IMPACT OF CONGLOMERATION ON LOCAL TELEVISION NEWS

A CREATIVE RESEARCH PROJECT

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

BY EVAN HOFFMEYER

NATALEE K. SEELY, PH.D. – ADVISOR

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY

MUNCIE, INDIANA

MAY 2021

“*Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one.”*
--A. J. Liebling, 1960

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

CREATIVE PROJECT: The Impact of Conglomeration on Local Television News

STUDENT: Evan Hoffmeyer

DEGREE: Master of Arts

COLLEGE: Communication, Information, and Media

DATE: May 2021

PAGES: 47

This research project studied the relationship between mergers & acquisitions among the corporate ownership of news-producing local television stations in the United States and the quality of the journalism those stations produce as measured by the resources they are left to operate with. This was measured with quantitative data from a national survey of news directors paired with qualitative data from five semi-structured interviews with news directors representing a cross-section of parent companies and market sizes.

INTRODUCTION

American journalist A.J. Liebling said in 1960 that "Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one" (p. 109). For his purposes, it was a simple parenthetical side note in one installment of a years-long monthly feature for the *New Yorker* magazine focusing on the newspaper industry of 60 years ago. But do those words hold true when shifting focus to the modern local television news industry?

While the viewing public may think of their local stations according to their network affiliations, the networks themselves only own and operate a handful of stations across the largest markets. The vast majority of stations are owned by independent companies that contract with the networks for the right to carry their programming. Historically, these companies were relatively small, owning fewer than 10 stations each (Macker, 2020). One of those small companies that owned just three stations in 1991 was Sinclair Broadcast Group (Sinclair Broadcast Group, 2019). Today, it has grown to become the second largest owner of stations in the United States with 191 stations (Miller & Jessell, 2020). The largest owner, Nexstar Media Group, did not even exist 30 years ago (Nexstar Media Group, 2019). Today, it owns 197 stations across 115 of the nation's 210 media markets.

Cable news brands tend to dominate specific subject areas like elections, but local TV journalists draw more viewers than their cable or network counterparts (Matsa, 2017). Studies also show that civic engagement is strongly tied to local news habits (Barthel, Mahone & Mitchell, 2016), but the competitive displacement presented by the internet to traditional media – both broadcast and print (Dimmick, Chen & Li, 2009) – has led some outlets to resort to demand-driven, biased coverage (Agirdas, 2015), impacting journalism's intended function in a free society.

Tuchman called journalism “a window on the world” (1978, pg. 1). More importantly, she said that it is through that frame that “Americans learn of themselves and others, of their own institutions, leaders and life styles, and those of other nations and their peoples….[T]he news aims to tell us what we want to know, need to know, and should know.” McCombs & Shaw found that the news media play an important role in setting their audience’s political agenda, saying that “for most, mass media provide the best – and only – easily available approximation of ever-changing political realities” (1972, p. 185).

When looking specifically at local news, content consumption is directly related to how attached American citizens feel toward their local community (Barthel, Holcomb, Mahone & Mitchell, 2016). Roughly four in five who feel highly attached to their communities either demonstrate much stronger ties to local news or follow local news very closely. Similarly, those who always vote in local elections “display strikingly stronger local news habits than those who do not regularly vote in local elections” (p. 1).

All these implications are crucial to keep in mind when considering the impact ownership may have over the quality – and even quantity – of journalism produced by local television stations. At the time of this research project, local news was experiencing a surge in audience as communities across the nation tuned in to get the latest information on the COVID-19 pandemic (Shearer, 2020). Overall, though, local news has been on a downward trend in viewership (Matsa, 2018). This decline, combined with increased competition from non-traditional online outlets, is often cited by corporate owners as justification for conglomeration – scale is the only way for local TV journalism to stay profitable in a digital era.

The flip side of that coin is that mergers and acquisitions lead to layoffs, leaving fewer journalists to keep their communities informed. A representative for the National Association of

Broadcast Employees and Technicians, a union for television station employees, said in 2018 that when buyouts lead to the same company owning multiple stations in the same market, the merger results in roughly 20% of the news staff being laid off in the first year (Farhi, Gillum & Alcantara). If the services being provided by local news outlets are not sufficiently invested-in to properly inform citizens of what is happening in their local governments, it may not only impact public discourse but have a direct impact on the quality of local governance.

Using quantitative data from a national survey of local commercial television news leadership, this study examines the relationship between mergers & acquisitions among the corporate ownership of news-producing local TV stations in the United States and the quality of the journalism they produce as measured by the resources they are given to operate with. This quantitative data is supplemented by qualitative data obtained through one-one-one interviews with five survey respondents.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Business of News

There has been much criticism of “the media” in recent years, but the complaints levied are hardly new. In the same feature for the *New Yorker* in which Liebling mentioned freedom of the press and its relationship to ownership, he quoted Richard Strout of the *Christian Science Monitor* criticizing the political coverage of the day as “a one-party press in a two-party country” (p. 106).

The circulation battles between Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst led to the rise of “yellow journalism” to extents only associated with pure “fake news” outlets today. When an artist Hearst sent to Cuba to cover building tensions in the late 19th century wrote a letter saying he could not find the problems he had been asked to illustrate, “Hearst responded by telling him, ‘You furnish the pictures and I’ll furnish the war’” (Mahoney, 2009).

Both Pulitzer and Hearst allowed a desire for success and increased circulation to damage the quality of their product. In more recent history, corporate owners of media agencies have looked to short-term gains over long-term success, especially when the parent company is publicly traded. Cranberg, Bezanson, and Soloski put forth a long list of potential effects of public ownership on newspapers because, “[f]or public companies (with but few exceptions), the business of news is business, not news. Their papers are managed and controlled for financial performance, not news quality” (2001, p. 9). This trend arose despite research into community newspapers finding a positive relationship between newsroom investment and circulation (St. Cyr, Lacy & Guzman-Ortega, 2005), plus circulation revenue per copy, advertising revenue per copy, total revenue per copy, and gross profit per copy (Chen, Thorson & Lacy, 2005).

As news companies consolidate, there is inherently less competition in the marketplace, and by extension less newsroom investment. Lacy found in 1992 that local television news competition, intracity newspaper competition, and intercity newspaper competition all led to greater spending in the newsroom. Lacy & Blanchard found in 2003 – before the “Great Recession” and resulting bloodletting seen in news organizations large and small across the country – that the presence of competition was positively correlated with newsroom size and starting salary at mid-sized daily newspapers.

Blankenburg and Ozanich looked at the influence of outside control that stock in newspaper corporations exerted and found higher levels of outside ownership affected financial performance including higher profit margins (1993). Lacy, Shaver, and St. Cyr replicated the study and had similar results in 1996. They further found that public ownership correlated with lower newsroom budgets but competition was a countervailing force.

While competition among local broadcast outlets diminishes, competition among journalism outlets overall has increased with a boom in online-only companies. Local TV used to earn far more viewers than their online competitors, but that gap in the United States was down to a 7-point difference as of 2017, with 50% looking to broadcast television news and 43% primarily getting their news online (Gottfried & Shearer, 2017). By 2018, more than two-thirds of Americans said they at least occasionally got their news from social media even though more than half of Americans in the same survey said they expect news on social media to be largely inaccurate (Matsa & Shearer).

Basic economics teaches us that an increase in competition leads to lower profit margins, but businesses still need to make their profits. Corporations often cite the need to mitigate these unavoidable economic truths as their reason for undergoing this series of mergers and acquisitions, arguing conglomeration helps cut costs and increase scale. The claim is backed up, at least in part, by Myllylahti's 2017 study of New Zealand media convergence. Consolidation can compensate for decreased revenue generated by digital media compared to revenue generated by the same content in print or broadcast forms. It can also defend against the ever-increasing power of online and digital giants such as Facebook and Google that hold unprecedented control – or at least influence – over what content is found by their users.

Consolidation comes with a price; one that necessitates massive debt loads that can still lead to layoffs and other cutbacks in newsroom investment. In some cases, consolidations also lead to seeking new forms of revenue that break the wall between journalism and sales, such as native advertising. In 2014, Sinclair Broadcast Group was the largest owner of local stations. Shortly after the company bought Allbritton Communications, Allbritton's flagship station, WJLA-TV in Washington, D.C., began promoting Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, as a tourist destination during its morning news show as part of a company-wide tourism-promotion deal (Farhi, 2014). In 2016, 1,723 broadcast segments about Huntsman Cancer Institute ran across 64 of Sinclair's stations ranging from 60- and 90 second packages to 30-minute infomercials (Goldman, 2017). All were designed to look like independently produced journalism but they were actually paid for by Huntsman – and the stations never disclosed that fact. The FCC levied a record $13.3 million fine against Sinclair for the Huntsman infraction.

This is not meant to argue that these effects of consolidation are somehow intentional. Such an argument would be well outside the scope of this research. However, intentional or not, both the increased business interests and lowered quality of journalism affect the community at large. A 2018 study out of Emory University found that after Sinclair Broadcast Group bought stations, those stations' coverage of national politics – provided by a corporate bureau in Washington and shared to all of its stations – went up by 3%, but coverage of local politics that used to be produced by in-house reporters dropped to nearly 4 percentage points less weight in their newscasts compared to the local political coverage in non-Sinclair station newscasts (Martin & McCrain). The same study found that the newly purchased stations' ratings went down after the change in ownership as local audiences preferred watching local stations that focused more on local news. The economies of scale achieved through the merger were significant enough to outweigh the loss in ratings, though, and so the conglomeration continues.

James Squires, former editor of the Chicago Tribune, saw conglomeration as such a problem for the news industry that he said as early as 1998 that the modern press is "no longer an institution dedicated to the public interest, but rather a business run solely in the interest of the highest possible level of profitability" (Miller, p. 21). Celeste Headlee is an American radio journalist, author, public speaker, and co-host of the weekly series Retro Report on PBS. During a 2019 speech delivered at Mercer University's Center for Collaborative Journalism, she encapsulated practicing journalists' frustrations with business interests within their own industry – and external perception about the health of American journalism – when she said, "The news business isn't dying. We aren't losing our audience. What should die is this destructive idea that the news industry can generate dividend checks to rival Amazon's" (para. 18).

Journalism Resources

The resources a newsroom is allowed to work with, whether internal in the form of direct employees, freelancers, equipment, etc.; or external in the form of shared corporate resources like statehouse bureaus or national content desks; inherently impacts the quality of journalism that a media organization is able to produce and is tied to the amount of consolidation it has undergone. One of the most visible examples of this comes in the form of layoffs. Because these mergers among owners involve stations spread across the country, each with different personnel levels, there are rarely, if ever, stories tracking the total number of layoffs – or increases in staffing – that come after such a merger.

Harder data is easier to find with national outlets, though. When Verizon bought AOL in June 2017, some 1,000 layoffs were announced, including 39 at news outlet HuffPost (Bowden, 2017). One of those 39 was a military reporter who won the outlet its first Pulitzer Prize in 2012. Less than a week after taking over Time Inc. in 2018, Meredith announced plans to cut 700 Time employees (Kelly, 2018). Fewer employees means lower costs, which can help corporate ownership make debt service payments on massively leveraged buyout deals, but fewer journalists asking questions also leaves the public less informed. This can be traced back to Fink's 1988 book sourcing labor as the largest single expense at a newspaper, and more recently to local newsrooms cutting their collective staffs by 23% between 2008 and 2019 (Grieco, 2020).

That is roughly 26,000 fewer journalists in a decade's time.

The story is worse in the nation's state capitols, where full-time statehouse journalism staffing dropped by 35% from 2003 – 2014, five points worse than the overall rate of decline among the ranks of local journalists in the same time frame (Enda, 2014).

Layoff survivors feel the impact, too. They are asked to pick up the slack left behind by their former colleagues and see the work they have been left doing as "void of purpose and function" (Reinardy, 2010, p. 1).

To help compensate for the decrease in statehouse staffing and overall statewide coverage, some local outlets are pooling resources. For some, this is accomplished through partnerships directly with other organizations like the Front-Page Exchange, a collaborative of the five largest daily newspapers in Texas. It started in 2009 after each of the member operations was forced to reduce their statewide coverage because of the economic recession (Edmonds, 2014).

Other outlets are bolstering their resources through conglomeration via their parent company. At the time of this research project, Nexstar Media Group is the largest owner of local television stations, according to every major metric used to measure such an organization, including number of full-powered TV stations, number of markets in which at least one full-powered station is owned, total coverage as a percentage of the total U.S. population, FCC coverage (includes a 50% discount for UHF stations), revenue collected from retransmission fees, revenue collected from advertising, and total revenue collected (Miller & Jessell, 2020). In January 2020, Nexstar announced it had opened a new statehouse bureau in Missouri that was created to service every market in the state in which Nexstar owned a station: St. Louis, Kansas City, Springfield, and Joplin (Nexstar, 2020). The opening marked the 20th state in which

Nexstar operated such a bureau, offering state government coverage to smaller-market newsrooms that could never afford such a dedicated presence on their own, even in the height of journalistic revenue.

It should be noted that while these new external resources help bolster statewide or regional coverage, they do not replace truly local coverage that used to be generated by local outlets. A 2008 study found that local stations owned by smaller parent companies "produced more local news, more locally produced video, more use of on-air reporters, and fewer news promotions than the larger chain-based broadcast groups investigated, suggesting a deeper commitment to local news quality" (Scott, Gobetz & Chanslor, p. 84). In 2007, Napoli & Yan found that duopoly ownership (when the same company owns two stations in the same market) was associated with fewer hours of local news programming. The Federal Communications Commission itself found in a 2004 report based on 1998 data that locally owned stations broadcast nearly 5 ½ more minutes of local news and more than three minutes additional local on-location news than stations that were not locally owned (Puzzanghera, 2006). The Project for Excellence in Journalism[i] studied stations in roughly a quarter of the nation's designated market areas for five years starting in 1998, and found that "smaller station groups overall tended to produce higher quality newscasts than stations owned by larger companies — by a significant margin" (Rosenstiel, et al., 2003).

Conglomeration vs. Democratization

The internet has led to the democratization of the news, an informal idea within the industry describing the concept that traditional media outlets are no longer the sole gatekeepers of information and discussion in open societies. Williams and Delli Carpini (2000) argued that such an open flow of information eliminated gatekeepers entirely, though Blidook differed nearly a decade later, saying in 2009 that mass media still “sets the context for the facts that are gathered, determines how such facts should be viewed and debated . . . and shapes not only how events are presented, but how they become relevant to the public.” Singer (2001) split the difference, positing that the internet has not eliminated gatekeepers, but rather created an environment in which there are now many gatekeepers. Marrying their rationales together, it could be said that even if mass media no longer hold a monopoly on the Marketplace of Ideas, lower quality professional journalism can still negatively impact overall public discourse.

Fewer journalists working directly for news organizations leads to a higher dependence on wire reports and crime blotter, as opposed to well-researched, intelligently presented original journalism verified by full-time fact-checkers. This turns the Marketplace of Ideas into something more closely resembling an echo-chamber of pundits and press releases.

The rise of the internet as a source of information has not only increased the supply of news, but triggered a higher demand for instant information. An Agirdas study in 2015 confirmed previous research findings that biased coverage is demand-driven. The biggest concern online is that partisan clusters facilitate the viral spread of partisan information among audiences who can now choose to read only information that agrees with their pre-existing beliefs, regardless of its accuracy (Rojecki & Meraz, 2014). Falling resources inside traditional newsrooms coupled with rising pressure from management and ownership for how quickly content must be created for digital platforms has led to an increase in biased headlines and even biased coverage for the sake of driving more clicks (Konnikova, 2014).

Ideological press has been moving in to fill the void left behind by the drop in state political coverage brought about by traditional journalists being laid off or reassigned away from the statehouse beat, according to a 2014 Pew Research study (Enda, 2014). They found 33 news gathering organizations in 25 state capitols at the time that described themselves as having an ideological slant. The increase in non-traditional news outlets has also led to an increase in confusion regarding where information comes from. In 2020, the Pew Research Center found only 9% of U.S. adults were "very confident" they could tell if a news organization did its own reporting, and 23% did not correctly identify original vs. non-original reporting in any of six examples presented to them during the study (Barthel, Mitchell, Asare-Marfo, Kennedy, & Worden).

Hierarchy of Needs

Because this research project focuses on the content produced by local stations in light of recent mergers and acquisitions as opposed to the economics cited as the cause for said conglomeration, the hierarchy of influences model was used as the theoretical basis for my research questions.

The hierarchy is presented visually as a ring of concentric circles with the "individual level" at the innermost circle, frequently representing individual journalists (Reese, 2019). Beyond them lies the "routine level," referring to the structures that those on the individual level function within on a daily basis. These can be very mechanical routines, such as the inverted pyramid writing style taught in journalism schools across the nation, to more artistic elements like how a story gets framed. Objectivity as a "strategic ritual" also exists within the routine level of the heriarchy. Tuchman described "objectivity as strategic ritual" as so fervently ingrained in U.S. journalists' processes that it could be compared it to "the way a Mediterranean peasant might wear a clove of garlic around his neck to ward off evil spirits" (1972, p. 660). Depending on the culture of the newsroom, this "routine" level of the hierarchy could also include the news directors who participated in this research.

The third ring is the "organizational level," which "recognizes that news is produced within entities that have their own policies and economic imperatives. Organizations must balance commercial with professional concerns, reflecting the goals of the ownership" (Reese, 2019). The fourth and fifth rings are the social-institutional and social systems levels, which are largely outside the parameters of this study, which instead focuses on the second and third rings, and how they impact the innermost.

Research Questions

There is overlap in topics studied and measured by the survey and interview instruments, but the empirical data from the survey instrument was primarily used to determine the relationship between the Organizational Level represented by parent companies and Individual and Routine levels represented by journalists based at local stations and the culture at local stations. Thus, the following research questions were posed:

RQ1a: What resources are GAINED through conglomeration?

RQ1b: What resources are LOST through conglomeration?

RQ2: According to local news directors, what role SHOULD parent companies play in content decisions?

This was supplemented by qualitative interviews with practicing news directors at local stations across the United States to put the empirical data into context and answer two more research questions:

RQ3: Do the effects of conglomeration, both positive and negative, differ based on market size?

RQ4: Does public perception of local stations change based on ownership?

METHOD

This pattern of corporate mergers and acquisitions within the local television news industry has spiked since the Great Recession of the latter 2000s. The purpose of the survey instrument is to explore the impact of that pattern in terms of the quality of the local news product being produced for viewers across the United States. These insights were collected through evaluations by the news directors inside those local TV newsrooms.

I compiled a database of the news directors for every commercial television news operation in each of the United States' 210 television markets after obtaining their contact information from their station websites. For any station that did not publicly disclose this information, I deduced it for myself. Stations almost uniformly list email addresses for their on-air personalities on the station's website. I used these listings to discern the station's email convention (i.e., if the email addresses for reporters Adam Adams, Becca Beckerson, and Charlie Chaplin are adam.adams@abcd.com, becca.beckerson@abcd.com, and charlie.chaplin@abcd.com respectively, then odds are that the email address for their news director Debra Dee is debra.dee@abcd.com). Many parent companies also provide all of their employees with corporate email aliases (i.e. the fictitious conglomerate Local News Corp. will give every employee – both in front of and behind the camera, and in every market – an email address following the convention ehoffmeyer@localnews.com in addition to their station-specific email).

A database of 543 active email addresses was compiled. There were 11 qualifying news operations for which an accurate email address for the news director could not be deduced. Another 17 had open news director positions at the time of the survey. These were omitted in favor of only surveying permanent news directors as opposed to inviting acting news directors to participate, as there was no guarantee they had the same level or type of relationship with their respective corporate entities as a permanent news director. After the database was complete, each news director was emailed an invitation to participate in the survey instrument (see APPENDIX A). Each prospective participant was only emailed once as the anonymous nature of the survey prevented confirmation of who had and had not participated.

The survey was administered via Qualtrics, an online survey software, between November 14, 2020 – January 16, 2021. The software stripped all participants' identifying information, including their IP address, from each completed survey before sending me the results. Participants indicated their consent in the survey before beginning the questionnaire. Quantitative measurements were calculated using IBM SPSS Statistics software version 27 and Microsoft Excel 2016.

A question at the end of the survey asked for volunteers to participate in one-on-one interviews meant to supplement the survey's quantitative data with qualitative responses. Because Qualtrics stripped their identifying information, this question sent interested participants to a Google Forms document where they could input their contact information. This allowed them the opportunity to ask any questions they had of me without necessarily committing to the interview portion or having to attach identifying information to their survey responses. This third-party form also included language clarifying that participation in the additional interview was voluntary, and would not impact the use of the data they submitted in the survey. The final question on the Qualtrics survey explained that anyone not wishing to participate in the interviews could simply click a button to end the survey without participating in any interview or ever revealing identifying information.

Out of the total potential study population, 41 participants completed the survey, representing a 7.5% response rate. Thirty-one were men and 10 were women. When asked to disclose their age by decade, 78% said they were in either their 40s or 50s; none were younger than 30. Thirty-nine percent each said they had worked in local news (not necessarily as a news director) for 20-24 years or 25+ years. Four worked for a major market station (defined as Designated Market Areas 1 – 10, according to Nielsen's 2020-21 rankings (Media Tracks, 2020)). Another four worked for large market stations (DMAs 11 – 30), five worked in mid-sized markets (DMAs 31 – 60) and 28 worked in small markets (DMAs 61 – 210).

Respondents were asked to identify their current parent company from a list reproduced from trade publication TVNewsCheck's annual Top 30 station groups listing, which is ranked by annual revenue. The list that participants saw named the top 25 according to the list TVNewsCheck released in June 2020 (Miller & Jessell) followed by a final option for "other." Thirty-four participants collectively represented 13 of the top 25, six marked their parent company as "other," and one did not respond to the question.

This quantitative data was supplemented by five qualitative interviews. To protect the anonymity of the interviewees, they are identified only by the size of the market in which they work. One was at a major market station, one worked in a mid-sized market, and three worked for small market stations. None of the interview participants worked in a large market.

Instruments

The survey instrument for this study consisted of 18 questions – 14 multiple choice, two answered on a 1-10 scale, and two short answer/free response (see APPENDIX B).

Questions began with demographic information including gender, age, years of experience in the industry, and current market size. These questions were intended to help differentiate the feelings of different demographic groups. Particularly of interest were years in the industry and current market size.

The interview instrument for this study consisted of 12 scripted questions, plus unscripted follow-ups based on the respondents' answers (see APPENDIX C). The semi-structured format facilitated comparison between interviewees while still allowing for each participant to elaborate on areas that were specific to their experience.

RESULTS

The frequency of mergers and acquisitions among individual stations was not included in any of this study's research questions, but it was measured for context. Two responses were thrown out for this measure due to inconsistencies (n = 39). Unsurprisingly given the sheer number of mergers and acquisitions in recent years, more than half of survey respondents said their current station had been sold at least once in the past five years. Only 28% of stations represented had not changed ownership at all in the past 10 years; 19 news directors (49% of respondents) went through one ownership change in that time, four said their station had been sold twice in the past decade and five said the station had changed owners three times or more.

Survey Results

Research Question 1: What resources are GAINED and LOST through conglomeration?

Only two of the news directors surveyed said they received no additional journalistic resources from their parent company such as a statehouse bureau, Washington bureau, or pooled resources for major national events like the Super Bowl or Academy Awards as detailed in Table 1. Both of those news directors also identified themselves as working for a company outside the top 25 owners as defined in this study. This suggests their owner(s) is small enough that it does not have the resources to provide additional support and/or the benefits do not make sense within the context of its corporate structure (e.g., a company that only owns stations in state capitals so providing a corporate-level statehouse bureau would be redundant, or all its stations are geographically dispersed enough it isn't practical to move reporters around to help cover major local events).

Table 1

Corporate Journalistic Resources

Resource	Stations receiving resource from parent company	Number of parent companies represented
Statehouse Bureau	12	5*
Washington, D.C. Bureau	26	8
National Investigative Reporting	17	7
Pooled Resources for Major National Events	26	13**
Pooled Resources for Major Local Events	32	13**
Other journalistic resources not listed	23	13*

**indicates the inclusion of 2 "other" responses*
***indicates the inclusion of 3 "other" responses*

The results indicate regional coverage increases among stations owned by larger parent companies. News directors disclosed the number of media markets geographically bordering their own in which they had at least one sister station (another station owned by the same parent company, not necessarily sharing network affiliation). A statistically significant positive Pearson Correlation (r = .438, p=.004) exists between that number of markets and the number of stories their station ran from sister stations each week. Thirteen news directors cited content sharing as a "beneficial aspect of mergers & acquisitions in terms of the quality of your news product." Responses included, "It's nice to have regional content partners, especially on slow days or when major news happens," the "ability to cover breaking news in other markets more quickly," and the “ability to share content among co-owned stations from a variety of markets, instead of relying solely on network-produced content.” An interview participant cited preferring sister stations’ coverage to network coverage because of the local perspective that local stations bring to the table. “This past year with all the unrest and riots, we were able to take our viewers all over the country where it was happening, where we had affiliates in those markets…and give a better, local flavor to what was going on,” Participant D said.

On the flip side, results confirmed those of previous studies that this increase in regional coverage can lead to a drop in truly local coverage. In an open-ended response to a question about drawbacks of mergers and acquisitions, one news director said that “for newsrooms with less resources / experience, it may take away localism because there is readily available content every day from other stations, but not necessarily local.” Eleven other news directors referenced some version of a cookie-cutter approach being forced on all stations in a company’s portfolio, like “there are so many layers of corporate managers and it seems we are handed a one size fits all playbook.”

Six respondents specifically cited layoffs when asked about harmful effects, but that qualitative complaint was not supported by responses to a quantitative question about the change in staffing their station went through after their most recent change in ownership. The quantitative question used a seven-point scale with the low end (1) representing a decrease of more than 10% in staffing and the high end representing a more than 10% increase (7). The results showed an average response of 4.44, indicating no difference in staffing after the most recent ownership change, leaning toward a small increase. This could be explained by an interview participant who cited stations having to lay off their most experienced (and most expensive) staff but then being allowed to hire younger (and cheaper) replacements. The stations in this scenario do experience layoffs but end with a larger, though less experienced, staff. “They’ve downsized in experience, not bodies,” Participant E said.

Research Question 2: According to local news directors, what role should parent companies play in content decisions?

News directors were asked to rate how involved parent companies should be in their local stations on a 0-10 scale, with zero representing a silent partnership, and 10 representing owners acting as an essential component in local operations. The average response was 3.73 (SD = 2.45). Every news director who responded to the open-ended question about “the most beneficial aspect of mergers & acquisitions” referenced additional resources and support ranging from content sharing and corporate bureaus to equipment and direct monetary investment. One respondent described the optimal balance as local execution with national support. “It’s allowed for an infrastructure we have never had before while maintaining local freedom to serve our community.”

Interview Results

RQ3: Do the effects of conglomeration, both positive and negative, differ based on market size?

The interviewees were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statement: “Being part of a large parent company is more beneficial when you work for a smaller market station because of their pooled resources you otherwise wouldn’t have.” All five said they agreed, though four hedged their agreement. Participant A, who works in a small market, said that many of the resources parent companies provide like pooled resources for major events like the Super Bowl and Academy Awards can be replicated through a station’s network affiliation. Both Participant A and Participant B, who also works in a small market, said that while networks do provide national political coverage from Washington, corporate-run D.C. bureaus tend to be less generic than network coverage, because network stories are inherently created to be applicable across the entire nation. Interviewees said corporate bureau reporters can concentrate on a specific region they have been assigned to cover. Smaller market stations especially benefit from this; larger stations offer the opportunity to reach more of a politician's constituents than smaller stations do, making it harder to convince elected leaders to make time in their schedule for an interview with a small station, at least outside of election season. Participant B also said that some of the nicer equipment parent companies supply their stations can be difficult to properly implement in a small market where managers are limited by less-experienced journalists who will not be as familiar with how to make the most of the technology, or where staffing is so small there just are not enough bodies to take advantage of it at all.

Participant C, who works in a major market, also referenced smaller stations working with less-experienced journalists, saying those new reporters get greater benefit from the training opportunities provided by larger owners. "They need the help with ideas and how to shape an editorial vision and do better storytelling….My least experienced producer in the newsroom has 15 years' experience. It's just apples and oranges when it comes to market size."

Participant A referenced the benefit of corporate-provided training from a monetary standpoint. "In-person training is expensive. You have to drive or fly or stay in a hotel, or possibly pay a tuition for something if it is a Poynter program or something of that nature." Corporate-provided training is limited by corporate's ability to travel to all of their stations, unless they pick a station to act as a regional hub where nearby stations send representatives to participate in the same training, though that would still necessitate the driving and potentially hotel costs for all except the host station's personnel. "A" said their company has tried doing webinars to help more stations at once and eliminate those travel costs entirely, and "for some people, webinars are great. For others, it can be difficult to focus on. You can't ask a question and get that one-on-one feedback that you need because there are literally 1,000 people on it from 100 markets and we're just trying to get everyone to mute their phone."

While "A" did agree that small markets benefit more from general corporate resources that are made available to every station in the company, they also said small markets can have a hard time getting more specialized attention from corporate. "We get less interaction with our corporate team and less feedback and guidance simply because they've got their hands full either with a ton of other markets or they're more focused on larger markets."

Shifting from what parent companies provide their stations to what they expect *from* their stations, participants D and E, who work for mid-sized and small market stations, respectively, both described parent company expectations as "uniform" regardless of market size. "I've never worked for a company – and I've worked for several now – that had different corporate expectations based on market size," E said.

"E" also pointed out that larger markets have seen their staff levels "gutted" in recent years.

> Not far from here is [a major market station] we worked with and shared content with. It's to the point now where they're calling us to cover stuff in counties along the border between our markets that are actually on their side of the line because they don't have the people to get to it….There's some smaller market stations, honestly, that have more experience and more staff than some of these major markets do.

Quantitative data provided by survey responses did not offer statistically significant correlations between industry experience or market size and favorability ratings for conglomeration.

RQ4: Does public perception of local stations change based on ownership?

The question of corporate ownership's influence on local media was largely an internal debate until Sinclair Broadcast Group was featured on a 2017 episode of HBO's *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*. Oliver spotlighted Sinclair's use of "must-runs," content that is produced at the corporate level then shipped out to Sinclair-owned stations, which are then required to run the content, including commentary, advertising and documentaries, and even journalistic/non-editorial content inside their newscasts (Oliver, 2017). Sinclair was also the subject of academic research, with the 2017 Martin & McCrain study out of Emory University on local news and national politics finding "text-based measures of ideological slant shifted to the right at Sinclair-acquired stations following the acquisition, relative to other stations in the same market" (p. 3).

When asked if viewers started asking more questions about their ownership after attention like this, the interviewees all indicated such inquiries were relatively minor or even non-existent. "A" said they did get "a couple of questions here and there that were generically about, 'Hey, I saw this. Who owns you? Is there a station in the area that fits into this?' Mostly, though, they said the only questions they got were from personal friends because they knew it was the participant's industry. "That was the first time anyone who wasn't in our industry ever cared."

Less than a year after the Oliver portrayal, *Deadspin*[ii] published an article online featuring a video showcasing dozens of Sinclair station anchors reading the same promotional script about journalistic integrity (Burke, 2018). Participant D referenced the *Deadspin* video in conjunction with Oliver's take to address criticism of Sinclair's practices overall, saying they thought both *Deadspin* and Oliver took Sinclair's product and distorted it to fit a pre-conceived message they wanted to portray. “D” said the original message of the journalistic integrity promo was “a good message that local news is about getting to the truth of the matter. That was the message they were trying to put out, but I think it got lost when *Deadspin* mashed it up into one [compilation].” D’s analysis of the situation paints the process as quintessential two-step flow communication: Sinclair disseminated a message, which – though they never intended it to play out like this – was co-opted by powerful opinion leaders who then dispersed it to a wider population. “It was almost like [Oliver and *Deadspin*] put that out and said, ‘You should be angry about this,’ and people said, ‘Gosh, I should be angry about this!’ People weren't upset about it until someone told them to be upset about it.”

DISCUSSION

When asked what a local news operation looks like when it is operating at its best, all of the interviewees included locally focused original content as part – or even the entirety – of their response, from enterprise content and human interest stories, to investigative journalism and emergency information during natural disasters. As Participant E put it, “They are connected to the local community….They are there when local communities need them.”

This focus on local content was one of only two things that all five confidently agreed on. The other: the question of conglomeration’s impact on the quality of local journalism is not as clear cut as it is often portrayed.

Corporate Motivations

When asked if a station’s parent company can be the added boost that gets a station to the next level and look closer to that optimal newsroom they had just described, Participant A said, “They *could* be; it’s just a matter of will they devote the time and resources?” B said it depends on what the station’s corporate owners and their board of trustees want to accomplish. “Are they in the business purely for money, or are they in the business because it's also a public service?" Participant C said:

> It honestly varies tremendously from parent company to parent company. I have worked for a number of the larger parent companies and some of them have an interest in and have supported us in terms of resources, in terms of philosophy, in terms of research, down an investigative path; others have not been interested in that at all. They were more about the machine, just churning out a lot of quantity versus looking at what is the quality of the local journalism that we're providing.

Interview participants were assured their current employer would not be disclosed in this research. During the course of the interviews, though, two of the interviewees mentioned on their own that they had previously worked for Sinclair stations, and said the claims of "must-run" content in John Oliver and *Deadspin*'s pieces were accurate. E said Oliver's portrayal was "accurate, but he was about 25 years behind the story….The only thing that was inaccurate is I think it was presented as something new when it really wasn't." C said they worked for a station that was purchased by Sinclair during their tenure at the station.

> Before that, a lot of us had never experienced this truly-- I'll use the word, "meddling," must-run content, wanting every one of their local stations to reflect a certain editorial standard regardless of the community that you're in, which may have different ideals and different needs….I think there is a real danger in some of the merging and acquisitions going on in the news business over these past five, six, seven years because having fewer, larger companies in a lot of ways has a negative impact on that local community TV station autonomy and control."

Not an Island

Journalism is a 24/7/365 endeavor, regardless of weekends, holidays – or global pandemic. This study was conducted amid the COVID-19 outbreak. As stay-at-home orders and social distancing requirements were issued by local and state governments across the nation, newsrooms had to figure out a way to keep their product on the air, even with limitations not just on anchors in the studio, but technicians in the control room, and every other position in the station's operational structure. "B" praised their parent company for how well they had stepped in to help local stations handle both the sudden change in workflow but also protecting their employees with health resources, like masks and hand sanitizer for employees at all levels as well as those employees' families. The parent company even gave every employee across the entire corporation a 3% raise at the end of 2020 as a thank-you for everything they had dealt with over the course of the year. "As an individual TV station, we would not have been able to make the kind of commitment. But as a corporation, I've been very pleased with how they've treated everybody as equally as they possibly can."

Corporate help did not only come in the form of equipment or even monetary resources. Participants A, C, D, and E all said their parent companies either offered expanded mental health resources or made a deliberate effort to bring extra attention to such resources they already offered. "It's been a real intentional effort and that's been a good thing, to acknowledge that it's not easy on anyone," C said. "It's not easy on anyone who is still going into the newsroom every day. It's not easy on those of us who don't. It's gone on way longer than anyone thought it would."

Participant A indicated dynamics within the station may have had a larger impact on their execution than the parent company did. "Digital people worked from home, as did a couple of reporters. We put some people in a bureau that was otherwise empty, and we redid the seating chart to space people out." They said their choices were made not because of a corporate mandate but because the station's General Manager preferred employees to work in the office. The parent company did facilitate several group calls to share best practices, and required every station to craft a multi-tiered plan to cover multiple contingencies. A's parent company spans a wide range of market sizes, "so they made it clear a blanket company policy wasn't appropriate."

'Double-edged Sword'

Some of the interviewees skewed toward thinking conglomeration is more beneficial than harmful and others felt it was more harmful than beneficial. All agreed it is not as black-and-white as one or the other, though.

"A" called it overall "a double-edged sword." Their company offers a Washington bureau, which they said had definitely been helpful to their station, but then reiterated a previous comment that "We get less individual feedback. We get less interaction with our corporate team and less feedback and guidance simply because they have their hands full either with a ton of other markets or they're more focused on larger markets."

"B" said they thought conglomeration had made an impact on the industry, but that:

> The economy has probably been more harmful, and the way that TV and government has set up the broadcast licenses, because it's more difficult to sell advertising….I think corporate has been good since the Great Recession because of the economy of scale that has helped us get new equipment, better equipment that can help deal with fewer staff, but I've always felt that the fewer boots on the street, the fewer stories you're going to have that impact your audience.

"C" heavily emphasized "I don't think there's a black-and-white answer to that question….It's a real fine line between 'Are the additional resources helpful?' Yes. 'Is sometimes the lack of autonomy harmful?' Absolutely."

Similarly, "E" said that while they "would always describe mergers as more harmful, there are cases where it is beneficial….We can better serve our communities with a responsible parent company that has some mass to it because we have resources we can tap into, maybe can investigate a little further, maybe pry a little more life-saving information that we wouldn't otherwise be able to do if we didn't have the support of our sister stations and our parent company. A large parent company is not necessarily a bad thing." They said that in the end, which parent company owns the keys to the kingdom can make less of an impact on the quality of a local newsroom's journalism quality than the local management and journalists setting up shop inside that newsroom.

"D" was the only interview subject who definitively said their opinion on the subject had changed over time. They used to think larger parent companies were too big a threat to local autonomy. "I like being able to make our decisions on our level and feel confident that we're making the decisions." As time has gone on, though, they have decided that the additional resources offered by a larger parent company are a significant boost to their local product. "Using these resources and seeing a broader scope of things and seeing what other stations are able to do, I've learned it's not a bad thing. Having those resources, having that help is beneficial."

LIMITATIONS

This study was primarily limited by its size. There was representation from all four market size categories, a majority of the major parent companies, and a diverse segment of minor owners, and the quantitative section was supplemented by qualitative interviews. Attempts to protect participants' identities were solid, but perhaps they were too strong to the point that it generalized too many data points, making it more difficult to calculate quantitative evaluations.

FUTURE RESEARCH

While there is a developing body of scholarly work regarding local television news, it is not as robust as research focused on stations' print counterparts. The industry would benefit from continued broadcast-focused research, particularly as the dynamics between local stations and their network partners continue to shift.

Networks are starting their own independent streaming platforms, like NBCUniversal's "Peacock." Launched July 15, 2020, the streaming service was originally promoted as an opportunity for premium subscribers to see late night comedies like *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon* and *Late Night with Seth Meyers* at 8 p.m. ET and 9 p.m. ET respectively, instead of having to wait for the traditional broadcast airtimes on their local stations at 11:35 p.m. and 12:35 a.m. ET (NBCUniversal, 2020). The network was not pulling the show from its affiliates, but the move would have undermined one of their local stations' biggest draws for keeping viewers up late to watch their late local news. The NBC Affiliate Board pushed back against the plan (Jessell, 2020), with one industry analyst calling it "an outrageous breach of trust" (Price, 2020). The move was delayed when the COVID-19 pandemic altered the production process for the late night shows, but network representatives said they still intended to move forward with their original plans once the shows were "back to full production" (O'Keefe, 2020).

The relationship between local stations and the networks was addressed during my interview with Participant E, who said, "There have been rumblings for a while now about what the networks are trying to do, and streaming is going to make it easier than ever before to move away from the broadcast affiliates." What is even more curious is what appears to be mutually exclusive patterns of behavior:

> For [our network], the way they've set up their news divisions, they've had cutbacks - actually all the networks have. They're relying on affiliates more than ever for their national broadcast more than I've ever seen. Emails will go out saying, 'Hey, [the national network newscast] is working on this story. If you guys are covering anything, please send your elements.' I used to never see that from network, and we see it every day now.
>
> On one hand, from a programming standpoint, it looks like they're setting the table to move away from affiliates, but from a news standpoint, they're using their affiliates more than ever before.

With an increasingly murky relationship between local stations and their networks, stations' relationships with their parent companies will only become more important – as will corporations' impact on the local news that viewers depend on.

---

[i] The Project for Excellence in Journalism was a tax-exempt research organization founded in 1997 in affiliation with the Columbia School of Journalism. It separated from Columbia in 2006 and joined the Pew Research Center, eventually changing its name to "Pew Research Center's Journalism Project" in 2013 (Rohal, 2013).

[ii] *Deadspin* is an online-only publisher primarily focused on sports content, but it also has sections featuring non-sports content. One of those sections is called *The Concourse*, the branding under which this story was published. The story, specifically the video Burke spliced together featuring anchors from around the country all reading the same script, was picked up by outlets across America, including major publications like the *Washington Post* (Farhi, 2018).

REFERENCES

Agirdas, C. (2015). What drives media bias? New evidence from recent newspaper closures. *Journal of Media Economics, 28*(3), 123-141. https://doi.org/10.1080/08997764.2015.1063499

Barthel, M., Holcomb, J., Mahone, J., & Mitchell, A. (2016). Civic Engagement Strongly Tied to Local News Habits. *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from http://www.journalism.org/2016/11/03/civic-engagement-strongly-tied-to-local-news-habits/

Barthel, M., Mitchell, A., Asare-Marfo, D., Kennedy, C., & Worden, K. (2020). Measuring news consumption in a digital era. *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from https://www.journalism.org/2020/12/08/measuring-news-consumption-in-a-digital-era/

Blankenburg, W.B. & Ozanich, G.W. (1993). The Effects of Public Ownership on the Financial Performance of Newspaper Corporations. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 70*(1)*,* 68 – 75. https://doi.org/10.1177/107769909307000108

Blidook, K. (2009) Choice and Content: Media Ownership and Democratic Ideals in Canada. *The Canadian Political Science Review, 3*. Retrieved from https://ojs.unbc.ca/index.php/cpsr/article/viewFile/135/183.

Bowden, J. (2017). HuffPost lays off dozens of staffers. *The Hill*. Retrieved from http://thehill.com/homenews/media/337839-huffington-post-lays-off-dozens-of-journalists-after-being-bought-by-verizon.

Burke, T. (2018) How America's largest local TV owner turned its news anchors into soldiers in Trump's war on the media. *Deadspin*. https://theconcourse.deadspin.com/how-americas-largest-local-tv-owner-turned-its-news-anc-1824233490

Chen, R., Thorson, E., & Lacy, S. (2005). The impact of newsroom investment on newspaper revenues and profits: Small and medium newspapers, 1998-2002. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, *82*(3), 516-532. https://doi.org/10.1177/107769900508200303

Cranberg, G., Bezanson, R. & Soloski, J. (2001). *Taking Stock: Journalism and the publicly traded newspaper company.* Iowa State University Press.

Dimmick, J., Chen, Y. & Li, Z. (2009). Competition between the internet and traditional news media: The gratification-opportunities niche dimension. *Journal of Media Economics, 17*(1)*,* 19-33. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327736me1701_2

Edmonds, R. & Mitchell, A. (2014). The Texas Front-page Exchange. *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from https://www.journalism.org/2014/12/04/the-texas-front-page-exchange/

Enda, J. (2014). At the Statehouse, ideological press tries to fill a void in news coverage. *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/07/15/at-the-statehouse-ideological-press-tries-to-fill-void-in-news-coverage/

Farhi, P. (2014). Under new ownership, WJLA-TV takes a slight turn to the right. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/under-new-ownership-wjla-tv-takes-a-slight-turn-to-the-right/2014/09/16/a21ffa6e-3ac8-11e4-9c9f-ebb47272e40e_story.html

Farhi, P. (2018). As Sinclair's sound-alike anchors draw criticism for 'fake news' promos, Trump praises broadcaster. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/as-sinclairs-sound-alike-anchors-draw-criticism-for-fake-news-promos-trump-praises-broadcaster/2018/04/02/a1be67e8-367a-11e8-9c0a-85d477d9a226_story.html

Farhi, P., Gillum, J., & Alcantara, C. (2018). In this town, you can flip the channel all you want – the news is often the same. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/lifestyle/sinclair-broadcasting/

Fink, C.C. (1988). *Strategic Newspaper Management*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Goldman, D. (2017). Tempers flare at FCC over record Sinclair fine. *CNNMoney*. Retrieved from http://money.cnn.com/2017/12/22/media/fcc-sinclair-fine/index.html.

Gottfried, J. & Shearer, E. (2017). News use across social media platforms 2017. *Pew Research Center.* Retrieved from https://www.journalism.org/2017/09/07/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2017/.

Grieco, E. (2020). U.S. newspapers have shed half of their newsroom employees since 2008. *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/20/u-s-newsroom-employment-has-dropped-by-a-quarter-since-2008/

Headlee, C. (2019). Not Everyone Hates Us, Just Lots of People. *Celeste Headlee blog*. Retrieved from https://celesteheadlee.medium.com/not-everyone-hates-us-just-lots-of-people-8ba62789e2c1

Jessell, H. A. (2020). NBC affils in talks on Peacock latenight. *TVNewsCheck*. Retrieved from https://tvnewscheck.com/business-revenue/article/nbc-affils-in-talks-on-peacock-latenight/

Kelly, K. J. (2018). Meredith to ax 700 Time Inc. employees. *New York Post*. Retrieved from https://nypost.com/2018/02/08/meredith-to-ax-700-time-inc-employees/.

Konnikova, M. (2014). How headlines change the way we think. *The New Yorker.* Retrieved from https://www.newyorker.com/science/maria-konnikova/headlines-change-way-think.

Lacy, S. (1992). The financial commitment approach to news media competition. *Journal of Media Economics, 5*(2)*,* 5-21. https://doi.org/10.1080/08997769209358220

Lacy, S. & Blanchard, A. (2003). The Impact of Public Ownership, Profits, and Competition on Number of Newsroom Employees and Starting Salaries in Mid-Sized Daily Newspapers. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *80*(4), 949 – 968. https://doi.org/10.1177/107769900308000413

Lacy, S., Shaver, M.A., & St. Cyr, C. (1996). The Effects of Public Ownership and Newspaper Competition on the Financial Performance of Newspaper Corporations: A Replication and Extension. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 73*(2), 332 – 341. https://doi.org/10.1177/107769909607300205

Liebling, A.J. (1960, May 14). The Wayward Press: Do you belong in journalism? *New Yorker*, 105-112. Retrieved from https://archives.newyorker.com/newyorker/1960-05-14/flipbook/104/

Macker, N. (2020). New coverage of TV station owners. *Morningstar.* Retrieved from https://www.morningstar.com/articles/961093/new-coverage-of-tv-station-owners

Mahoney, D. (2009). The Circulation Battle of Pulitzer and Hearst. *History of Journalism.* Retrieved from http://historyofjournalism.onmason.com/2009/09/16/46/.

Martin, G. J., & McCrain, J. (2018). Local news and national politics. *Emory University.* Retrieved from https://joshuamccrain.com/localnews.pdf

Matsa, K. E. (2017). Local TV News Fact Sheet. *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from http://www.journalism.org/fact-sheet/local-tv-news/.

Matsa, K. E. (2018) Fewer Americans rely on TV news; what type they watch varies by who they are. *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/01/05/fewer-americans-rely-on-tv-news-what-type-they-watch-varies-by-who-they-are/

Matsa, K.E. & Shearer, E. (2018). News use across social media platforms 2018. *Pew Research Center.* Retrieved from https://www.journalism.org/2018/09/10/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2018/.

McCombs, M.E. & Shaw, D.L. (1972). The agenda-setting function of mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 36*(2), 176-187. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2747787

Media Tracks Communications (2021). Nielsen DMA Rankings 2021. Retrieved from https://mediatracks.com/resources/nielsen-dma-rankings-2021/

Miller, J. (1998). Yesterday's news: Why Canada's daily newspapers are failing us. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.

Miller, M.K. & Jessell, H.A. (2020). Nexstar remains firmly atop station groups. *TVNewsCheck*. Retrieved from https://tvnewscheck.com/article/249937/nexstar-remains-firmly-atop-station-groups/

Myllylahti, M. (2017). The rise of tactical partnerships: Media converging beyond ownership. *Medianz, 17*(1). https://doi.org/10.11157/medianz-vol17iss1id181

Napoli, P.M. & Yan, M.Z. (2007). Media ownership regulations and local news programming on broadcast television: An empirical analysis. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 51*(1), 39-57. https://doi.org/10.1080/08838150701308010

NBCUniversal (2020). NBCUniversal unveils Peacock, a free premium ad-supported streaming service with subscription tiers. *NBCUniversal*. Retrieved from https://www.nbcuniversal.com/press-release/nbcuniversal-unveils-peacock-free-premium-ad-supported-streaming-service-subscription

Nexstar Media Group (2019). Company history. Retrieved from https://www.nexstar.tv/history/

Nexstar Media Group (2020). Nexstar Media Group launches Missouri's only broadcast and digital news bureau in state capital. Retrieved from https://www.nexstar.tv/missouri_capital_news_bureau_launch_2020/

O'Keefe, M. (2020). Why can't you watch late night shows early on Peacock yet? *Decider*. Retrieved from https://decider.com/2020/07/15/peacock-nbc-late-night-early-access/

Oliver, J. (2017). Sinclair Broadcast Group: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO). YouTube. Retrieved from https://youtu.be/GvtNyOzGogc

Price, H. (2020). NBC affiliates stabbed by Peacock quill. *TVNewsCheck*. Retrieved from https://tvnewscheck.com/digital/article/nbc-affiliates-stabbed-by-peacock-quill/

Puzzanghera, J. (2006). FCC lawyer says TV study was hushed. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2006-sep-15-fi-fcc15-story.html

Reese, S. D. (2019). Hierarchy of Influences. In T. P. Vos, & F. Hanusch (Eds.), *The International Encyclopedia of Journalism Studies* (2019 edition). John Wiley & Sons. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118841570.iejs0023

Reinardy, S. (2010). Downsizing Effects on Personnel: The Case of Layoff Survivors in U.S. Newspapers. *Journal of Media Business Studies, 7*(4), 1-19. https://doi.org/10.1080/16522354.2010.11073512

Rohal, M. (2013). PEJ renamed Pew Research Center's Journalism Project. *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from https://www.pewresearch.org/2013/10/03/pej-renamed-as-pew-research-centers-journalism-project/

Rojecki, A. & Meraz, S. (2014). Rumors and factitious informational blends: The role of the web in speculative politics. *New Media & Society, 18*(1)*,* 25-43. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814535724

Rosenstiel, T., Mitchell, A., Pertilla, A., Carlson, M., Avlia, T., Chinni, D., Anderson, N., & Brady, L.A. (2003). Does ownership matter in local television news: A five-year study of ownership and quality. *Project for Excellence in Journalism*. Retrieved from https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/legacy/ownership.pdf

Scott, D.K., Gobetz, R.H., & Chanslor, M. (2008). Chain versus independent television station ownership: Toward an investment model of commitment to local news quality. *Communication Studies, 59*(1), 84-98. https://doi.org/10.1080/10510970701648624

Shearer, E. (2020). Local news is playing an important role for Americans during COVID-19 outbreak. *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/07/02/local-news-is-playing-an-important-role-for-americans-during-covid-19-outbreak/

Sinclair Broadcast Group (2019). History. Retrieved from https://sbgi.net/history/

Singer, J. B. (2001). The metro wide web: Changes in newspapers' gatekeeping role online. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly. 78*(1), 65-80. https://doi.org/10.1177/107769900107800105

St. Cyr, C., Lacy, S. & Guzman-Ortega, S. (2005). Circulation Increases Follow Investments in Newsrooms. *Newspaper Research Journal*, *26*(4), 50-60. https://doi.org/10.1177/073953290502600405

Tuchman, G. (1972). Objectivity as strategic ritual: An examination of newsmen's notions of objectivity. *American Journal of Sociology, 77*(4), 660-679. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2776752

Tuchman, G. (1978). *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality.* The Free Press: New York.

Williams, B. A. & Delli Carpini, M. X. (2000). Unchained reaction: The collapse of media gatekeeping and the Clinton-Lewinski scandal. *Journalism, 1*(1), 61-85. https://doi.org/10.1177/146488490000100113

APPENDIX A – Invitation for News Directors to Participate

Hello,

I am a graduate student at Ball State University seeking participants for a study examining the impact of conglomeration on local television news stations. Participation is open to any news director who is at least 18 years old and works at a local, commercial television news operation in the United States. This is an online survey estimated to take 5-7 minutes to complete. Your responses will be anonymous and no identifying information like your name or station call letters will be collected or appear in any publication or presentation of the data.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you have the right to stop the study at any time if you wish. No form of compensation is being offered for completing this study.

If you are interested, you can take the survey at this link. If you have questions before agreeing to participate, feel free to reply to this message and I will be happy to address any questions or concerns. Thank you so much for your time.

Study Title: The Impact of Conglomeration on Local Television News
Link: https://bsu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_3wpNhAywTXXagwR
IRB Number: 1675070-1
Researcher: Evan Hoffmeyer
Email: ehoffmeyer@bsu.edu
Faculty Supervisor: Natalee K. Seely, Ph.D.
Email: nkseely@bsu.edu

APPENDIX B – Survey Questions

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research project. This survey will provide insights into the attitudes and beliefs of local TV news directors across the United States regarding mergers & acquisitions among corporate ownership within the local TV news industry. Your name will never be publicly disclosed by using this form.

Before beginning, please read the linked Informed Consent Form then indicate if you agree to continue with the rest of the survey.

1. What is your gender?
    a. Female
    b. Male
    c. Trans
    d. Non-binary
    e. prefer not to self-identify

2. What is your current age?
    a. under 25
    b. 25-29
    c. 30-39
    d. 40-49
    e. 50-59
    f. 60+

3. How long have you worked in local TV news?
    a. fewer than 5 years
    b. 5-9 years
    c. 10-14 years
    d. 15-19 years
    e. 20-24 years
    f. 25 years or more

4. How long have you worked at your current station? (This can include time spent with a different job title, so long as there was no break in employment between titles.)
    a. fewer than 3 years
    b. 3-5 years
    c. 5-7 years
    d. 7-10 years
    e. 10 years or more

5. What size market do you currently work in?
    a. Major market (DMAs 1-10)
    b. Large market (DMAs 11-30)
    c. Mid-sized market (DMAs 31-60)

d. Small market (DMAs 61+)

6. When was the last time your current station went through a change in ownership?
   a. Less than 2 years ago
   b. 2-5 years ago
   c. 5-7 years ago
   d. 7-10 years ago
   e. more than 10 years ago

7. How many total times has your station undergone a change in ownership in the past 10 years?
   a. none
   b. once
   c. twice
   d. three or more times

8. How did your newsroom staffing levels change after the most recent change in ownership?
   a. increased by 10% or more
   b. increased by 5-9%
   c. increased by less than 5%
   d. no change
   e. decreased by less than 5%
   f. decreased by 5-9%
   g. decreased by 10% or more
   h. I don't know.

9. In a perfect world, what do you see the role of a parent company to be in terms of your content generation process?
   0-10 scale with "0" being the parent company is a silent partner with no role in content and "10" being the parent company is an essential component in creating a product that will serve my viewers.

10. Thinking back to your experience at every station where you've worked, do you think parent companies handle their local newsrooms differently based on market size and/or revenue?
    a. different levels of involvement based on market size
    b. different levels of involvement based on how well you compete against other stations in your market
    c. different levels of involvement based on both market size and how well you compete against other stations in your market
    d. same handling of all stations in their portfolio regardless of market size, success and/or revenue

11. Does your station's current owner require you to run content produced at the corporate/national level?
    a. Yes, journalistic content

b. Yes, editorial content
c. Yes, both journalistic and editorial content
d. No, neither journalistic nor editorial content

12. Does your station's current owner provide journalistic resources you would not otherwise have? Please select all that apply.

- o statehouse/state capitol bureau
- o Washington, D.C. bureau
- o national investigative reporter(s)
- o pooled resources for major entertainment and/or sporting events (e.g. Super Bowl, Olympics, Academy Awards)
- o pooled resources for major local events (i.e. your market is hit by a hurricane and reporters from sister stations come in from other markets to help you cover it)
- o other journalistic content
- o none

13. In how many markets that geographically border your own do you have a sister station?
a. 0
b. 1
c. 2
d. 3
e. 4 or more

14. How frequently, on average, do you bring in content directly from sister stations for your on-air product? (Please only count sister stations, not affiliates owned by another company.)
a. less than once a week
b. 1-3 stories a week
c. 4-7 stories a week
d. 8-11 stories a week
e. 12 or more stories a week

15. How beneficial or harmful do you think the pattern of mergers and acquisitions has been on the quality of journalism?
0-10 scale with "0" meaning fully harmful with no benefit and "10" meaning entirely beneficial with no downside

16. What do you think is the most beneficial aspect of mergers & acquisitions in terms of the quality of your news product?

17. What do you think is the most harmful aspect of mergers & acquisitions in terms of the quality of your news product?

18. So the researcher can know how many organizations are represented in this study, please indicate the current owner of your company. Your answer will not be published.
a. Nexstar

b. Sinclair
c. Tegna
d. Fox
e. CBS
f. Gray
g. NBCU
h. ABC / Disney
i. Scripps
j. Univision
k. Hearst
l. Cox
m. Meredith
n. Graham
o. Quincy
p. Sunbeam
q. Entravision
r. Hubbard
s. Ion
t. NPG
u. Weigel
v. Allen Media
w. Capitol
x. Berkshire Hathaway
y. Lockwood
z. other

APPENDIX C – Interview Questions

Informed Consent

My name is Evan Hoffmeyer, a graduate student at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana. This interview is taking place [DATE & TIME].

Thank you for your interest in taking part in the interview process of my research project, "The Impact of Conglomeration on Local Television News." I'm studying the relationship between mergers & acquisitions among the corporate ownership of news-producing local commercial television stations in the U.S. and the quality of journalism those local stations produce.

Participants in this study are exclusively news directors of local commercial television stations in the United States who are at least 18 years of age. Does that describe you? [WAIT FOR RESPONSE]

The interview will begin with a handful of demographic questions. No personally identifying data like your name will be collected, and the only demographic I will reference in publication will be the market size where you currently work, as a range (e.g., "a news director at a large market station").

This interview will last around 20 minutes. It will start with some multiple-choice questions followed by open-ended response opportunities. I may add in some follow-up questions if I feel further clarification of your responses will help the study.

I am recording this interview to ensure accurate transcription of your responses and to have a record of your consent to participate. The recording will never be included in any presentation of the results of this project or in any other way disclosed to the public.

No responses given in this study will be shared with employers, employers will not know who participated in this study, and participation in this study has no bearing on employment.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw your permission at any time for any reason without penalty or prejudice from the investigator. Please feel free to ask any questions before agreeing to participate, or at any time during the study. On that note, do you have any questions at this point? [WAIT FOR RESPONSE]

Having had this project explained to you, do you agree to participate? [WAIT FOR RESPONSE]

Demographic Data

Thank you again for your participation. As I mentioned earlier, I'm going to start with some quick demographic and background questions.

1. Into which age range do you currently belong?
    a. 20 – 29
    b. 30 – 39
    c. 40 – 49
    d. 50 – 59
    e. 60+

2. How long have you worked in local television news?
    a. fewer than 5 years
    b. 5 – 9 years
    c. 10 – 14 years
    d. 15 – 19 years
    e. 20 – 24 years
    f. 25 years or more

3. What size market do you currently work in?
    a. Major market (DMAs 1 – 10)
    b. Large market (DMAs 11 – 30)
    c. Mid-sized market (DMAs 31 – 60)
    d. Small market (DMAs 61+)

Background Data

4. Does your station's current owner require you to run content produced at the national level?
    a. Yes, journalistic content
    b. Yes, editorial/opinionated content
    c. Yes, both journalistic and editorial/opinionated content
    d. No, neither journalistic nor editorial/opinionated content

5. Does your station's current owner provide journalistic resources you would not otherwise have? I'm going to read off a list of examples. Please give a yes or no for each.
    a. statehouse / state capitol reporter(s)
    b. national political reporter(s)
    c. national investigative reporter(s)
    d. digital desk / trending content
    e. pooled resources for major national & international events (e.g., Super Bowl, Olympics, Academy Awards)
    f. pooled resources for major local events (i.e., a hurricane hits your market and reporters come from sister stations to help you cover the story)
    g. other syndicated journalistic content I didn't mention

Research Questions

Moving more into the bulk of the study now:

6. Think about local TV news operations you admire, that are doing incredible work. What is it that makes them stand out to you? In other words, what does a local TV news operation look like when it's performing the way it should?

7. When thinking about the elements that can get a newsroom to that point, do you see parent companies as being silent supporters? Or are they the added boost that gets you closer to looking like that optimal newsroom?

8. The opinion of parent companies' impact on local news was largely an internal industry debate until Sinclair Broadcasting was featured on HBO's "Last Week Tonight with John Oliver." Did you see that portrayal? If so, how did you feel about Oliver's take? And have you been hearing more questions or comments about your own parent company since then?

9. Overall, do you think the wave of mergers & acquisitions among parent companies that has been seen since the Great Recession has been beneficial to the local news product, or more harmful?

10. Thinking back to your experience at past stations, do you think parent companies handle their newsrooms differently based on market size and/or revenue? Or do they generally have a uniform set of expectations and offerings for everyone?

11. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement, and why: Being part of a large parent company is more beneficial when you work for a smaller market station because of their pooled resources you otherwise wouldn't have.

12. Do you have any final thoughts about mergers & acquisitions or corporate ownership that I didn't bring up but you think are important for others in the industry and/or government regulators to think about more?

APPENDIX D – Industry Evaluations

Evaluation #1

Evaluator: Austin Kellerman, Sr. Director of Local Digital Content Strategy, Nexstar Media Group

Brief Discussion of Evaluator's Credentials: I was a News Director in small and medium markets for more than a decade before my current role at the corporate level for Nexstar Media Group. I currently work across all Nexstar stations with a focus on content and resource sharing in the digital space.

Relationship to Author: Mr. Hoffmeyer and I worked together in a newsroom in Little Rock, Arkansas about 10 years ago. He and I have stayed in touch throughout the last decade.

Relationship to the Subject Matter: I managed through a merger in Little Rock and know the positives and negatives that come from conglomeration. Additionally, I managed a duopoly newsroom in one of America's smallest markets (Abilene, Texas) and worked in a large market for a television station owned and operated by a broadcast network. In my current role, I've helped onboard numerous stations following acquisitions.

Evaluation of the Topic as Appropriate for the Creative Endeavor: This is an extremely important topic that's been debated at all levels. With an increasingly biased media in the cable news space, it is critically important local news providers serve their audience in an unbiased, thoughtful, and truthful manner. Conglomeration has the potential to threaten that and thus needs to be researched. As noted by Mr. Hoffmeyer, the topic has become more mainstream over the last few years, but you don't hear much about the data behind the opinions or the positives that can come from conglomeration. Based on the ever-changing landscape of the industry, this was a great topic to tackle.

Evaluation of the Student's Approach: I thought Mr. Hoffmeyer's approach was extremely thorough. While he makes the process of obtaining contact information for every News Director in the country sound somewhat simple, it's not an easy process at all. By taking the approach he did, he allowed himself the opportunity to connect with the widest pool of participants possible. I thought going beyond the survey and having deep discussions on the topic helped provide much-needed context.

Evaluation of the Body of the Project: This is an impressive examination of the impact of conglomeration on journalists, businesses, and the consumer. Mr. Hoffmeyer brings up numerous examples of research that set the stage ahead of his survey results and interviews. The beginning of the piece gives a nice look at the foundation and evolution of broadcast journalism. The results are presented clearly and well organized. I thought his interviews helped provide welcomed perspective to the results.

Evaluation of the Student's Work as Contributing to the Field: While much has been written about the negative impact of conglomeration, there isn't much out there about the positives. I thought Mr. Hoffmeyer did a fantastic job outlining the positives while also balancing things out with the negatives. He also provided much-needed context to somewhat sensational presentations from John Oliver and Deadspin. When I originally saw the Deadspin piece, I immediately thought, as Mr. Hoffmeyer pointed out, "this is bad." In hearing the opinion of Sinclair employees as it related to the messaging, I saw the reporting in a different light. I believe this piece will make those who believed their opinion was already formed and established think again.

Evaluation #2

Evaluator: Ginger E. Blackstone, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Harding University

Brief Discussion of Evaluator's Credentials: In addition to my position as a full-time broadcast journalism professor, I am a published scholar with a research emphasis on political broadcast media, cultivation theory, and framing. My dissertation, which also focused on elements of the broadcast journalism industry, won the 2017 Harwood Dissertation Award from the Broadcast Education Association. I also worked in broadcast news from 1991-2011. I was a Supervising Executive Producer at CNN and CNN Headline News from 1999-2009.

Relationship of Evaluator to Student and Subject Matter: I am familiar with the student's career in Arkansas broadcast news media before his relocation to Indiana. I, too, have witnessed the effects of layoffs and corporate takeovers of various news outlets, both at local network affiliate television stations and at the larger cable news operations.

Evaluation of Topic as Appropriate for the Creative Endeavor: The topic is timely, relevant, and provocative. The influence of station ownership and corporate "one size fits all" mandates may not be obvious to broadcast audiences outside the newsroom; however, at a time when distrust of journalism overall is so prevalent in the United States, it is important to explore possible reasons behind the erosion of trust, even when the changes might not be obvious to the audience. As pointed out in this work, community-based journalism often impacts the day-to-day lives of local viewers more directly than the stories making national or regional headlines. It is the news operation's connection to the local population that builds trust and loyalty among viewership. A local focus also encourages reporters to seek out quality stories that others may never find. This study explores and documents the shifting resources and staffing that is bolstering more generic regional and national coverage while stifling community-based coverage that was once the signature of local broadcast news programs. It also touches on the erosion of employee morale as a result of layoffs and the subsequent increase in workload because of smaller staff sizes.

Evaluation of the Student's Approach: The student's approach is noteworthy, and the findings are revealing. The mixed method offers insights at both the macro and micro levels. However, I have two areas of critique: first, that the participation is extremely low. In defense of the student's efforts, I have had similar frustrations in trying to recruit a robust sampling of professional journalists to participate in research efforts, as have my colleagues. Perhaps the lack of participation is a reflection of the stressors in the modern news media dynamic as staff sizes continue to shrink. And yet, perhaps more could have been done by the student to encourage more participation. The student mentions that there were no follow-up e-mails or incentives offered. Additional steps may have proved beneficial. For example, had a small token been offered, such as $10 gift cards to a popular coffee outlet, it might have encouraged more potential participants to respond. The second area of critique is with regard to the theoretical foundation of the study: yes, theory is mentioned the end of the literature review, but the work fails to go back and apply the findings to potential theory development. It feels like the theory is thrown in and not used as a part of the foundational structure of the work.

Evaluation of the Body of the Project: This is a very well-written work, and the findings are unexpected. It is evident that much effort went into this project, and the paper is a joy to read. It is clear that the student is an excellent communicator and a thoughtful researcher who cares about this topic. Given the setup in the literature review and the premise behind the research design, I found it surprising that news directors would look at corporate ownership as a positive experience. I did not expect the benefits associated with additional company resources to outweigh the angst associated with laying off newsroom personnel or the irritation of corporate interference in editorial autonomy. The organization of the paper is appropriate for a scholarly work and the methodology is well-detailed and sound. I would offer two minor suggestions under the guise of copy editing: first, that formal research writing does not use contractions; and second, that formal sentences do not end in prepositions. For those of us who worked many years writing copy for broadcast, conversational writing is in our DNA; however, scholarly works require a more formal use of language. Most works also use third person references to the author instead of first person. I also question some of the placement of the years in the citations. It is my understanding that, for the most part, the year is posted immediately after name of the source rather than the end of the sentence. The APA guidebook will spell that out more clearly. But details aside, this is a well-conceived, well-executed work that opens the door to future exploration into the modern corporate structures of local broadcast news operations.

Evaluation of the Student's Work as Contributing to the Field: This effort is a window into the current state of the local broadcast news industry and the erosion of local news audiences in both size and trust. Corporate emphases on profits and reorganization may offer resources to smaller newsrooms; however, their operations across the country are struggling to cover local, community-based stories that are not told in national or regional coverage. It is local news that has a more direct impact on the lives of individuals; and in a democracy, a misinformed and misguided public can jeopardize the very foundational strength of the government. In practical terms, this paper contributes much to our understanding of what is happening behind the scenes in a majority of newsrooms around the country. From a scholarly perspective, the paper could be more robust in the area of theory application and development.