

Online News Readers Get Different News Mix than Print

by Scott R. Maier and Staci Tucker

A comparison of the digital and print newspapers in Seattle and Minneapolis indicates that online readers get a different mix of top news stories. Online newspapers focused on old-style news—crime, disaster and sports—while print offered more on politics, environment and education.

With national and international news widely available on the Internet (often at no charge), the viability of local newspapers—print and online—hinges on coverage of the communities they serve.

Harvard researcher Thomas E. Patterson in a study of 160 news-based websites observed:

The Internet is redistributing the news audience in ways that [are] threatening some traditional news organizations. Local newspapers have been the outlets that are most at risk, and they are likely to remain so.¹

Even as local newspapers decline in circulation, profitability and jobs, evidence suggests that newspaper readers retain a high level of interest in community news.² The Project for Excellence in Journalism, citing significant potential for local content creation and online advertising, proclaims in its State of the Media report that “local news remains the vast untapped territory.”³

How are local newspapers covering the news in a digital age? What do readers tend to gain—or lose—as they increasingly go online to get their local news? This study evaluates how metropolitan newspaper websites compare to the press in news content. The study focuses on news coverage in Seattle

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and Minneapolis, two urban markets where newspapers have been leaders in online news amid economic challenges. In a content analysis of 725 news stories, the study examines online and print coverage by the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*, the *Seattle Times* and the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, the nation's first metro daily newspaper to switch from print to exclusively online publication. The study draws on the methodology used by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, a Pew research affiliate that rigorously examines national and international news coverage but excludes what is arguably the strongest asset of most news media—local coverage of their communities. By addressing this gap, this study provides a baseline assessment of local news coverage in the pivotal transition to digital news. Applying news consonance as a conceptual framework, the study also explores the agenda-setting implications of media fragmentation as newspaper readers' worldviews—and their local perspectives—are increasingly shaped by the news platform they choose to read.

Background and Literature Review

Newspapers are not faring well in the digital transition, especially among younger audiences. The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press reports that just 27 percent of Generation Y (those born since 1977) read a newspaper the previous day, compared with 55 percent of those born prior to 1946.⁴ In another ominous trend for legacy media, gains in online audience⁵ do not make up for losses in newspaper readership, a decline that began decades before the worldwide web was introduced to mainstream usage.⁶ As national and international news has become ubiquitous online and on cable television, local news is more than ever the metropolitan newspaper's chief commodity. While newspapers still try to be comprehensive, covering international to local news, "it's that last area—local—that may be their refuge from the Internet storm," writes Ken Doctor in his book titled *Newsonomics*.⁷ In longitudinal research following three mainstream U.S. newspaper Internet sites, Barnhurst has documented an increasing focus on highly localized, event-centered news (as well as a decline in coverage providing analysis and context to the news).⁸ Media blogger Jeff Jarvis holds that the newspaper's future rests with the development of digital coverage of local news. "We can improve the (Internet's) ecosystem for covering local news," Jarvis said. "We're still in the pre-dawn era of this transformation."⁹

When the Hearst Corporation in 2009 turned the 146-year-old *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* to a web-only newspaper, the *P-I* became the nation's first daily newspaper to switch to online-only publication. *P-I* Executive Producer Michelle Nicolosi touted the conversion as a "great opportunity for us to try out many of the theories journalism professionals and academics have been throwing about for the past few years." Among the *P-I*'s promises was to avoid duplicating stories found elsewhere and focus its limited staff (down from 140 newsroom jobs to 25 or so staff members) on original content that provides "something

unique and civically important.”¹⁰

Media scholars have long observed that journalists operate within a shared set of news values and practices.¹¹ Heavily influenced by professional norms, media “gatekeepers” tend to follow a common news agenda, regardless of the media platform. News consonance, in which media generally cover the same issues or events, persists even as new forms of mass communication—radio, television, cable and now the Internet—change the way people get their news. As noted by Riffe and his colleagues in a 1986 study:

*... story duplication is arguably functional, by focusing a pluralistic public's attention on common threats and in some cases building consensus. ... And agenda-setting is enhanced by consonance, wherein different media or channels repeatedly emphasize the same issues.*¹²

But some scholars warn that media fragmentation has accelerated political polarization and diminished the role of mass media in nurturing a civic agenda.¹³ If online news coverage lacks scope and depth and media customization limits the public's worldview, journalism's role in society as an information provider and community builder is reduced. Raising the specter of “the end of mass communication,” Chaffee and Metzger suggest that as people isolate themselves from the larger public discourse, they “in the process, undermine the very notion of a larger public discourse.”¹⁴

Over the last several decades, news consonance studies have shown that network television newscasts and, to a lesser degree, newspapers are highly similar in selection of news topics.¹⁵ More recently, researchers have documented media homogeneity among newspapers and web-based news. For example, a content analysis of national and international news coverage in 2007 showed that newspapers and five prominent news websites shared similar news judgments regarding story topics and story prominence, although newspapers offered depth and breadth unmatched by the online sites.¹⁶ Researchers also have found online and legacy media coverage of the 2008 presidential campaign to be similar in tone and content.¹⁷ In a 2010 study drawing on data collected by the Pew Research Center, a content analysis of 3,900 national and international news stories examined how online coverage differs from newspapers, network television, cable television and radio. With 6 percent of the top stories on news websites found to cover the same topics as covered by legacy media, the study concludes:

*In the fragmenting media universe, audiences turning to news websites will find the dominant stories of the day as well as a selection of news reports offering fresh perspective on events shaping the nation and the world.*¹⁸

Research Questions

While local news coverage remains the metropolitan newspaper's primary asset, largely unexplored is how local newspaper content differs as readers increasingly turn to online resources. Modeled after the content analysis of national and international news coverage conducted by the Pew Research Center, this case study examines news content of local daily newspapers—in print and online—in two metropolitan markets: Seattle and Minneapolis. The following research questions are posed:

RQ1:

How do local newspapers in print and online compare in selection of top news stories?

RQ2:

How does news coverage by local newspapers in print and online compare in story prominence, depth and breadth across story topics?

RQ3:

How does news coverage by local newspapers in print and online compare in geographic focus?

RQ4:

How does news coverage by local newspapers in print and online compare in story authorship and story format?

In contrast to national web news sites, bylined staff-written news stories were a mainstay for Seattle and Minneapolis newspapers, digital as well as print.

Method

This study closely follows the methodology developed by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism's (PEJ) for its News Coverage Index,¹⁹ which provides a weekly quantitative report identifying top news stories by media sector, including newspapers, television network news, cable news and radio. Analyzing more than 70,000 news stories a year from 48 news outlets, PEJ provides "the largest effort ever" to measure the content of news media on a continuing basis.²⁰ However, the News Coverage Index tracks only national and international news; excluded from its sample is local news.

The Seattle market was chosen for this study because it offers one of the

most digitally connected metropolitan regions in the nation²¹ and was cited among the top 20 most-visited newspaper web destinations in the nation.²² This market also was chosen because the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, which stopped printing in 2009, became the nation's first newspaper to switch to an all-online edition. "Seattle, perhaps more than any other American city, epitomizes the promise and challenges of American journalism at the local level," Michael Fancher, former editor of *The Seattle Times*, wrote in a report prepared for the Pew Research Center.²³ Minneapolis was chosen for this study because it also represents a vibrant and highly competitive media environment,²⁴ with the StarTribune.com and its parent newspaper, the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*, among the nation's most-read metropolitan newspapers.²⁵

Coding

From May 1 to May 31, 2010, a research team archived and coded daily news content in the print and online editions of *The Seattle Times*, the all-digital *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* and the print and online editions of the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*. Using online Olive Software, a fully formatted image of the print newspapers was captured digitally on the day of publication; screen captures were made daily of the homepages of the online newspaper and of each article analyzed. Coders varied the time of day of the screen captures to achieve a balance of morning, mid-day and evening editions of the online newspapers.

Following the coding protocol developed by the Pew Research Center, the sample included the top five front-page stories (including jumps) for newspapers and the day's top five stories for each online news site. The intent was to monitor and evaluate what the media consider their leading stories—in essence, their news agenda.²⁶ Included in the sample were all stories with local, national and international focus for both online and print editions. Coding was based only on the narrative text. For each top story, the entire text, including elements of the story that followed the jump or a hyperlink, was coded. Photos or multimedia with captions or teasers that were lacking a text-based news story were excluded. In all, 725 top news stories were identified and analyzed.²⁷

Selection of top stories was determined by location, prominence of display on the web page and the size of the headline. In accord with PEJ's methodology, newspaper placement was determined by following a backward "S" across the page, with highest prominence given to the story appearing in the upper left-hand corner of the newspaper's front page.²⁸ When less than five stories appeared on a newspaper's front page, stories most prominently displayed in the local news section were added to the sample. For online newspapers, the designated "lead" story was the news article headlined with the largest font size; the second most prominent story was the story that had a picture associated with it (presumably to draw the reader's attention), if that story was different from the one with the largest headline. Prominence for the next three stories was determined according to headline size and placement on the homepage.

Variables

Key variables included story topic, story placement, geographic focus, word count, story format and news source. Story topic was measured in two ways: by pre-defined broad story categories (i.e., crime, business, environment) and “big” story topics defined by on-going coverage of breaking news events and issues (i.e., Gulf oil spill, a heated Senate race, police misconduct). Geographic focus was determined by the predominant locale of the news event. To measure word count, researchers copied and pasted each article into Microsoft Word and used the software’s “word count” feature. Headline, byline and captions were not included in the article word count. Story format indicates the origin and type of the article, such as whether the news story is a product of original reporting, wire services or other news sources.

Intercoder Reliability

A 35-page codebook based on Pew’s News Coverage Index was developed to provide standard measures and protocols for this study. Following coder training and before refinement of procedures, an intercoder reliability test was conducted prior to the start of the coding process. Overall level of agreement across all variables was 97 percent. Intercoder agreement ranged from 78 percent for big story topic and story format, 89 percent on word count and 100 percent on all other variables.²⁹ In a mid-study check on intercoder reliability, overall level of agreement across all variables was 98 percent.

Findings

Story consonance among metropolitan newspapers and news websites in Seattle and Minneapolis was sporadic and generally weak. In an examination of each day’s top news stories, the study found that only 13 percent of the story-lines on the web news sites covered the same topics as the print editions of the local newspaper. [See Table 1] The all-digital *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* (seattlepi.com) provided a starkly independent news agenda, with only 8.2 percent of

Table 1
Frequency and Percentage of Top News Stories Covered in Common

<i>Media Comparisons</i>	<i>Same Story</i>	<i>Unique Story</i>
<i>Seattle Times</i> (print) - seattlepi.com	22 (8.2%)	245 (91.8%)
<i>Seattle Times</i> (print) - seattletimes.com	51 (21.1%)	191 (78.9%)
seattletimes.com - seattlepi.com	32 (12.3%)	226 (87.6%)
<i>Star Tribune</i> (print) - StarTribune.com	20 (7.4%)	250 (92.6%)

top stories in common with *The Seattle Times* print edition and 12.4 percent in common with *The Seattle Times* online news site (seattletimes.com). The digital metro newspapers differed sharply in story selection even from their parent newspapers. On average, only one in five of the top news stories posted on *The Seattle Times* websites was identical or similar to the stories found on the same day's front page of its print edition. In Minneapolis, the difference was even more pronounced: less than 8 percent of the top stories posted on StarTribune.com were in common with the *Star Tribune's* print edition.

Even when news storylines overlapped, digital and print coverage tended to diverge in story length and prominence. In a side-by-side comparison of news stories, coverage by *The Seattle Times* print edition was nearly twice that of the digital *Post-Intelligencer* while the word count for the *Star Tribune's* print newspaper was more than three times that of its digital edition. Paired-sample *t*-tests indicate the differences are statistically significant. [See Table 2] *The Seattle Times* online versions of a story on average were somewhat shorter than found

Table 2 Paired Samples T-Test Comparing Differences in Depth of News Coverage				
<i>Media Comparisons</i>	<i>Mean Difference</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
<i>Seattle Times</i> (print) - seattlepi.com	326.5	3.2	22	0.004
<i>Seattle Times</i> (print) - seattletimes.com	32.6	1.09	50	> .05
seattletimes.com - seattlepi.com	166.5	1.9	31	> .05
<i>Star Tribune</i> (print) - StarTribune.com	305.7	.09	19	.002
<i>Print editions provided lengthier coverage, measured by word count, than news websites when covering the same story.</i>				

in the newspaper's print editions but somewhat longer than the same stories covered by seattlepi.com. However, neither of these differences is statistically significant.

Top Stories

Despite overall differences in news agendas, the digital and print media converged when major events occurred. The top story, as measured by length and frequency, was the same for all five media studied: the Gulf oil spill. Among the most closely covered stories by both print and digital newspapers in Seattle was an uproar over police conduct and a hotly contested U.S. Senate race. In Minneapolis, both digital and print editions of the *Star Tribune* focused on state budget cuts and health care. But beyond a dozen or so of the most closely followed issues, story selection by each medium tended to be idiosyncratic.

Regardless of platform, Seattle and Minneapolis newspapers have a decisively local focus, with a majority of the stories covering metropolitan and state

Table 3
Story Frequency by Geographic Focus

	<i>Seattle P-I (online)</i>	<i>Seattle Times (print)</i>	<i>seattletimes. com (online)</i>	<i>Star Tribune (print)</i>	<i>Star Tribune.com (online)</i>	<i>Total</i>
City	96 66.2%	62 42.8%	65 44.8%	37 25.5%	54 37.2%	314 43.3%
State	23 15.9%	22 15.2%	22 15.2%	58 40.0%	47 32.4%	172 23.7%
Region	3 2.1%	4 2.8%	5 3.4%	1 .7%	1 .7%	14 1.9%
U.S.	17 11.7%	48 33.1%	45 31.0%	40 27.6%	38 26.2%	188 25.9%
Intl	5 3.4%	5 3.4%	6 4.1%	5 3.4%	4 2.8%	25 3.4%
No Geo Focus	1 .7%	4 2.8%	2 1.4%	4 2.8%	1 .7%	11 1.5%
Total	145 100.0%	145 100.0%	145 100.0%	145 100.0%	145 100.0%	725 100.0%

news. [See Table 3] The digital *Post-Intelligencer* in particular featured news on its home turf—two-thirds of its top news stories involved events and issues within metropolitan Seattle. Only 18 percent of the *Post-Intelligencer's* top stories covered news outside Washington state, compared to approximately 40 percent for both the print and digital editions of *The Seattle Times*. The *Star Tribune* had a stronger statewide news focus than did Seattle's dailies: 40 percent of the top news stories in the *Tribune's* print edition and 32 percent of the digital edition covered state events and issues (compared to 15 percent for the Seattle media studied). But none tended to give international news top billing, with less than 4 percent of the stories studied focused on news beyond U.S. borders.

News Topics

The television news cliché, "If it bleeds, it leads," could apply to the digital newspapers in Seattle and Minneapolis. The *Post-Intelligencer* turned to crime news for 42.1 percent of its top-billed stories and nearly one in four top stories posted in the *StarTribune.com* featured crime. [See Table 4] Crime was also the leading news topic for *SeattleTimes.com*, accounting for 17.9 percent of its top news stories. The second most prevalent news category, online and in print, was "disaster/accidents"—a result reflecting prominent coverage of the Gulf oil spill and its devastating ecological impact. The print editions of *The Seattle Times* and the *Star Tribune* provided more front-page coverage of government, politics and education than did their online counterparts. Conversely, the digital edition of *The Seattle Times* provided more than twice the amount of top business coverage than did the newspaper's print edition. All three news websites

Table 4
Story Frequency by Broad Story Topic

	<i>Seattle P-I (online)</i>	<i>Seattle Times (print)</i>	<i>Seattle Times (online)</i>	<i>Star Tribune (print)</i>	<i>Siar Tribune (online)</i>	<i>Total</i>
Government	9 6.20%	14 9.70%	12 8.30%	15 10.30%	15 10.30%	65 9.00%
Politics	4 2.80%	11 7.60%	10 6.90%	12 8.30%	6 4.10%	43 5.90%
Courts	2 1.40%	4 2.80%	5 3.40%	3 2.10%	6 4.10%	20 2.80%
Crime	61 42.10%	18 12.40%	26 17.90%	17 11.70%	34 23.40%	156 21.50%
Business	10 6.90%	9 6.20%	20 13.80%	8 5.50%	7 4.80%	54 7.40%
Economy	5 3.40%	8 5.50%	6 4.10%	8 5.50%	4 2.30%	31 4.30%
Environment	1 0.70%	7 4.80%	2 1.40%	2 1.40%	0 0.00%	12 1.70%
Transportation	9 6.20%	8 5.50%	8 5.50%	2 1.40%	3 2.10%	30 4.10%
Education	1 0.70%	7 4.80%	4 2.80%	6 4.10%	6 4.10%	24 3.30%
Health	0 0.00%	4 2.80%	0 0.00%	18 12.40%	8 5.50%	30 4.10%
Disasters	11 7.60%	21 14.50%	20 13.80%	19 13.10%	17 11.70%	88 12.10%
Celebrity	0 0.00%	1 0.70%	1 0.70%	2 1.40%	2 1.40%	6 0.80%
Sports	11 7.60%	1 0.70%	6 4.10%	7 4.80%	13 9.00%	38 5.20%

Note: Only major story topics listed.

gave more top coverage to sports than did the print newspapers. Unlike the attention given by national web news media to the rich and famous,³⁰ none of the metropolitan media succumbed to celebrity coverage, with less than 1 percent of the top news stories focused on rock stars, movie idols and other entertainment persona.

While the news organizations tended to pursue divergent news stories, a pattern of news congruence is revealed by ranking broad story topics according to their frequency of publication. Through this lens, local media shared a fairly common view of what broad story topics were worthy of top coverage. The Pearson product-moment correlations between broad story topic ranking and news organization were consistently positive, moderately strong and statistically significant. The highest rank correlation of broad story topics was between the print and online editions of *The Seattle Times* ($r = .89$, $p < .001$).

The rank correlation between the print and online editions of the *Star Tribune* was nearly as strong ($r = .79$, $p < .001$). But also highly correlated was the rank order of story topics covered by the two competing online Seattle newspapers ($r = .79$, $p < .001$).

News Sources

In contrast to national web news sites, bylined staff-written news stories were a mainstay for Seattle and Minneapolis newspapers, digital as well as print. More than half of the top stories in the *Seattletimes.com* and the *Star-Tribune.com* carried the names of their reporters; the proportion of staff bylined stories for the digital *Post-Intelligencer* was 40 percent. [See Table 5] In print, staff bylines on average were displayed on three in four stories of the *Star Tribune's* front page and nearly two in three front-page stories in the *Seattle Times*. With most major stories authored by named staff reporters, local newspapers boast a high degree of story ownership and transparency—attributes largely missing from some of the nation's most prominent web-based news services.³¹

Local digital newspapers were more dependent on wire services than was the traditional press. The *Star Tribune* relied on material from wire services for more than a third of the top stories appearing in its online editions; such stories represented 28 percent of the digital *Seattle Times*. In a partnership with KOMO-TV, the *Seattlepi.com* turned to the local television station as a frequent news source. None of the newspapers relied heavily on freelance reporters for their

Table 5
Story Frequency by Story Format

	<i>Seattle P-I (online)</i>	<i>Seattle Times (print)</i>	<i>Seattle Times (online)</i>	<i>Star Tribune (print)</i>	<i>Star Tribune (online)</i>	Total
Staff, byline	58 40.0%	92 63.4%	85 58.6%	112 77.2%	77 53.1%	424 58.5%
Staff, no byline	0 .0%	3 2.1%	6 4.1%	2 1.4%	10 6.9%	21 2.9%
Combo staff wire	22 15.2%	12 8.3%	41 28.3%	13 9.0%	51 35.2%	139 19.2%
Other outlet	38 26.2%	26 17.9%	4 2.8%	18 12.4%	3 2.1%	89 12.3%
Freelancer	2 1.4%	2 1.4%	4 2.8%	0 .0%	0 .0%	8 1.1%
Opinion, byline (staff)	8 5.5%	5 3.4%	5 3.4%	0 .0%	2 1.4%	20 2.8%
Opinion, no byline (staff)	10.3% 15	.0% 0	.0% 0	.0% 0	.0% 0	2.1% 15

Note: Only major story formats listed.

top stories. Only the Seattlepi.com turned regularly to opinion and commentary for its top-billed stories. [See Table 5]

Discussion

The results of this study stand in sharp contrast with a long line of research documenting news consonance, in which the media—from the legacy press to national Internet news sites—have tended to cover the same issues and events.³² In a strikingly distinct pattern of news coverage at the local level, newspaper readers in Seattle and Minneapolis were given a fundamentally different selection of top news stories online than in the printed newspapers delivered to their doorstep. For example, only 1 in 10 or so of the top news stories published by seattlepi.com overlapped in topic with news coverage by *The Seattle Times*. News stories featured online tended to differ from newspaper front pages even when published by the same parent company. Indeed, the *Star Tribune* proved most distinctive between print and online news, with less than 8 percent of top news storylines in common on any given day.

The study gives further evidence that local newspapers, at least in Seattle and Minneapolis, have largely gone beyond “shovelware” of newspaper stories repositioned from print. Although many stories that appeared in the print editions of *The Seattle Times* and the *Star Tribune* also were published in the newspaper’s digital editions, the stories given top placement tended to be fresh and original. A digital divide also was found in broad news topics. Print editions featured most prominently stories on the economy, politics, the environment and education. The topics most thoroughly covered by the digital press—crime, disaster and sports—could be considered a throw-back to old-style newspaper coverage that focuses on breaking news events. But when major news events occurred, such as the dramatic Gulf oil spill, the digital divide all but disappeared with print and online covering the issues with similar depth and frequency. Moreover, news organizations exhibited similar news values overall when rank emphasis of broad story topics was evaluated. This suggests that while digital news media seek to differentiate themselves from their local print brethren, readers—regardless of media platform—will still be informed of the important stories of the day as well as be kept apprised of broad news topics.

Unable to compete with the immediacy and scope of national and world news provided online by *The New York Times*, CNN and other prominent media outlets, the metropolitan press needs to capitalize on local news. In print and online, the focus indeed was sharply local among daily newspapers in Seattle and Minneapolis. Only 25 of the 725 stories examined covered foreign news, reflecting a nationwide trend in which mainstream news organizations skimp on international coverage.³³ *The Seattle Times* and the *Star Tribune* devoted a considerable portion of newshole to national events, but the majority of their top stories covered metropolitan and state news. The standout was the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, with 83 percent of its top stories covering metro and state

news. In this respect, the nation's first all-online metropolitan news daily has aggressively pursued a local news identity, establishing a market niche arguably more distinctive than that offered by its cross-city competition.

The online newspapers turned to an old-fashioned mainstay of news coverage: the police blotter. Crime and law-enforcement was the leading news topic for the online newspapers, accounting for more than 28 percent of the top stories posted on the three news websites studied. The online news sites also gave greater prominence to sports stories than did their print counterparts. The focus on crime and sports likely reflect the practical reality that online news operations, relatively short-staffed, tend to pursue breaking news stories that are timely, easily accessible and quickly covered. News beats that often demand more nuanced, multi-sourced reporting—economics, government, politics, health and education—all received proportionally greater coverage in print than online. Overall, newspapers offered significantly greater depth—providing on average more than twice the text in print than in digital stories. This suggests that the press retains editorial qualities largely missing from online news.

Not surprisingly, short-staffed online news operations also relied more heavily on wire services and other news outlets than did their print counterparts. But remarkably few of the leading online stories were covered by freelance reporters. And unlike blogs and social media, the digital news media generally refrained from posting opinion and commentary at the top of their online editions. For these online newspapers, their leading stories remain the province of staff reports and legacy news outlets. Alternative news sources—bloggers, freelancers and commentators—were commonly found only by digging deeper into the digital index of stories. This suggests that the digital newspapers remain fairly traditional in their approach to top news, relegating citizen-based reporting and other pioneering formats to lower-page placement.

For online news, the focus on local, quick-hit, breaking-news stories makes rational economic sense. Unable to match the immediacy of online news, the traditional press needs to offer even more reflective, in-depth community coverage. For the growing number of consumers who go online and to their doorsteps to get the news, the mix of old and new media heralds the potential of unprecedented news breadth and depth. But in reality, most newspapers are cutting rather than adding personnel and resources. With newspaper investment shrinking, the likely result will be even less in-depth reporting as more resources are devoted to easily covered headline news stories.

This study helps identify how the content of local news is defined—and being redefined—in the digital age. But by focusing on content rather than format, the study overlooks one of the online newsroom's leading attributes—the ability to choose the best platform for telling a story. Researchers should evaluate multimedia's potential by assessing how video, photos, interactive information and other innovative formats contribute to the quality of local news coverage. This study also understates the extent that newspapers publish a story in both online and in print editions. In a reversal of "shovelware," news stories now often

break first in the newspaper's digital edition, to be followed with longer, more contextual news stories in the next day's print edition. Those stories are missed in this study's day-by-day examination of news coverage. Also not counted in this study are news stories that make the front page of the newspaper but are buried deep or cycled briefly by the online news site. Another limitation of this study is its sample—a month's news coverage by five news operations in two digitally savvy cities. A contribution can be made by examining a random sample of news operations over time and across metropolitan markets, providing a statistically predictive, longitudinal perspective on how evolving digital operations define what is news.

If what's happening in Seattle and Minneapolis is indicative, then local online newspapers really are offering a product that is fundamentally different in content focus as well as format and delivery. Only by clicking into the depths of an online news site is an avid reader likely to find the same news stories featured online as on the front page of his or her local print newspaper. These results have significant implications for the news industry and for the reading public. By offering distinctive products in print and online, local newspapers have the opportunity to build new audiences in the digital age while retaining at least a portion of its core of loyal readers who still prefer the breadth, depth—and feel—of the printed newspaper. While readers clearly have more choices, the multiplicity of news sources has a potential downside as the media's ability to provide a common agenda weakens. How the agenda-setting role is changing, especially as media fragmentation accelerates political polarization, deserves continued scrutiny. At stake is not only the solvency of local newspapers but how local audiences read and learn about the issues and events shaping their communities.

Notes

1. Thomas E. Patterson, *Creative Destruction: An Exploratory Look at the News on the Internet* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 2007), 3.

2. See, for example, Barry Hollander, "Local Government News Drives Print Readership," *Newspaper Research Journal* 31, no. 4 (fall 2010): 6-16; Don Heider, Maxwell McCombs, and Paula Poindexter, "What the Public Expects of Local News: Views on Public and Traditional Journalism," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 82, no. 4 (winter 2005): 952-967; 953.

3. Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, "The State of the News Media 2011: Major Trends," *StateoftheMedia.org*, March 15, 2011, <<http://stateofthemedi.org/2011/overview-2/major-trends/>>.

4. The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "How Many Would Shrug if Their Local Newspaper Closed," *StateoftheMedia.org*, March 12, 2009, <<http://people-press.org/report/497/many-would-shrug-if-local-newspaper-closed>> (Mar. 12, 2009).

5. The nation's top four news websites (Yahoo! News, MSNBC.com, CNN.com and AOL News) in 2008 experienced a 22 percent increase in unique visitors to 23.6 million a month. This is a rate increase twice that of 2007 and more than five times the rate of 2006. Project for Excellence in Journalism, "Online - Audience," *StateoftheMedia.org*, 2009, <http://www.stateofthemedi.org/2009/narrative_online_audience.php?media=5&cat=2#topnewssites> (Mar. 23, 2009).

6. Philip Meyer dates the newspaper industry's peak as far back as the early 1920s, when household penetration (average daily circulation as a percentage of households) was 130. By 2001, newspaper household penetration had declined to 4. Philip Meyer, *The Vanishing Newspaper: Saving Journalism in the Information Age* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 4-5.

7. Ken Doctor, *Newsonomics: Twelve New Trends that will Shape the News You Get* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2010), 10.

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24. Carol Marie Cropper, "Speedier StarTrib Rules Roost in Minneapolis," *NetNewsCheck.com*, April 27, 2011, <<http://www.netnewscheck.com/article/2011/04/27/10914/speedier-startrib-rules-roost-in-minneapolis>>.

25. *The Star Tribune* was ranked the 15th largest newspaper in the nation, and tenth based on circulation. The online *Star Tribune* was rated No. 1 in the nation in time spent by visitors on newspaper websites, according to the Nielsen Net Ratings (August 2009), <http://ww2.startribune.com/digitalmediakit/massreach.php>.

26. PEJ's methodology is discussed in greater detail at <http://www.stateofthemedias.org/2008/methodology.php>

27. The first day's coding, used to confirm inter-coder reliability, is not included in the sample. Also excluded from this analysis are news stories published May 4, 2010 because an incomplete sample was collected.

28. For some newspapers, the most prominent story resides on the top right of the page, but we chose to follow the backward "S" method to be consistent with the methodology used by the Pew Research Center.

29. To take into consideration that a percentage of agreement by coders could occur by chance, Scott's *pi* was calculated for each variable. *Pi* ranged from .68 for two variables (story format and story topic) to 1.0 for perfect agreement among the majority of variables. Following further training, a subsequent check indicated 100 percent intercoder agreement on story format and story topic.

30. See Patricia A. Curtin, Elizabeth Dougall and Rachel Davis Mersey, "Study Compares Yahoo! News Story Preferences," *Newspaper Research Journal* 28, no. 4 (fall 2007): 22-35; Maier, "Newspapers Offer More News."

31. Less than 4 percent of online stories on national Web news sites carried a byline and only 14 percent were staff written. Maier, "Newspapers Offer More News," 15.

32. See, for example, Stempel III, "Gatekeeping: The Mix of Topics and Selection of Stories"; Riffe, et. al, "Gatekeeping and the Network News Mix"; Stempel III, "Topic and Story Choice of Five Network Newscasts"; Riffe, "Conflict and Consonance"; Maier, "Newspapers Offer More News"; Maier, "All the News Fit to Post?"

33. See American Journalism Review, "Retreating from the World," *AJR.org*, December/January 2011, <<http://www.ajr.org/article.asp?id=4985>>. Over the past quarter century, foreign news in newspaper dailies examined by AJR fell 53 percent. Also see American Journalism Review, "Shrinking Foreign Coverage," *AJR.org*, December/January 2011, <<http://www.ajr.org/article.asp?id=4998>>.

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