuts on staff. They responded that the biggest change in the newsroom this year was "Cutbacks in staff due to budget restraints," "staff cuts, early retirements," "layoffs," "cutbacks," "reduced staff," "staff reduction," "lower staffing," "staff turnover," and "shrinking staff."

And no matter what the market size, more than half the stations reporting say that budget cuts have affected morale in the newsroom. One Midwestern news director, calling morale the biggest change in the newsroom this year, declared: "People are no longer kidding themselves about the ethic of business vs. quality journalism. 'Journalism' is now 'commercial journalism.'"

Several news directors described a prevailing anxiety brought about by budget cuts. In response to an open-ended question, more than one used the term "a sense of uncertainty."

"Everyone wonders if, and when, layoffs may happen here," wrote one news director. "It is like a dark cloud looming over the staff," wrote another. "Who is next?" wrote a third.

News directors are worried about the stress on the workforce. One, from a small-market station, ticked off his concerns: "Fewer people — more work for remaining staff. Dip in production quality for daily stories. Inability to get all stories."

In some stations the budget crisis has created, or intensified, tension between the newsroom and the boardroom.

"The news staff has become frustrated with corporate and it has begun to show," explained one manager. Another expressed a "higher level of frustration over high expectations with not enough resources." Said another, slightly more optimistic, "For the most part the staff has pulled together but it still affects how people view our corporation."

One news director described a nexus of problems: "Anxiety about future of business, resentment toward corporate ownership, lack of money for better coverage."

Many news directors indicated that young people were particularly worried about their future prospects in the news business, an ominous sign that the profession may lose some of the most talented members of its next generation.

The best young staffers have "worries about career future[s]" or a "sense of discouragement," said one news director. "Staffers hoping to move up in markets are frustrated and that spills back into their work," said another.

Not all stations believed that budgets affected morale — or at least "not yet." Some said their operations were already trimmed so close to the bone that there was nothing left to cut. One news director noted that because the station made cuts in the non-salary portion of the budget, morale did not suffer.

One news director waxed philosophical. The effect of budget cuts on morale was "what you'd expect, but we soldier on." Another explained: "We're very open with employees, and by choosing a reduction in annual increases over layoffs, it actually boosted morale."

Budget pressures are topmost in the minds of news directors. When we asked them about the obstacles to producing a high-quality newscast, "too little money" was a popular response, second only to "too few staff."

But the linkage between the two problems is clear. "Budget cuts have killed staff morale — no raises, a hiring freeze, no overtime," said one news director.

Luckier ones reported investments in their stations. Some news directors bragged about new equipment ("we went digital!"), new personnel (general managers, news directors, owners, on-air talent), and new newscasts.

And a few remained optimistic by concentrating on the people they work with: "In spite of all the negatives (what we can't do and industry impacts) [we're] maintaining a creative, positive, forward-thinking team," said a news director from a small market. "More positive than ever before."

One thing seems clear. Nearly all news managers are going to have to find creative ways to cope with the people and resources that remain. The question is whether viewers will begin to decide that what is left on the air is not worth their time when they have more choices than ever for news. •

Marion Just is a professor of political science at Wellesley College and a research associate at the Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy at Harvard. Rosalind Levine is an attorney in Boston. Todd Belt is a doctoral student in political science at the University of Southern California.

The Slant of the News: How Editorial Endorsements Influence Campaign Coverage and Citizens' Views of Candidates

KIM FRIDKIN KAHN AND PATRICK J. KENNEY *Arizona State University*

One of the essential elements of an impartial press in the United States is the "wall of separation" between the editorial pages and the pages devoted to the news. While the political beliefs of newspaper owners and editors are clearly articulated on opinion pages, their views are not supposed to infiltrate the reporting of the news. The analyses presented in this paper raise questions about this claim. We examine newspaper coverage of more than 60 Senatorial campaigns across three election years and find that information on news pages is slanted in favor of the candidate endorsed on the newspaper's editorial page. We find that the coverage of incumbent Senators is most affected by the newspaper's endorsement decision. We explore the consequences of "slanted" news coverage by showing that voters evaluate endorsed candidates more favorably than candidates who fail to secure an editorial endorsement. The impact of the endorsement decision on voters' evaluations is most powerful in races receiving a great deal of press attention and among citizens who read their local newspaper on a daily basis.

The First Amendment and scores of Supreme Court decisions accord newspapers broad leeway about what information to print concerning politics. Not surprisingly, with so few restrictions, the press has remade itself several times during the last 250 years. Today, newspaper coverage of political events and public policy conforms to the canons of "professional journalism." These include, for example, a code of ethics concerning the rights and responsibilities of the press in a democracy, the formation of structured education for aspiring journalists, and a series of norms and rules that define the general practice of gathering the news.

This constellation of characteristics is supposed to produce the fair and balanced reporting of the news. Today, the professional journalist assumes "the role of a politically neutral adversary, critically examining all sides of an issue and thereby assuring the impartial coverage of the broadest range of issues" (Bennett 1988, 120). It is expected that professional journalists subordinate their political leanings in pursuit of professionalism (Davis 1996).

One of the essential elements of an impartial press is the impenetrable wall between the editorial pages and the pages devoted to the news. This "wall of separation" is critical to the establishment of a fair and impartial press. While the political beliefs of newspaper owners and editors are articulated clearly on opinion pages, their views are not supposed to infiltrate the reporting

of the news. According to journalistic norms, the information on the news pages is reported objectively and free from pressure or direction by the people who own and run the newspapers. According to the executive editor of the *Washington Post*, Leonard Downie, Jr., the news department at the *Post* follows the paper's formal ethics policy that "the separation of news columns from the editorial pages . . . is solemn and complete" (Seib 1994, 119). A routine practice at most major newspapers in this country is for editors and reporters who cover the daily news to have nothing to do with endorsement decisions or other opinions printed on the editorial page. Likewise, the editorial page editors have no involvement in the coverage of the news (Seib 1994).

The concept of the "wall" is preached faithfully in journalism classes across the country and is a widely held norm within the newspaper industry. In this paper, we examine the integrity of the wall by investigating the relationship between newspapers' editorial decisions and the tone of their news coverage.¹ We examine newspaper coverage of more than 60 Senatorial campaigns across three election years.

Our analysis has important implications for the role of the modern press during campaigns. Historically, the press has played two crucial roles during elections. First, it has been a conduit of information between citizens and candidates. Indeed, most of what citizens know about candidates comes from the news media (e.g., Graber 1997; Paletz 1999). Furthermore, candidates often look to the press to disseminate their messages to potential supporters (e.g., Just et al. 1996; Kahn and Kenney 1999).

Second, the press structures the discourse of political campaigns by emphasizing certain topics over others (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder 1997; McCombs and Shaw 1972). Along with candidates and parties, the press has the ability to help define the nation's problems and identify possible solutions. While the press may sometimes echo the discussions of political elites, at other

Kim Fridkin Kahn is Professor of Political Science, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287 (kahn@asu.edu). Patrick J. Kenney is Professor of Political Science, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287 (pkenny@asu.edu).

The names of the authors appear in alphabetical order and imply that this paper is in every way a collaborative enterprise. We thank Rick Herrera, Benjamin I. Page, Malia Reddick, and Mike Yawn for their comments on an early draft of this paper and Pat Crittenden for her editorial assistance. The data used in for this paper are available through the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, University of Michigan. Of course, the Consortium bears no responsibility for the analysis herein. The content analysis of news coverage was collected with support from National Science Foundation Grant SBR-9308421.

¹ Only a handful of scholars have examined the relationship between editorial views and news coverage (e.g., Page 1996; Rowse 1957).

times it acts as a dissenting or alternative voice in the political arena.

The press has been performing these roles in the United States for the better part of two centuries. However, how the press performs these functions has changed dramatically. In the early to mid-1800s, the press was unabashedly partisan. Newspapers were viewed not as objective purveyors of information, but as sources of political propaganda. The avowed practice of today's press, in contrast, is to limit displays of political preferences to the editorial pages, while objectively presenting the news in the remainder of the paper.

The editorial influence on news coverage has electoral ramifications. In particular, the endorsement decisions of newspapers, reflected in the news coverage, may affect citizens' attitudes about competing candidates. Citizens may be unaware that the coverage in their daily newspapers is slanted, making them especially susceptible to persuasion (Milburn 1991). Because the modern press claims to be an objective source of information, unlike the partisan press of the past, any bias in the news section of today's newspapers is particularly insidious.

SEARCHING FOR ENDORSEMENT EFFECTS IN CAMPAIGN COVERAGE

We conduct an extensive content analysis of campaign coverage to see whether endorsement decisions affect news coverage. We then turn to individual-level survey data to determine whether citizens develop more favorable impressions of candidates who are endorsed.

We focus on U.S. Senate elections. Senate campaigns generate much more coverage in the local press. Senate races generate more coverage than House races because of the more efficient "media-market" fit in Senate contests (Clarke and Evans 1983; Goldenberg and Traugott 1984). Most metropolitan newspapers need to cover only one Senate race because all (or most) readers reside in the same state. However, most newspapers are read by voters residing in several House districts. In addition, House races receive less coverage than Senate campaigns because reporters and editors view House elections as less newsworthy (Cook 1989). Because Senate races generate so much media coverage, differences in press patterns in Senate campaigns may have a profound influence on voters' views of Senate candidates (Kahn and Kenney 1999). Examining Senate races is also preferable to an examination of presidential races because, in a given election year, more than 30 Senate races are available for study. However, to examine 30 presidential campaigns, we would need to go back to the nineteenth century. Of course, press coverage of presidential campaigns has changed dramatically over this extended period.

A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF CAMPAIGN COVERAGE

We examine all Senate races contested between 1988 and 1992—79 races involving incumbents and 17 open

races.² To see whether newspaper endorsement decisions influenced press coverage in these races, we selected the largest circulating newspaper in each state for analysis, because this newspaper reaches more potential voters than any other paper in the state.³ In 12 of the 79 incumbent races, the state's largest newspaper did not endorse a Senate candidate. These races were dropped from our sample, leaving 67 incumbent races available for analysis.⁴ Newspapers endorsed a candidate in each of the 17 open campaigns.

For each newspaper in our sample, we examined news coverage between September 1 and Election Day.⁵ We examined all articles that mentioned either candidate in the first, state, or editorial section of the newspaper. In total, we examined 5,529 articles.⁶

Considering Rival Explanations

To assess the impact of endorsement decisions on campaign coverage, it is necessary to take the political context into account. Endorsed candidates may receive more positive coverage because news personnel favor the candidates they endorse, showering the endorsed candidates with favorable press attention. On the other hand, endorsed candidates may receive more positive coverage because they happen to be superior in terms of experience, popularity, resources, and other criteria (Fenno 1996). We thus employ a series of indicators of the political context.

² We decided to analyze open races separately from incumbent campaigns for two reasons. First, prior research has documented that these races vary considerably along several dimensions, such as substance of campaign message, tone of campaign message, and voter recognition of candidates (see Abramowitz 1988, Jacobson 2001, and Kahn and Kenney 1999). Second, the number of open races is small during this period (i.e., 17), making an analysis of open races more suggestive than definitive. Nonetheless, we present the findings for the open races in footnote 16.

³ By concentrating on the larger and therefore more professional papers, we may be underrepresenting the relationship between editorial decisions and news content, the idea being that more professional papers are more likely to separate editorial opinions from news.

⁴ Because we are interested in examining whether endorsement decisions influence news content, we eliminate races in which an endorsement decision is not made. Although not making an endorsement may represent an endorsement decision, we cannot be certain. Some newspapers have a policy of not endorsing candidates. In our study, incumbents obtain the bulk of the newspaper endorsements (70%). Furthermore, our data suggest that endorsements of Senate candidates does not simply follow partisan lines. Newspapers endorse the Senate and the presidential candidate of the same party only 55% of the time.

⁵ For specific sampling details about the content analyses, see Kahn and Kenney 1999, 36–8.

⁶ In all, 20 trained coders participated in the project. Intercoder reliability was assessed repeatedly during the coding process. On average, there was 92% agreement across all the content codes. More specifically, intercoder agreement was 0.90 for the tone of the article, 0.94 for the tone of the headline, 0.92 for the tone of the front page, 0.90 for attributed criticisms, 0.88 for unattributed criticisms, 0.92 for the tone of issue coverage, 0.90 for the tone of trait coverage, and 0.96 for the tone of horserace coverage. These measures of tone are discussed below.

Characteristics of the Candidates. To assess the quality of the candidates, we include several measures. First, we assess the seniority of the incumbent seeking election. Senior senators may be more successful in generating favorable coverage than their junior counterparts.⁷ In addition to seniority, involvement in scandals and political controversies may influence press coverage of the sitting senators (Abramowitz 1988). Therefore, we include a measure assessing the candidates' involvement in a scandal.

We expect challengers with political "experience" and candidates who are more "skillful" campaigners to capture more positive press coverage than their less experienced and less skillful counterparts. With regard to experience, others (Green and Krasno 1988; Squire 1989; Squire and Smith 1996) have developed measures that predict challengers' abilities to raise campaign funds and capture votes. Political experience should also explain whether challengers capture the attention of the press. Challengers with electoral and governing experience can rely on established relationships with reporters and editors. These candidates may also be more adept at generating news releases and holding news conferences.

Beyond experience, some challengers are skillful campaigners and are savvy at garnering the media's attention. As Squire and Smith (1996, 236–7) point out, "Campaign skills refer to the personal characteristics of a candidate that strengthen his or her appeal irrespective of party membership or stands on the issues." To measure the quality of the challenger, we combine the elective experience measure with the indicator of campaign skill.

Campaign Spending. Reporters and editors react to campaign activity when preparing stories (e.g., Clarke and Evans 1983). These activities include press releases by the candidates, press conferences, interviews with reporters, and campaign rallies. To stage these events, candidates need money (Cook 1989). Given the expected relationship between campaign spending and coverage, we control for incumbent and challenger spending when examining patterns of news treatment.

Closeness of the Races. The competitiveness of the campaign also influences news coverage. Candidates receive substantially more coverage when the race is perceived as competitive (e.g., Goldenberg and Traugott 1984; Kahn and Kenney 1999; Westlye 1991). In addition, as races become more "hard-fought," press coverage becomes more negative. In competitive races, newspapers publish more criticisms of the candidates and are more likely to use negative traits to describe the candidates. Given the strong relationship between competition and coverage, we control for the closeness of the race by relying on preelection polls published prior to October 1.

⁷ See Appendix A for descriptions of all variables used in the analyses in this paper.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ENDORSEMENTS AND COVERAGE

Reporters and editors can slant news coverage of campaigns in various ways—some subtle and difficult for casual readers to detect, others unambiguous and easily identified. We borrow liberally from Page's (1996) summary of more common techniques.

Tone of Coverage

We begin by looking at the relationship between endorsements and the overall tone of press coverage. Not all news stories are neutral in tone. Instead, the content of many campaign stories can be characterized as favorable toward one candidate and unflattering to another candidate. We scored each article as positive, negative, mixed, or neutral in tone and then calculated an average tone score for the articles written about each candidate.⁸

The ordinary least-squares (OLS) regression results in Table 1 indicate a link between the newspapers' endorsement and how reporters write about sitting senators. In the model for incumbents, the parameter estimate for endorsements is 0.24, with a standard error of 0.09. With all control variables held constant at their means, endorsed incumbents can expect an average tone score of 0.38 (on a scale ranging from -1 to 1), whereas unendorsed incumbents can expect an average tone score of 0.14. In contrast, challengers who secure endorsements do not receive more favorable press treatment than nonendorsed challengers, as indicated by the coefficient of only -0.01 , with a standard error of 0.12, compared to nonendorsed challengers.

Among the control variables, competition influences the tone of coverage for incumbents; as races become more competitive, incumbents can expect more critical coverage.⁹ In the challenger model, as challengers become more experienced and more skillful, they receive more favorable coverage.

Tone of Prominent Coverage

We turn now to the tone of prominent press coverage. Many newspaper readers are attracted to stories because of the content of the headlines or the placement of stories. Front page stories, for instance, are much more likely to be read than articles buried near the back of the newspaper. Newspapers hoping to hurt or help candidates may slant the tone of headlines and the tone of front page stories. To examine the tone of prominent coverage, we calculate an average tone measure for the front page stories about a candidate and

⁸ In Appendix B, we present several examples of news content, accompanied by our coding decisions.

⁹ Throughout this section, we include two additional control variables: a variable measuring each newspaper's endorsement of the presidential candidates in the two previous presidential elections and a variable measuring each newspaper's endorsement decision in the most recent Senate race. These variables failed to reach statistical significance in 15 of the 16 equations in Tables 1–4.

TABLE 1. OLS Regression Analysis Explaining the Overall Tone of Coverage

	Incumbent coverage		Challenger coverage	
	Unstandardized coefficient (SE)	β	Unstandardized coefficient (SE)	β
Endorsement	0.24(0.09)***	0.28	-0.01(0.12)	-0.02
Competition	-0.009(0.002)***	-0.46	0.003(0.003)	0.16
Incumbent spending	0.04(0.12)	0.04	-0.08(0.14)	-0.08
Challenger spending	-0.04(0.13)	-0.04	0.23(0.16)	0.19
Scandal	-0.03(0.14)	-0.02	0.02(0.16)	0.01
Seniority	0.002(0.005)	0.04	-0.004(0.006)	-0.07
Challenger quality	-0.001(0.01)	0.01	0.03(0.01)***	0.30
Constant	-0.20(0.16)		0.01(0.19)	
R^2	0.34		0.17	
N	67		67	

Note: The dependent variable is the average tone score for all the articles written about the candidate during the campaign. The tone score averaged 0.26(SD = 0.32) for incumbents and -0.03(SD = 0.33) for challengers. Endorsement is a binary variable coded 1 if the incumbent is endorsed and 0 if the challenger is endorsed. Competition ranges from 24 (in the least competitive races) to 100 (in the most competitive races). Incumbent and challenger spending is logged to base 10 and divided by the voting age population in the state. Scandal is a binary variable where 1 = incumbent involved in scandal and 0 = otherwise. Seniority is measured by number of years in U.S. Senate. Challenger quality is a scale ranging from 1 to 27. All p values are two-tailed. *** $p < 0.01$.

an average tone measure for the headlines about a candidate.

In Table 2A, we present incumbent and challenger models predicting the tone of front page articles, and in Table 2B, we present models predicting the tone of headlines for incumbents and challengers. The results indicate that endorsements influence the tone of coverage given to incumbents but not challengers. With all remaining variables fixed at their means, endorsed incumbents can expect an average tone score of 0.27 for all front page articles, compared to an average tone score of 0.06 for nonendorsed incumbents. The same pattern holds for headlines. The tone of headlines is more favorable for endorsed than for nonendorsed incumbents. Other factors being equal, the average tone of headlines for endorsed incumbents is 0.17 higher than the average tone of headlines for nonendorsed incumbents.

Beyond the endorsement effect, the closeness of the race influences the tone of prominent coverage for incumbents. As in the earlier analysis, the most important explanatory variable in the challenger models is the quality of the challenger, which influences the tone of front page articles and the tone of newspaper headlines.

Number of Criticisms

Newspapers can also slant coverage by explicitly criticizing candidates. Journalists often turn to quotations as a way of supporting their point of view. Furthermore, according to the professional norms of newswriting (Cappon 1991), reporters need to identify sources when they offer criticisms of candidates in news stories. However, they sometimes stray from this ideal, criticizing a candidate in a news story without citing a source. When criticisms are linked to sources, readers can employ well-known political cues (e.g., the party identification or ideological view of the source) to place the criticisms in political context. On the other hand,

when reporters make critical comments about candidates without identifying a source, readers cannot depend on common heuristics to help "counterargue" the information.

Table 3 shows two sets of regression results for criticisms of incumbents and challengers. In Table 3A, we develop incumbent and challenger models to explain the number of attributed criticisms published about the candidates. In addition to controlling for the closeness of the race, the amount of spending by the candidates, and the characteristics of the candidates, we include the number of paragraphs written about the candidate during the course of the campaign. This is necessary because as the total coverage increases, so do criticisms.

The results in Table 3A indicate that endorsed incumbents are treated more favorably than Senators who fail to secure endorsements, receiving, on average, nearly 12 fewer attributed criticisms, holding all remaining variables constant. The endorsement decisions of newspapers do not affect coverage of challengers.

For the remaining variables in the model, the number of paragraphs written about the candidates is by far the most powerful factor influencing the number of attributed criticisms. The level of competition influences coverage in both models, with candidates in competitive races receiving more attributed criticisms. In addition, quality challengers who spend more money are successful in creating more attributed criticisms of incumbents.¹⁰

¹⁰ To examine more directly whether, by spending more money, challengers encourage the press to cover challengers' criticisms of the incumbents, we analyzed an OLS regression model of the number of criticisms of the incumbent by the challenger. The predictors in the model are the amount of spending by the challenger, incumbent spending, challenger quality, competition, seniority of the senator, the existence of scandal, and the newspaper's endorsement decision. As challengers' spending increases, the number of challenger criticisms of the incumbent increases significantly. The unstandardized coefficient for challenger spending is 34.8 (standard error = 16.8).

TABLE 2. OLS Regression Analysis Explaining the Tone of Prominent Coverage

	Incumbent coverage		Challenger coverage	
	Unstandardized coefficient (SE)	β	Unstandardized coefficient (SE)	β
A. Tone of front page coverage				
Endorsement	0.21(0.09)**	0.28	0.02(0.09)	0.03
Competition	-0.008(0.002)***	-0.42	0.003(0.003)	0.17
Incumbent spending	0.11(0.13)	0.13	-0.21(0.16)	-0.24
Challenger spending	-0.04(0.14)	-0.04	0.13(0.18)	0.13
Scandal	0.005(0.13)	0.01	-0.08(0.14)	-0.09
Seniority	-0.003(0.006)	-0.06	-0.004(0.007)	-0.09
Challenger quality	-0.003(0.01)	-0.03	0.03(0.01)***	0.31
Constant	-0.19(0.16)		0.21(0.18)	
R^2	0.30		0.20	
N	56		48	
B. Tone of headlines				
Endorsement	0.17(0.08)**	0.27	-0.09(0.09)	-0.11
Competition	-0.006(0.002)***	-0.40	0.002(0.002)	0.12
Incumbent spending	0.08(0.09)	0.11	-0.10(0.12)	-0.11
Challenger spending	-0.06(0.10)	-0.08	0.25(0.13)	0.24
Scandal	-0.06(0.10)	-0.07	0.02(0.14)	0.02
Seniority	0.001(0.004)	0.03	-0.006(0.005)	-0.13
Challenger quality	-0.002(0.009)	-0.03	0.03(0.01)***	0.32
Constant	-0.18(0.12)		0.03(0.16)	
R^2	0.31		0.13	
N	67		67	

Note: Front page tone is the average tone score for all the front page articles about the candidate during the campaign. The average front page tone was 0.20(SD = 0.29) for incumbents and 0.03(SD = 0.29) for challengers. Tone of headlines is the average tone score for all the headlines mentioning the candidate during the campaign. The average headline tone was 0.14 for incumbents(SD = 0.24) and -0.06(SD = 0.28) for challengers. Endorsement is a binary variable coded 1 if the incumbent is endorsed and 0 if the challenger is endorsed. Competition ranges from 24 (in the least competitive races) to 100 (in the most competitive races). Incumbent and challenger spending is logged to base 10 and divided by the voting age population in the state. Scandal is a binary variable where 1 = incumbent involved in scandal and 0 = otherwise. Seniority is measured by number of years in U.S. Senate. Challenger quality is a scale ranging from 1 to 27. All p values are two-tailed. *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$.

In Table 3B, we focus on unattributed criticisms. The dependent variable in these models is the number of unattributed criticisms published about the candidate divided by the total number of criticisms written about the candidate. Endorsements continue to influence the tone of coverage for incumbents, but endorsements fail to influence the coverage of challengers.¹¹

Substance of Coverage

We now turn to the substance of coverage, seeking to determine whether coverage of issues, traits, or the horserace varies with endorsement decisions. We begin by examining issue coverage, which far outstrips trait and horserace coverage in terms of press attention. On average, 154 paragraphs about issues are published during Senate campaigns, whereas only 54 paragraphs, on

average, discuss the personal characteristics of candidates, and 40 paragraphs, on average, discuss the candidates' chances of victory.¹²

We calculate an average tone measure for stories mainly about issues.¹³ The results presented in the first and second columns in Table 4 indicate that endorsed incumbents could expect more positive coverage of their policy views compared to nonendorsed incumbents. The endorsement coefficient indicates that the average tone score for issue articles is 0.23 higher for endorsed incumbents compared to nonendorsed incumbents, all other things being equal. In contrast,

¹² In research on presidential campaigns, scholars have found much greater emphasis on the horserace, compared to issues and traits (e.g., Pattison 1993; Robinson and Sheehan 1983). In Senate races, coverage of the horserace is much less prevalent (Kahn 1991; Westlye 1991).

¹³ For incumbents, there were five campaigns in which no articles mainly about issues were published during the course of the campaign. For challengers, there were seven such campaigns. We exclude these races from the analysis, leaving 62 races for incumbents and 60 races for challengers in Table 4.

¹¹ We repeated the same analysis for unattributed criticisms with one change; we made the dependent variable the number of unattributed criticisms. The results are identical to those presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3. OLS Regression Analysis Explaining Criticisms in Press Coverage

	Incumbent coverage		Challenger coverage	
	Unstandardized coefficient (SE)	β	Unstandardized coefficient (SE)	β
A. Number of attributed criticisms				
Endorsement	-11.63(6.47)*	-0.12	-1.81(6.03)	-0.03
Competition	0.41(0.18)**	0.19	0.43(0.17)**	0.25
Incumbent spending	-4.30(8.28)	-0.04	-3.86(7.66)	-0.04
Challenger spending	20.54(8.99)**	0.16	3.50(8.30)	0.04
Seniority	0.66(0.35)*	0.12	0.30(0.33)	0.07
Scandal	-4.62(8.98)	-0.04	0.55(8.35)	0.01
Challenger quality	-2.09(0.83)***	-0.17	-1.14(0.78)	-0.12
Paragraphs about candidate	0.08(0.009)***	0.70	0.06(0.01)***	0.65
Constant	10.41(12.70)		19.54(11.92)*	
R^2	0.76		0.66	
N	67		67	
B. Proportion of unattributed criticisms				
Endorsement	-0.06(0.03)**	-0.22	0.10(0.07)	0.18
Competition	0.0007(0.0008)	0.10	-0.005(0.002)***	-0.38
Incumbent spending	-0.02(0.05)	-0.06	-0.03(0.09)	-0.04
Challenger spending	-0.06(0.05)	-0.16	-0.04(0.10)	-0.05
Seniority	0.0001(0.002)	0.01	0.002(0.004)	0.06
Scandal	-0.07(0.05)	-0.18	0.09(0.10)	0.12
Challenger quality	0.005(0.005)	0.13	0.001(0.009)	0.02
Constant	0.20(0.06)***		-0.009(0.12)	
R^2	0.12		0.19	
N	67		67	

Note: Number of attributed criticisms is the number of criticisms citing a source published about a candidate during the campaign. The mean for incumbents was 44.1(SD=36) per race and 29(SD=28) for challengers. Proportion of unattributed criticisms is the number of criticisms not referring to a source published about a candidate/total number of criticisms published about the candidate. The mean for incumbents was 0.12(SD=0.12) per race and 0.22(SD=0.25) for challengers. Endorsement is a binary variable coded 1 if the incumbent is endorsed and 0 if the challenger is endorsed. Competition ranges from 24 (in the least competitive races) to 100 (in the most competitive races). Incumbent and challenger spending is logged to base 10 and divided by voting age population in the state. Scandal is a binary variable where 1 = incumbent involved in scandal and 0 = otherwise. Seniority is measured by number of years in U.S. Senate. Challenger quality is a scale ranging from 1 to 27. Paragraphs about candidate is the number of paragraphs written about the a candidate during the course of the campaign. All p values are two-tailed. *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.10$.

endorsements failed to influence the tone of issue coverage for challengers.

We also look at patterns of trait coverage. While professional standards for modern journalists caution against using evaluative adjective (Cappon 1991), contemporary news coverage is replete with evaluative adjectives (Page 1996). For example, reporters routinely characterize candidates as inexperienced, erratic, out of touch, or ineffective.

We present results for models of the proportion of negative trait coverage devoted to the candidates in the third and fourth columns in Table 4. In a deviation from the pattern we have seen thus far, endorsement decisions are not consequential for incumbents. Reporters are *not* more likely to describe incumbents in unflattering terms when the incumbent fails to impress the newspaper's editorial board. In addition, and consistent with our previous results, critical coverage of the challengers' personal traits does not vary with endorsement decisions.

Finally, we examine patterns of horserace coverage in the fifth and sixth columns in Table 4. Political reporters spend a great deal of time describing the viability of the competing candidates (e.g., Bartels 1988; Patterson 1993). The news discussion of the candidate's viability can be consequential, influencing voters' impressions of the candidates and affecting the candidates' abilities to raise funds (Bartels 1988; Mutz 1995). Endorsements do alter how reporters describe the viability of sitting senators. Incumbents who are not endorsed by newspapers are described as less electable than incumbents who are endorsed, all other things being equal. Reporters are less likely to use phrases such as "way ahead," "big lead," and "safe margin" when covering nonendorsed incumbents. Consistent with all previous analyses in this paper, endorsed challengers do not receive the same "endorsement slant" as incumbents.

The closeness of the race influences the coverage of issues, traits, and horserace for incumbents. Competition also alters the tone of horserace coverage given

TABLE 4. OLS Regression Analysis Explaining the Substance of Coverage

	Issue coverage		Trait coverage		Horseshoe coverage	
	Unstandardized coefficient (SE)	β	Unstandardized coefficient (SE)	β	Unstandardized coefficient (SE)	β
A. Tone of coverage for incumbents						
Endorsement	0.23(0.09)**	0.30	-0.004(0.07)	-0.01	0.26(0.15)*	0.16
Competition	-0.008(0.002)***	-0.41	0.004(0.002)**	0.28	-0.02(0.004)***	-0.61
Incumbent spending	0.03(0.12)	0.04	0.04(0.09)	0.06	0.07(0.20)	0.03
Challenger spending	-0.04(0.13)	-0.04	0.03(0.10)	0.05	-0.06(0.21)	-0.03
Seniority	0.004(0.005)	0.08	-0.002(0.004)	-0.07	0.006(0.009)	0.06
Scandal	-0.04(0.13)	-0.04	-0.10(0.10)	-0.14	-0.23(0.22)	-0.10
Challenger quality	-0.003(0.01)	-0.03	-0.009(0.009)	-0.13	-0.03(0.02)	-0.16
Constant	-0.20(0.16)		0.38(0.12)***		3.12(0.26)***	
R^2	0.32		0.08		0.55	
N	62		67		67	
B. Tone of coverage for challengers						
Endorsement	-0.10(0.11)	-0.13	0.08(0.06)	0.17	-0.17(0.15)	-0.10
Competition	0.001(0.003)	0.07	0.001(0.002)	0.11	0.02(0.004)***	0.64
Incumbent spending	-0.05(0.14)	-0.05	-0.10(0.08)	-0.17	0.03(0.20)	0.01
Challenger spending	0.14(0.15)	0.14	0.006(0.09)	0.01	-0.04(0.22)	-0.02
Seniority	0.0001(0.006)	0.01	0.0007(0.004)	0.02	-0.008(0.009)	-0.09
Scandal	-0.003(0.15)	-0.01	-0.10(0.09)	-0.15	0.12(0.22)	0.06
Challenger quality	0.03(0.01)***	0.33	-0.01(0.01)	-0.20	0.03(0.02)	0.13
Constant	0.04(0.18)		0.41(0.11)***		2.91(0.26)***	
R^2	0.16		0.10		0.52	
N	60		67		67	

Note: Tone of issue coverage is the average tone score for all articles mainly about issues for the candidate during the campaign. The average tone for incumbents was 0.24(SD=0.30) for incumbents and 0.01(SD=0.31) for challengers. Tone of trait coverage is the number of negative traits about a candidate/the total number of traits (positive and negative) mentioned about the candidate. The mean for incumbents was 0.27(SD=0.18) per race and 0.33(SD=0.20) for challengers. Tone of horseshoe coverage is the average viability score based on all the articles written about the candidate. The mean viability score for incumbents was 4.1(SD=0.65) and the mean for challengers was 2.0(SD=0.63). Competition ranges from 24 (in the least competitive races) to 100 (in the most competitive races). Incumbent and challenger spending is logged to base 10 and divided by the voting age population in the state. Scandal is a binary variable where 1 = incumbent involved in scandal and 0 = otherwise. Seniority is measured by number of years in U.S. Senate. Challenger quality is a scale ranging from 1 to 27. All p values are two-tailed. *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.10$.

to the challenger,¹⁴ and the quality of the challenger influences the tone of issue coverage for challengers.¹⁵

¹⁴ Competition has been related to the slant of coverage in virtually all analyses. Given its consistent influence, it is possible that the strength of the relationship between the tone of coverage and endorsements changes as competition changes. We conducted two separate tests to investigate this possibility. First, we added an interaction between competition and endorsement to each of the analyses in Tables 1–4. The interaction coefficient fails to reach traditional levels of statistical significance ($p < 0.05$) in 14 of the 16 tests. Second, we partitioned competition into low, medium, and high levels and then reestimated all of the analyses in Tables 1–4 for each level. In highly competitive races, the endorsement variable reached statistical significance in eight of the 16 tests. In moderately competitive races, endorsement reached statistical significance in two of the 16 tests. And in races with low levels of competition, endorsement reached statistical significance in one of the 16 tests. These findings suggest a modest conditional relationship between competition and endorsement, with the impact of endorsement being the most powerful in the most competitive races. The results of these analyses, as well as other analyses discussed in this paper, are available from the authors upon request.

¹⁵ Although challenger quality has performed quite well, defeating the null hypothesis in four of the eight challenger models ($p < 0.01$),

In sum, our results suggest that newspaper endorsements shape newspaper coverage for incumbents. For every measure of coverage, save one, endorsed incumbents receive more favorable coverage than their nonendorsed counterparts. Coverage of challengers, on the other hand, is unaffected by endorsement decisions. Challengers do, however, reap indirect benefits from endorsements: When challengers capture endorsements, their opponents—the nonendorsed incumbents—receive more negative coverage.¹⁶

the elected experience component of the challenger quality model is not a true interval measure. Therefore, we examined alternative operationalizations of challenger quality. First, we recoded the nine categories of experience into three binary variables. Second, we examined a binary experience variable (i.e., elected experience, no elected experience). These operationalizations of challenger quality did not perform as well as the original measure.

¹⁶ As discussed earlier, we replicated all the analyses in Tables 1–4 for open races. The endorsement variable fails to achieve statistical significance in these models. Nonetheless, as noted earlier, our conclusions about open races are only suggestive given the small number of cases.

ASSESSING TEMPORAL ORDER

We have argued that the views of newspaper editors influence how the paper covers Senate campaigns. However, it is conceivable that the causal direction is reversed. That is, what appears in the newspaper may influence the endorsement decisions of editors. However, prior research examining how endorsement decisions are made suggests that editorial boards do not simply rely on news reports (Clarke and Evans 1983; Seib 1994). In particular, endorsement decisions at virtually all newspapers come after detailed scrutiny by editorial board members of the competing Senatorial candidates, without the influence of reporters. Most editorial boards conduct face-to-face interviews with the Senatorial candidates, and reporters are not privy to these interviews. In addition, editorial boards routinely prepare detailed reports on potential candidates, intentionally excluding reporters. Nevertheless, to feel confident that endorsement decisions influence news coverage, and not vice versa, we conduct a test aimed directly at assessing temporal order. Our task is made easier because we know the precise publication date of each newspaper's endorsement.

We model coverage patterns over time and determine whether the endorsement decision of the newspaper alters the tone of coverage from early to late in the campaign. To assess the change in the tone of coverage before and after the endorsement decision, we specify and estimate a dynamic OLS model. Based on the date of each news article and the date of the endorsement decision, we develop a change model in which the tone of coverage after the endorsement decision is a function of (1) the tone of coverage before the endorsement decision, (2) the newspaper's endorsement decision, (3) changes in incumbent and challenger spending, and (4) changes in the closeness of the race. This enables us to estimate whether changes in the tone of coverage can be explained by the endorsement decision, controlling for prior coverage and other dynamic campaign forces.¹⁷

To measure the tone of coverage, we combine the eight measures of coverage presented in Tables 1–4 into a single global measure of tone.¹⁸ Thus, the global tone measure after the endorsement decision serves as the dependent variable.¹⁹ The results presented in Table 5 indicate that the endorsement decision changes the tone of coverage.²⁰ Incumbents who capture the

¹⁷ As with the prior analyses, we control for the newspapers' prior endorsements. Consistent with our prior analyses, both measures of prior endorsements fail to reach statistical significance.

¹⁸ More specifically, we normalize each of the tone measures (e.g., number of attributed criticisms, tone of headlines) and then take the mean of these normalized scores.

¹⁹ In this section, we restrict our examination to incumbent coverage because we found no evidence of an endorsement effect for challengers and candidates in open races.

²⁰ The inclusion of a lagged dependent variable may produce autocorrelation and bias the estimators. We employ a test recommended by Durbin (1970), which requires the following steps: First, we use the original OLS model to estimate the residuals. Next, we regress the residuals at time t on the errors at time $t - 1$ while including

TABLE 5. OLS Regression Analysis Explaining Changes in the Global Tone of Incumbent Coverage

	Unstandardized coefficient (SE)	β
Endorsement	2.89(1.20)**	0.30
Early coverage (before endorsement)	0.46(0.15)**	0.37
Changes in competition	-0.002(0.04)	-0.01
Changes in incumbent spending	-2.13(2.02)	-0.12
Changes in challenger spending	1.80(2.25)	0.09
Constant	-0.77(1.09)	
R^2	0.32	
N	60	

Note: The dependent variable is the global tone score for coverage during the late period (after publication of the endorsement). The global measure has a mean of 1.55 (SD = 3.62). Endorsement is a binary variable coded 1 if the incumbent is endorsed and 0 if the challenger is endorsed. Early coverage is the global tone score for coverage before the publication of the newspaper's endorsement. Changes in competition is the change in poll standings from polls published in late September to polls published in late October. Changes in incumbent and challenger spending (logged to base 10 and divided by the voting age population in the state) are changes in spending levels from early October (10/1–10/15) to late October through election day. All p values are two-tailed. ** $p < 0.05$.

newspaper's endorsement receive nearly a three-point increase in positive coverage after the editorial decision is published, on average, compared to incumbents who are not endorsed.²¹

These findings enhance our confidence that the editors' endorsement decisions are influencing the tone of news coverage. Still open, though, is the question of whether slanted coverage alters citizens' views of candidates. If slanted coverage falls on deaf ears, then the relationship between editorial opinion and news coverage is far less noteworthy.

all the variables from the original model as additional independent variables. Finally, we conduct classical tests of significance for the coefficient estimating the errors at time $t - 1$. The results show that the standard error for the coefficient representing errors at time $t - 1$ is almost as large as the coefficient, indicating the lack of autocorrelation in the model. Therefore, no remedial action is needed.

²¹ We examined the temporal order question with one additional test. We compared the impact of the endorsement decision on the slant of coverage prior to and after the publication of the endorsement. We ran two OLS equations, one predicting the impact of the endorsement on global tone of coverage before the endorsement decision and the other predicting the impact of the endorsement on the global tone of coverage after the endorsement decision, controlling for all the variables in Tables 1–4. The impact of the endorsement decision on coverage increases sharply after newspapers print their endorsements. The unstandardized coefficient is 1.89 (standard error = 0.91) before the endorsement decision and 3.73 (standard error = 1.06) after the endorsement decision. This analysis suggests that once editors' preferences become known, the slant of new coverage in favor of endorsed candidates increases.

DO ENDORSEMENTS INFLUENCE CITIZENS' VIEWS OF CANDIDATES? A SURVEY ANALYSIS

People rely on and look to newspapers for information about political candidates (e.g., Goldenberg and Traugott 1984; Just et al. 1996). Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that slanted press coverage, driven by endorsement decisions, may influence the electoral fortunes of political candidates. To test for the electoral implications of newspaper endorsements, we integrate information about citizens' evaluations of the candidates with information about the newspapers' endorsement decisions, drawing on the 1988–92 National Election Studies/Senate Election Studies (NES/SES) for data on respondents' evaluations of U.S. Senate candidates.²²

We create a measure of comparative candidate evaluations. We also control for rival factors known to influence evaluations, such as political attitudes, perceptions of national conditions, candidate characteristics, and campaign characteristics.²³

Political Attitudes

We measure three political attitudes: party identification, ideological characteristics, and assessments of issues. According to Congressional scholars, these three forces consistently influence citizens' views of Senate candidates (e.g., Abramowitz and Segal 1992; Kahn and Kenney 1999). To measure party identification, we rely on the standard seven-point scale; for ideology, we construct a variable capturing the "comparative ideological distances" between the respondent and the two candidates, and we develop a measure of issue evaluations based on a series of spending questions included in the NES/SES.

Perceptions of National Conditions

Voters also consider the prevailing national conditions when casting their ballots (e.g., Ferejohn and Calvert 1984; Stein 1990), blaming candidates of the president's party if the national economy is getting worse or crediting candidates who share the president's partisan label if the economy seems healthy. Because voters may also use their vote for the president as a guide in their choice of Senate candidates (Campbell and Sumners 1990; Ferejohn and Calvert 1984), we include a measure of presidential vote choice in our model. In addition, voters may support the Senate candidate of the president's party if they approve of the president's job performance (Jacobson 2001; Kernell 1977), a possibility we examine.

²² We look exclusively at incumbent races because we failed to find that endorsements influenced coverage in open races. For the 67 campaigns examined in our analysis, 4,298 interviews were completed.

²³ For information on the operationalization of these variables, see Appendix A.

Characteristics of the Candidates

We control for three characteristics of the candidates: the seniority of Senators, the quality of challengers, and whether incumbent Senators are considered controversial (Abramowitz 1988; Squire 1989). By including measures of candidate characteristics, we not only develop a more complete model of citizens' evaluations, but also control for forces that covary with the newspaper's endorsement decision.

Campaign Spending

Citizens may develop more favorable impressions of challengers who spend more, compared to challengers who have few resources (e.g., Green and Krasno 1990; Jacobson 1980). In addition, levels of campaign spending, similar to candidates' characteristics, are likely to covary with the newspapers' endorsement decisions.

Competition

Finally, we measure the closeness of the race. Because editors may be more likely to endorse incumbents in lopsided races, it is necessary to control for competitiveness. Furthermore, people's impressions of candidates may vary with the closeness of race. For example, citizens may develop more favorable impressions of safe incumbents compared to vulnerable incumbents. Similarly, people may have more positive impressions of competitive challengers than challengers lagging far behind in the preelection polls.

THE IMPACT OF ENDORSEMENTS ON CITIZENS' VIEWS OF CANDIDATE

In Table 6, we examine the impact of slanted coverage, as conditioned by the amount of news attention devoted to the campaign. We employ a binary endorsement variable to capture the slant of coverage (1 = the incumbent is endorsed by the state's newspaper; 0 = the incumbent is not endorsed by the newspaper). By including the endorsement variable as a measure of slanted coverage, we capture the candidate preferences of the newspapers, thereby measuring the various ways endorsements influence the tone of coverage. We include an interaction term to estimate whether the impact of the newspaper's endorsement decision on candidate evaluations becomes more powerful as the amount of coverage increases.

The results in Table 6 indicate that the newspapers' endorsement decisions, by affecting patterns of press coverage, influence people's attitudes toward the candidates, holding all other factors constant.²⁴ As

²⁴ We also examined whether the newspaper's endorsement decision, conditioned by the amount of coverage, influences the voting decision. In this analysis, the dependent variable is 1 = vote for the incumbent and 0 = vote for the challenger. The logit coefficient for the interaction between endorsement and the amount of coverage is 0.0005, with a standard error of 0.0002, suggesting that the slant

TABLE 6. OLS Regression of Explaining Comparative Feeling Thermometer Score: The Multiplicative Relationship between Endorsement Decision and Amount of Coverage

	Unstandardized coefficient (SE)
Endorsement decision * amount of coverage	0.008(0.003)**
Endorsement decision	-6.73(2.43)***
Amount of coverage	-0.008(0.003)***
Citizens' attitudes	
Party identification	5.42(0.44)***
Ideology	2.01(0.27)***
Issues	1.78(0.49)***
National conditions	
Economic assessments	1.05(0.45)**
Coattail voting	5.58(1.06)***
Presidential approval	2.33(0.36)***
Characteristics of candidates	
Seniority	0.005(0.08)
Scandal	-3.05(1.81)*
Challenger quality	-0.28(0.09)***
Characteristics of the race	
Incumbent spending	11.40(3.75)***
Challenger spending	1.61(4.74)
Competition	-0.29(0.04)***
Constant	37.40(3.41)***
R ²	0.20
N	4,298

Note: The dependent variable is the comparative feeling thermometer scores, where challenger scores are subtracted from incumbent scores. See Appendix A for the operationalization of the independent variables. All *p* values are two-tailed. ****p* < 0.01; ***p* < 0.05; **p* < 0.10.

expected, the impact of the endorsement decision increases significantly with the amount of news attention, as indicated by the statistically significant and positive interaction coefficient.²⁵

To illustrate these effects, we calculate point estimates on the comparative feeling thermometer. For example, when news coverage is at its observed maximum value (i.e., paragraphs = 3,070) and the incumbent is endorsed, the predicted score on the comparative feeling thermometers is 31.1, heavily in favor of the incumbent. However, when coverage is at the maximum value and the incumbent is *not* endorsed, the average score on the feeling thermometers drops more than 16 points, to 13.5, slightly in favor of the incumbent.

In contrast, the effect of endorsements on citizens' attitudes is virtually nonexistent given sparse coverage. With coverage at its observed minimum (i.e.,

of coverage, conditioned by the amount of coverage, significantly influences respondents' reported vote decision. The number of cases for the analysis is 2,623.

²⁵ We examined the impact of slanted coverage with an alternative measure: the global measure of tone based on the specific measures of slanted coverage presented in Tables 1-4. The influence of the global tone measure on candidate evaluations escalates as the total amount of coverage increases. The interaction coefficient is positive and statistically significant (0.008, with a standard error of 0.003).

paragraphs = 71) and the incumbent endorsed, the predicted score on the comparative feeling thermometers is 30.4, heavily in favor of the incumbent. When the incumbent fails to secure the newspaper's endorsement and coverage is at the minimum, the predicted score decreases only to 29.8, still heavily favoring the incumbent. These examples demonstrate that the influence of slant of coverage depends on the amount of campaign news. The effect of endorsements increases as coverage increases, while the effects of endorsements are barely detectable when coverage is sparse.²⁶

The control variables in Table 6 perform as expected. Virtually all of the rival explanations are signed in the hypothesized directions and reach statistical significance.

The amount of coverage notwithstanding, some people simply do not read the newspaper as often as others. Some people form a lifelong habit of reading the paper every day, while others pick up the newspaper far less frequently. People exposed to the slanted coverage on a daily basis, almost by definition, should be more influenced than people who pick up a paper less regularly.

To test this expectation, we established two categories of readers: everyday readers and less-than-everyday readers. We then reestimated the equations in Table 6 for these two types of readers (see Table 7). The parameter estimate for the interaction term is statistically significant in the model for everyday readers but not in the model for people who read the paper less often. These findings indicate that the conditional relationship between slanted coverage and the amount of coverage is more powerful for people who read the paper every day. For citizens who do not read the newspaper daily, even large amounts of slanted coverage fail to influence their attitudes about the Senate candidates.

To illustrate the conditional relationship for everyday readers, we vary the amount of coverage and the endorsement decision.²⁷ When the incumbent is endorsed and the amount of coverage is at its peak (i.e., paragraphs = 3,070), the estimate for everyday readers is 17.1, favoring the incumbent. However, when the incumbent is not endorsed and the amount of coverage is at its highest point, the estimate for everyday readers is -4.9, favoring the challenger. In contrast, when information is at its lowest point, the estimate for everyday readers changes less than one point as a function of the endorsement decision. When coverage

²⁶ The impact of endorsements may be conditioned by other aspects of the campaign environment, such as competition. In particular, the impact of slanted coverage may be greater in competitive races where citizens are more interested in the race and are more likely to seek out news coverage. To test for this possibility, we reestimated the model in Table 6 and substituted the interaction term endorsement * competition for endorsement * total incumbent coverage. The interaction coefficient for endorsement * competition is 0.28, with a standard error of 0.11. The positively signed and statistically significant coefficient demonstrates that the influence of slanted coverage on citizens' evaluations of the candidates increases as competition increases.

²⁷ We do not illustrate the conditional relationship between amount of coverage and endorsement decisions for less-than-everyday readers because the interaction coefficient and the baseline coefficients are not statistically significant for these respondents.

TABLE 7. OLS Regression Explaining Comparative Feeling Thermometer Score: Exploring How Amount of Coverage and Newspaper Readership Condition the Impact of the Endorsement Decision

	Unstandardized coefficient (SE)	
	Everyday readers	Less-than-everyday readers
Endorsement decision * amount of coverage	0.01(0.005)**	0.005(0.005)
Endorsement decision	-8.68(3.59)**	-3.71(3.28)
Amount of coverage	-0.01(0.004)***	-0.003(0.003)
Citizens' attitudes		
Party identification	6.83(0.66)***	4.09(0.58)***
Ideology	2.46(0.41)***	1.56(0.34)***
Issues	2.65(0.75)***	1.11(0.63)*
National conditions		
Economic assessments	1.07(0.69)	0.99(0.59)*
Coattail voting	1.44(1.56)	9.29(1.44)***
Presidential approval	2.83(0.54)***	1.65(0.46)***
Characteristics of candidates		
Seniority	0.17(0.12)	-0.14(0.10)
Scandal	-3.92(3.04)	-0.85(2.21)
Challenger quality	-0.39(0.14)***	-0.21(0.13)
Characteristics of the race		
Incumbent spending	18.96(5.80)***	6.66(4.81)
Challenger spending	2.18(7.24)	1.66(6.16)
Competition	-0.35(0.06)***	-0.24(0.05)***
Constant	43.22(5.11)***	31.09(4.52)***
R ²	0.25	0.16
N	2,047	2,251

Note: The dependent variable in both models is the comparative feeling thermometer scores, where challenger scores are subtracted from incumbent scores. See Appendix A for the operationalization of the independent variables. All *p* values are two-tailed. ****p* < 0.01; ***p* < 0.05; **p* < 0.10.

is scarce, incumbents are favored by about 16 points, regardless of the newspapers' endorsement decision.²⁸

CONCLUSION

We have provided the most systematic evidence to date that newspaper coverage of campaigns is affected by editorial positions, which alter the tone of the news coverage given to incumbents. Moreover, endorsement-driven coverage affects the preferences of citizens. In races receiving a great deal of coverage, endorsed incumbents fare far better with potential voters than nonendorsed incumbents, even controlling for several forces known to shape the voting preferences of citizens. Individuals who routinely read their daily newspapers—the people who are most likely to vote—are most affected by coverage patterns.

We must emphasize that our study is limited to Senate campaigns over a six-year period. We encourage research on other races, different newspapers, and different years to assess the validity of our results.

Why do the newspapers' editorial decisions and news content coincide? We can only speculate.²⁹ The connec-

tion may be the result of the organizational structure of the newspaper (Gans 1980; Sparrow 1999). As Gans (1980, 97–8) explains, “Because news organizations are assembly lines on which people must work together to manufacture a product against a deadline, they almost always generate conformity—insofar as news judgment is filled with uncertainty, and top editors must, by virtue of their position, resolve uncertainty [by setting] tones and sometimes precedents, which then require conformity.” Reporters tend not to be independent observers of the political scene. Instead, they are “employees of complex organizations who see their copy go through layers of editors” (Sparrow 1999, 107–8). Accordingly, it seems inevitable that the views of the editors will shape the content of the news. Ambitious reporters learn what to write to please their editors and publishers, who ultimately decide what is to be the news and which reporters are to be hired and promoted (Sparrow 1999). Page (1996) explains that reporters who hold the same political views as their editors and publishers may be more likely to be hired by particular newspapers and may be more likely to succeed at these newspapers. On the other hand, reporters with opposing views, if hired, may be less satisfied with their job and may be more likely to leave. Sparrow goes a step further by contending that reporters who write stories that “threaten the institutional interests” of the news organization feel “the invisible hand” of the news

we have no data concerning the inner workings of newspapers across the nation.

²⁸ We replicated this analysis with the global tone measure and found the same pattern of results. The interaction coefficient for everyday readers is 0.0008 (with a standard error of 0.0004), easily reaching statistical significance. The interaction coefficient for less frequent readers fails to reach statistical significance (0.0001, with a standard error of 0.0008).

²⁹ We do not investigate the causal mechanism that generates the connection between news content and editorial preferences, because

room's social control. These reporters learn to regulate and censor themselves in order to be successful.

Finally, why do the editorial preferences of the newspaper influence news coverage only of sitting Senators? Senators, unlike challengers, are powerful figures whose position in government can promote or thwart the interests of editors. When editors view Senators as allies in terms of ideology or party, or even personally, they have clear incentives to foster a friendly and stable relationship with these Senators. If editors provide these Senators with favorable coverage, incumbents may be more likely to push policy agendas that resonate with the media elite. Furthermore, favorable press attention may encourage Senators to be friendly sources of information for reporters and editors as they write campaign and noncampaign stories.

"Unfriendly" Senators, in contrast, will not promote policy changes desired by the editors and publisher of the newspaper. Furthermore, Senators who are at odds with newspapers tend not to be cooperative with reporters and editors (Fenno 1996; Kahn and Kenney 1999). These uncooperative Senators may not hold as many press conferences, may not grant as many interviews, and may not be willing to offer comments on or "off the record."

Challengers, in contrast, are not the recipients of slanted coverage. This may be because they do not muster the same amount of coverage as incumbents (Goldenberg and Traugott 1984; Kahn and Kenney 1999; Westlye 1991). Challengers, perhaps because of their general lack of coverage, escape the slanted coverage due to editorial preferences.

Should we be concerned that news coverage has a political slant? In many other democratic countries, the press is unabashedly partisan. In Great Britain, for example, the major newspapers' partisan preferences are well known and these partisan preferences influence the tone and quantity of campaign coverage (see Semetko, Scammell, and Nossiter 1994). In the United States, in contrast, the press ostensibly strives for impartiality. The newspaper industry collectively assures Americans that news coverage is professionally produced and is free from bias. In fact, one of the "canons of journalism" of the American Society of Newspaper Editors is "a clear distinction between news reports and opinion" (McQuail 1992, 38). Our study shows that this goal has not been achieved.

The "hidden" bias in the United States press may be more problematic than the open bias of many European newspapers. If Americans believe that the news is presented in an objective fashion, free from editorial pressure, they may be more susceptible to media manipulation. Given that citizens rely on the press to bring them the news of campaigns, especially in races for statewide and national office, slanted coverage can have dramatic effects on the outcomes of elections.

APPENDIX A. CODING AND MEASUREMENT OF VARIABLES

Amount of News Attention: The number of paragraphs written about the candidates.

Attributed Criticisms: The number of attributed criticisms published about the candidate.

Campaign Spending: Spending for both candidates is logged to base 10 and divided by the state's voting age population. Campaign spending is measured early in the campaign (prior to October 1) to limit the chance that coverage patterns influence spending levels. The bulk of campaign coverage (73%) appears after September 30.

Coattail Voting: This variable is coded 1 (the respondent votes for a Republican for president and a Republican incumbent for Senate; the respondent votes for a Democrat for president and a Democratic incumbent for Senate) to -1 (the respondent votes for a Republican for president and a Democratic incumbent for Senate; the respondent votes for a Democrat for president and a Republican incumbent for Senate).

Comparative Feeling Thermometer: The arithmetic difference between the incumbent and the challenger scores on the NES feeling thermometer scales. Respondents who did not rate a candidate are placed at 50 on the feeling thermometer.

Competition: The difference in support of the candidates in preelection polls from 100, creating a scale ranging from 24 in the least competitive ($100 - 76 = 24$) to 100 in the most competitive race ($100 - 0 = 100$). Competition is measured early in the campaign (prior to October 1) to limit the chance that coverage patterns influence competition levels.

Controversial Senator: A Senator is controversial if (1) the Senator was involved in a well-publicized scandal, (2) the Senator ran unsuccessfully for president, (3) the Senator's advancing age was an important campaign issue, or (4) the Senator was newly appointed.

Economic Assessments: The wording of the sociotropic question is, "Now, thinking about the country as a whole, would you say that over the past year, the nation's economy has gotten better, stayed about the same, or gotten worse?" Economic assessments are measured on a five-point scale ranging from +2 (e.g., the nation's economy is much better and the incumbent is a Republican; the nation's economy is much worse and the incumbent is a Democrat) to -2 (e.g., the nation's economy is much better and the incumbent is a Democrat; the nation's economy is much worse and the incumbent is a Republican).

Endorsement Decision: The variable is coded 1 = endorsed incumbent (nonendorsed challenger); 0 = endorsed challenger (nonendorsed incumbent).

Global Tone Measure: Each of the tone measures in Tables 1-4 is normalized and averaged.

Ideological Placement: The absolute distance between the respondents' self-placement on the ideological scale and their placement of the incumbent and the challenger is calculated. Then the respondents' distance from the challenger is subtracted from their distance from the incumbent, indicating which candidate the respondents feel closer to ideologically. Respondents not answering the ideological questions are recoded to the middle of the scale.

Issue Evaluations: The issue scale is based on respondents' spending preferences for six federal programs (i.e., the environment, education, welfare, health care, child care, and defense). The candidates' positions on these six issues is estimated by calculating a mean position for all Democratic candidates and a mean position for all Republican candidates, based on descriptions of the candidates' positions in the press. The respondents' position is matched with the candidates' positions on each of the issues. The scale is then recoded so that respondents who hold positions identical to those of the incumbent are given the highest score, and respondents sharing all the same positions as the challenger are given the

lowest score. We adopt this measure because the NES/SES does not ask respondents to place candidates on issue scales.

Newspaper Readership: The NES/SES asks respondents, "How many days in the past week did you read a daily newspaper?"

Quality of Challenger: This measure is based on the challenger's experience and the challenger's campaign skills. Challenger experience is based on a nine-point scale: 9 = sitting governor, 8 = House members and statewide officials serving more than one term, 7 = first-term House members and first-term statewide officials, 6 = mayors of major cities, 5 = state legislative leaders, 4 = state legislators, 3 = other local office holders, 2 = celebrities, and 1 = noncelebrities. The candidates' campaign skills are based on descriptions in the *CQ Weekly Report* and the *Almanac of American Politics*. Candidates described as skillful campaigners are scored 3, candidates with a mixture of positive and negative reports are scored 2, and candidates described as poor campaigners receive a score of 1. The experience measure is multiplied by the skill measure to create the measure of challenger quality.

Party Identification: Respondents strongly identifying with the incumbent's party receive the highest score (+3); respondents strongly identifying with the challenger's party are given the lowest score (-3).

Presidential Approval: This scale ranges from +2 (e.g., the Senator is a Republican and the respondent strongly approves of the Republican president's performance, the Senator is a Democrat and the respondent strongly disapproves of the Republican president's performance) to -2 (e.g., the Senator is a Republican and the respondent strongly disapproves of the Republican president's performance, the Senator is a Democrat and the respondent strongly approves of the Republican president's performance).

Seniority: Years in office.

Tone of Articles/Tone of Front Page Articles/Tone of Issue Articles: Negative articles receive a score of -1, positive articles receive a score of +1, and neutral and mixed articles receive a score of 0.

Tone of Headlines: Negative headlines receive a score of -1, positive headlines receive a score of +1, and neutral and mixed headlines receive a score of 0.

Tone of Horserace Coverage: Press assessments are rated on the following scale: 5 = sure winner, 4 = likely winner, 3 = competitive, 2 = likely loser, and 1 = sure loser.

Tone of Trait Coverage: The number of paragraphs describing the candidates' personalities negatively is divided by the total number of trait paragraphs. A variety of negative traits is examined, including dishonest, uninformed, inexperienced, ineffective, part of the Washington establishment, erratic, insensitive, weak leader, and not an independent thinker.

Unattributed Criticisms: The number of unattributed criticisms is divided by the total number of criticisms published about the candidate.

APPENDIX B. CODING OF NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

Listed below are illustrative examples of how we coded news content from three races: Wallop vs. Vinich, 1988, *Casper Star Tribune*; Helms vs. Gantt, 1990, *The Raleigh News and Observer*; and Daschle vs. Haar, 1992, *Argus Leader* (Sioux Falls).

Tone of Coverage

1. "The Wyoming and National Education Associations endorsed Democratic Senate nominee John Vinich Monday

with the NEA giving him \$5,000 for his campaign against two-time incumbent Sen. Malcolm Wallop." *Casper Star Tribune*, 9/20/88 (positive for Vinich, neutral for Wallop).

2. "[Harvey B. Gantt] said during a campaign swing through the Triangle that Mr. Helms had spent his 18 years in the U.S. Senate trying to stomp out such 'personal demons' as communists, liberals, and artists rather than worrying about issues that matter to North Carolina families." *The News and Observer*, 9/23/90 (negative for Helms, neutral for Gantt).

Tone of Headlines

1. "Wallop accused of 'Grandstanding.'" *Casper Star Tribune*, 9/11/88 (negative for Wallop).

2. "Helms urges support for Bush stand." *The News and Observer*, 9/6/90 (neutral for Helms).

Attributed Criticism

1. "At a Union-sponsored barbeque at North Casper Park, Democrats Bryan, Sharratt, and John Vinich said in interviews that their opponents—U.S. Rep. Dick Chaney and U.S. Sen. Malcolm Wallop—have systematically failed to address the problems of Wyoming's working people." *Casper Star Tribune*, 9/6/88 (attributed criticism of Wallop).

2. "The Republican candidate for the U.S. Senate repeatedly has attacked Democratic incumbent Tom Daschle for breaking his word on the anti-tax pledge." *Argus Leader*, 10/18/92 (attributed criticism of Daschle).

Unattributed Criticism

1. "Vinich was obviously nervous and fatigued at the beginning of the debate." *Casper Star Tribune*, 10/28/88 (unattributed criticism of Vinich).

2. "After insensitively criticizing a TV ad for Democratic Sen. Tom Daschle, her main election opponent, Haar found herself in the spotlight." *Argus Leader*, 10/13/92 (unattributed criticism of Haar).

Tone of Issue Coverage

1. "Mr. Gantt says he is willing to consider a tax increase to finance necessary services, but he makes little effort to define how he would tax—what taxes he would choose or not choose." *The News and Observer*, 9/28/90 (negative for Gantt).

2. "South Dakota Sen. Tom Daschle says he would lobby a new Clinton administration to rewrite the nation's farm program. . . . Daschle, a Democrat who is running for reelection, wants to boost prices for wheat and other crops by raising government loan rates." *Argus Leader*, 10/28/92 (neutral for Daschle).

Positive Trait

"Quayle also endorsed his friend Sen. Malcolm Wallop calling him a man of 'keen intellect. . .'" *Casper Star Tribune*, 9/20/88 (positive trait for Wallop).

Negative Trait

"Mal Hinchley of Pierre, a chemical dependency counselor who served with the Navy Seabees in Thailand, said Haar's comments showed a lack of compassion." *Argus Leader*, 10/10/92 (negative trait for Haar).

Horserace

1. "Democratic challenger John Vinich has drawn to within 10 points of incumbent Republican Sen. Malcolm Wallop, according to a Democratic Party poll. . . ." *Casper Star Tribune*, 9/10/88 (competitive for Vinich, competitive for Wallop).

2. "Sen. Tom Daschle, a Democrat, leads Republican challenger Charlene Haar 56 percent to 33 percent, with 11 percent undecided." *Argus Leader*, 10/12/92 (sure winner for Daschle, sure loser for Haar).

REFERENCES

- Abramowitz, Alan I. 1988. "Explaining Senate Election Outcomes." *American Political Science Review* 82: 385-403.
- Abramowitz, Alan I., and Jeffrey A. Segal. 1992. *Senate Elections*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Bartels, Larry M. 1988. *Presidential Primaries and the Dynamics of Public Choice*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Bennett, Lance W. 1988. *News, the Politics of Illusion*. New York: Longman.
- Campbell, James E., and Joe A. Sumners. 1990. "Presidential Coattails in Senate Elections." *American Political Science Review* 84: 513-24.
- Cappon, Rene J. 1991. *The Associate Press Guide to News Writing*. New York: Prentice Hall.
- Clarke, Peter, and Susan Evans. 1983. *Covering Campaigns: Journalism in Congressional Elections*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Cook, Timothy. 1989. *Making Laws and Making News: Media Strategies in the U.S. House of Representatives*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
- Davis, Richard. 1996. *The Press and American Politics: The New Mediator*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Durbin, J. 1970. "Testing for Serial Correlation in Least-Squares Regression When Some of the Regressors Are Lagged Dependent Variables." *Econometrica* 38: 410-21.
- Fenno, Richard F. 1996. *Senators on the Campaign Trail*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Ferejohn, John A., and Randall L. Calvert. 1984. "Presidential Coattails in Historical Perspective." *American Journal of Political Science* 28: 127-46.
- Gans, Herbert. 1980. *Deciding What's News*. New York: Vintage.
- Goldenberg, Edie N., and Michael W. Traugott. 1984. *Campaigning for Congress*. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press.
- Graber, Doris. 1997. *Mass Media and American Politics*. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press.
- Green, Donald Philip, and Jonathan S. Krasno. 1990. "Rebuttal to Jacobson's 'New Evidence for Old Arguments.'" *American Journal of Political Science* 34: 363-72.
- Iyengar, and Kinder. 1987. *News That Matters*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Jacobson, Gary C. 1980. *Money in Congressional Elections*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Jacobson, Gary C. 2001. *The Politics of Congressional Elections*. 5th ed. New York: Longman.
- Just, Marion R., Ann N. Crigler, Dean E. Alger, Timothy E. Cook, Montague Kern, and Darrell M. West. 1996. *Crosstalk: Citizens, Candidates and the Media in a Presidential Campaign*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kahn, Kim F. 1991. "Senate Elections in the News: An Examination of the Characteristics and Determinants of Campaign Coverage." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 16: 349-74.
- Kahn, Kim F., and Patrick J. Kenney. 1999. *The Spectacle of U.S. Senate Campaigns*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Kernell, Samuel. 1977. "Presidential Popularity and Negative Voting: An Alternative Explanation of Midterm Congressional Decline of the President's Party." *American Political Science Review* 71: 44-66.
- McCombs, Maxwell E., and Donald Shaw. 1972. "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36: 176-87.
- McQuail, Denis. 1992. *Media Performance: Mass Communication and the Public Interest*. London: Sage.
- Milburn, Michael. 1991. *Persuasion and Politics*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Mutz, Diana C. 1995. "Effects of Horse-Race Coverage on Campaign Coffers: Strategic Contributing in Presidential Primaries." *Journal of Politics* 57: 1015-42.
- Page, Benjamin I. 1996. *Who Deliberates?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Paletz, David L. 1999. *The Media in American Politics: Contents and Consequences*. New York: Longman.
- Patterson, Thomas E. 1993. *Out of Order*. New York: A. Knopf.
- Robinson, Michael J., and Margaret Sheehan. 1983. *Over the Wire and on TV: CBS and UPI in Campaign '80*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Rowse, Edward. 1957. *Slanted News: A Case Study of the Nixon and Stevenson Fund Stories*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Seib, Philip. 1994. *Campaigns and Conscience: The Ethics of Political Journalism*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Semetko, Holli, Margaret Scammell, and Tom Nossiter. 1994. "The Media's Coverage of the Campaign." In *Labour's Last Chance?* ed. Anthony Heath, Roger Jewell, and John Curtice with Bridget Taylor. Aldershot, UK: Dartmouth.
- Squire, Peverill. 1989. "Challengers in U.S. Senate Elections." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 14: 531-47.
- Squire, Peverill, and Eric R. A. N. Smith. 1996. "Further Examination of Challenger Quality in Senate Elections." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 21: 235-52.
- Sparrow, Bartholomew. 1999. *Uncertain Guardians: The News Media as a Political Institution*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Stein, Robert M. 1990. "Economic Voting for Governor and U.S. Senator: The Electoral Consequences of Federalism." *Journal of Politics* 52: 29-53.
- Westlye, Mark C. 1991. *Senate Elections and Campaign Intensity*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.