

CONCENTRATION AND CONSOLIDATION:  
HOW CHAIN OWNERSHIP AFFECTS NEWSPAPER FRONT-PAGE CONTENT

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CONCENTRATION AND CONSOLIDATION: HOW CHAIN OWNERSHIP  
AFFECTS NEWSPAPER FRONT-PAGE CONTENT

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ABSTRACT

Ownership by newspaper chains in the United States has become the norm, rather than the outlier, in the past half-century. While proponents of this model of ownership claim that chain newspapers are no different from independently owned papers in terms of their dedication to local coverage, research has consistently shown that newspapers that are part of a group are more likely to converge in their editorial opinions and syndicate news articles among their holdings, suggesting that chain ownership has a profound effect on the outcomes of city newspapers' content. Those effects have likely accelerated in an era when newspaper chains are increasingly cutting newsroom staff and relying more heavily on consolidating production resources. Through a quantitative content analysis of front pages downloaded from Newseum.org, this research study investigates the relationship between the size of newspapers' parent companies and the amount of original news content on their front pages. This study was able to conclude that in general, newspapers owned by larger chains had smaller proportions of original news on their front pages, and newspaper chains had smaller proportions of original news in states where they had a higher concentration of ownership.

*Keywords:* newspaper chain, group ownership, political economy of communication, front page, Newseum

## Introduction

Over the past 50 years, economic, political, and structural forces have guided the steady concentration of media ownership (Wackman, Gillmor, Gaziano & Dennis, 1975; Thrift, 1977). Newspaper chains have expanded their empires through large-scale buyouts of city newspapers across the country (Bagdikian, 1997). The economic conditions of modern-day newspapers favor chain ownership because of the costs of paper, ink and printing are minimized when they are shared among multiple publications (George, 2007). As the revenue from print subscription and advertising has dwindled, the newspaper industry has faced increasing financial difficulty, and it has become more difficult for independently owned papers to stay afloat using old business models — but corporate chains can provide stability for declining businesses (Barnett, 2009). The influence of multimedia conglomerates has surged particularly in the decades following the passage of the 1996 Communications Act, which opened the doors for cross-platform mergers and acquisitions (Arsenault & Castells, 2008; Iosifidis, 2010; Bagdikian, 2004). Given the restructuring of media business models, the goal of this study is to better understand how media ownership affects content. More specifically, this paper will focus on the relationship between newspaper chain ownership structure, managerial and organizational goals, and their resulting effects on newspaper content.

Media scholars sometimes point out that newspaper chains are not true monopolies because their individual holdings would not reasonably be in competition with one another for advertising or subscription revenues (Busterna, 1988; George, 2007). But considering that by 1981, only 2 percent of daily newspapers in the U.S. operated in towns where two or more dailies were in direct competition (Busterna, 1988;



Bagdikian, 1997), a proportion that has since shrunk to 0.01 percent (Bagdikian 2004), it is more accurate to say a newspaper chain owns a network of local monopolies, and it defines where the boundaries of those monopolies end (Lacy and Simon 1997).

The danger of a single company holding centers of influence across so many markets is the potential to homogenize each newspaper's practices, editorial standpoints, and news judgment. That influence a newspaper group wields is exacerbated when it concentrates ownership into a regional empire (Bagdikian 2004). For example, Gannett Co. has taken Wisconsin as a stronghold. The company owns 11 newspapers in the state, including the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* and the *Green Bay Gazette*, the first- and third-largest newspapers in the state by circulation as of 2015 (Gannett Co., Inc., 2017; Wisconsin Newspaper Association, 2016). Individual newsrooms largely have editorial autonomy, but when they are part of a corporate entity, they are expected to meet broader organizational goals, which ultimately has an effect on the type of content they produce (Plopper, 1991; Bagdikian, 2004).

From a cost standpoint, it often makes sense for companies to transfer production staff to a central location, often known as a "design hub" (Haught and Morris, 2018). Visual elements among newspapers produced in these design hubs tend to converge, but usually the quality of design is elevated for smaller newspapers that used to employ in-house design staff (Haught and Morris, 2018). In addition, large newspaper chains often see individual news outlets as part of a broader "news network" where local journalists' work can be spread through a company-exclusive news wire (Yu, 2015). This could have two effects. For one, news outlets within a region could become homogenized as news articles are shared within a region. Second, individual news publications could turn more

toward hyper-local coverage and rely on other newspapers to fill out their state or regional news budgets. In theory, news sharing practices allow news outlets to select from a consolidated pool of news articles while allowing individual journalists to diverge in their news coverage, but layoffs in the interest of cost-cutting could hinder the breadth of local coverage (Yu, 2015).

This study of news content on chain newspapers' front pages seeks to find out how much the quantity of original news differs between large chains and smaller companies. Front pages are direct reflections of a newspaper's core values, and editors select stories based on their impact and their pertinence to their local audience (Reisner, 1992; Zoch and Supa, 2014). As news corporations increasingly use economies of scale to consolidate resources, it is imperative to evaluate whether individual newspapers are losing the local identities that matter to readers.

## **Overview**

Four sections comprise the rest of this paper. A literature review surveys past research on the interactions between chain ownership, content, and managerial and organizational goals. Next, I outline the methods and procedures used to carry out this study, followed by a summary of results and a discussion on the findings of the research and their implications for future studies.

## Literature Review

This literature review seeks to analyze how ownership affects news media's content and organizational/managerial goals. Each section will serve to exemplify political economy of communication by showing how the economic goals of media ownership influence the political commodity of the news.

### Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

In this paper, I will chiefly discuss *chain newspaper ownership* using the definition from Thrift (1977): “two or more daily newspapers in different cities under the same principal ownership or control” (p. 328). Chain ownership differs from single-market mergers in that chains do not necessarily concentrate ownership in any one media market — although they might gather influence over a region (Bagdikian, 2004; George, 2007; Lacy and Simon, 1997). Newspaper chains do not all necessarily fall under the same ownership structure. Shares of a newspaper chain company can be controlled solely by one family, 100% publicly traded on a stock market, or any combination in between (Couture, 2013; Soloski, 2005).

The *political economy of communication* is the idea that the content distributed by a mass communication outlet holds social-political capital and that that content is influenced by the nature of financial support the outlet receives (McChesney, 2000). The political economy of communication will serve as the conceptual lens that through which this paper will relate the power dynamics of the social implications of the news with the power dynamics of media ownership. Political economy was founded as a means of interpreting the effects of economic phenomena in a way that traditional economic thought was not able to process; debates such as inequality, discrimination and

community could not be explained with the prevailing economic schools of Adam Smith or Thomas Malthus (Mosco, 2009). Political economy is relevant in mass communication studies because all forms of mass media are wedged between the economic and political realms, or as McChesney terms it, “between capitalism and democracy” (2000, p. 115). Mass media are economically driven in that they rely on some sort of financial support to function — whether from subscriptions, advertising or subsidies — and they produce a commodity to be sold. A newspaper is a commodity, but it is a commodity that, when purchased, brings the consumer into the political sphere (Garnham, 1979). Thus, news media is the economic production of a political commodity.

### **Newspaper Ownership Has an Effect on News and Editorial Content**

Research on chain ownership of newspapers has widely consisted of two types of studies: comparisons between the content of group-owned newspapers and their independently owned counterparts and analysis of newspaper content before and after chain ownership. Some early work that studied the effects of chain ownership focused on the content of newspapers’ editorial pages. Hallock (2004) outlines why scholars might choose to focus so much on editorials:

“Newspaper editorials, more than any other section of the daily paper, stake out a newspaper’s political, social and economic territory. Editorials historically have revealed how the newspaper’s heart beats and how its brain functions. ... a newspaper’s editorial pages help shape a community’s conscience” (p. 29).

A common theory is that a change in ownership can impact a news publication’s goals. And when a newspaper joins the ranks of several other newspapers owned by the same company, their organizational goals and editorial viewpoints converge.

Building on research that describes the influence newspaper endorsements have on voters, Wackman et al. (1975) explored whether chain-owned newspapers under the same ownership exhibited high levels of uniformity in their endorsements. Based on statements from chain spokespeople saying in chorus that individual papers have editorial autonomy, the authors set forward the hypothesis that chain-owned papers would not be homogeneous in their presidential candidate endorsements. Wackman et al. (1975) used survey data on presidential endorsements from *Editor & Publisher* from 1960 to 1972 to compile a list of newspapers and their endorsements and cross-referenced the newspapers with a list of newspaper chains to determine dispersal of endorsements within chains. Defining *homogeneous chains* as “those in which 85 percent or more of the papers endorsing a candidate supported the same candidate” (Wackman et al., 1975, p. 418), they found that newspaper chains showed an overwhelmingly high level of homogeneity in endorsements — in three out of the four elections studied, more than three-quarters of chains registered as homogeneous. The authors concluded that chain ownership diminishes editorial autonomy when endorsing presidential candidates (Wackman et al., 1975).

A study of Gannett papers showed a similar uniformity of editorial opinion across newspapers under chain ownership. Akhavan-Majid, Rife & Gopinath (1991) sought to research whether chain ownership leads to greater uniformity of opinion both in terms of the issues given space in a paper and the publication’s support or opposition of an argument as opposed to newspapers not owned by that chain. The researchers sent out a survey to 78 Gannett-owned papers and 300 non-Gannett papers asking whether they published editorials on three controversial issues and what editorial position they took in

regard to each topic. They found that Gannett papers were more likely to publish editorials or columns on each issue and that Gannett publications were more uniform in their opinions than their non-Gannett counterparts (Akhavan-Majid, Rife & Gopinath, 1991).

Hallock (2004) studied the case of the *Louisville Courier-Journal* and its evening cousin the *Louisville Times*. The two papers were locally owned by the Bingham family before they were sold to Gannett in 1986; the *Times* shut down shortly after the sale. To determine the Gannett Company's influence on the Louisville print ecosystem, Hallock conducted a content analysis of the *Courier-Journal*'s editorial pages before and after the sale and supplemented its findings with phone interviews with staff members who worked at the *Courier-Journal* during the transition. The study found few changes in editorial ideology, but they had shifted in scope from local to state, regional, and national issues. The closure of the *Times* contributed in great part to the loss of locally focused editorials. Editorials were observed to be shorter after Gannett's takeover, and one editorial staff writer said the shortened editorials meant writers did less research and conducted fewer interviews (Hallock, 2004, pg. 40).

#### **Financial commitment affects content.**

There are other studies that suggest newspaper acquisitions can have a moderately positive effect on news content and variety. Lacy (1991) asked in his study whether group newspapers and independent newspapers differed in the way management allocates news space, editorial space, and organizational resources; and whether the number of newspapers in a chain affected the way newspaper management allocates these variables. He found little difference between the allocation of news space in chain papers and

independent papers, except that stories in chain papers were shorter on average. Coupled with larger staffs at chain newspapers, this could suggest that chain newspapers cover more stories but put a higher emphasis on briefs in order to be efficient with news space. Chain newspapers did demonstrate a higher commitment to editorial space in their pages, however, and had more inches devoted to editorial materials, locally-oriented editorials, and cartoons than independently owned newspapers (Lacy 1991).

Lacy's findings do not contradict Hallock's (2004) study of Gannett takeovers in Louisville because the loss of local editorial content was largely attributed to the shutdown of the afternoon *Louisville Times*. Nor can it be determined that it invalidates Thrift's (1977) study on editorial vigor in chain newspapers because with the exception of geographic scope, Lacy does not analyze the content of chain newspaper editorials, only the space given to them (Lacy, 1991).

George (2007) sought to examine the effect of ownership consolidation on product position, variety, and readership in her research. She hypothesized that because newspaper production requires high fixed costs, competition in a media market leads to outlets seeking to capture just enough of an audience to cover its high costs. By consolidating ownership, she argues, newspapers are able to achieve economies of scale and are better able to eliminate duplicative content among publications, leading to a higher variety of content and better product positioning. George studied reporter assignment data from 207 different newspapers to compare the number of topical reporting beats in 1993 and 1999. Using a distance formula to measure the differentiation between the start and end of the period studied, she found that content diversity increased as ownership concentration in media markets increased, and readership among those

newspapers increased as well in response to higher diversity of content (George, 2007). While George's research applies mainly to ownership consolidation in single media markets, newspaper chains are increasingly consolidating their production staff from several newsrooms into regional print hubs, and this practice is a similar cost-reduction method. The higher amount of news diversity observed in George's study can also be observed in chains. Eliminating duplication among newsrooms is a strategy for increasing efficiency among newspaper chain holdings, particularly in regions where a company has multiple properties (Lacy and Simon, 1997).

A more recent study that takes into account both the print and digital products of chain newspapers explored how consolidation strategies by the owner of four Norwegian newspapers affected pluralism among those publications. Looking at the technological, economical and structural advantages of chain ownership, Sjøvaag (2013) hypothesized that regional newspapers under chain ownership will engage in some degree of content consolidation, but that their emphasis on local coverage would limit those practices. The author ran a comparative content analysis of the four regional newspapers owned by the company Schibsted: Data were obtained for one continuous week through articles in print newspapers and by taking screenshots of the websites every hour from 8 a.m. to midnight. Sjøvaag found that each of the newspapers focused primarily on local coverage, and that syndicated content was almost nonexistent in print, but was slightly higher online. *Aftenposten*, the largest of the papers with national distribution and with the highest degree of national, international and political orientation, was the origin for the highest share of articles in syndication). The papers were most likely to run syndicated sports and lifestyle content (Sjøvaag, 2013). This study suggests that



individual newspapers primarily dedicate their resources to local coverage that is of unique interest to their audiences, but one limitation is that it does not look at similarities in editorial opinion among the newspapers' non-syndicated content.

### **Newsroom managers enact the goals of larger organizations in their workplaces**

While editorial managers of chain-owned newspapers rank low on the totem pole compared to corporate executives, they most often have the most direct gatekeeping power in a newspaper and tend to conform to larger organizational goals. This gatekeeping doesn't always appear in an overt manner — once editors are familiar with owners' demands, they practice self-censorship to align with company interests (Bagdikian, 1997).

Demers and Wackman (1988) examined the differences in management goals between editors at chain-owned and independent newspapers. The authors of the study conducted a secondary analysis of survey data from a questionnaire sent to a random sample of 300 editors, 300 publishers, and 300 advertising managers, controlling for whether their publications were under “independent” or “group” ownership. Among their findings was that editors at chain-owned papers were more likely to mention profit as an organizational goal, contrary to what their supporting literature theorized (Demers & Wackman, 1988, p. 63). The results of this study illustrate that profit is more likely to be a driving force behind larger news organizations. Holding profit as a core motivation might influence the extent to which companies prioritize cutting expenses rather than boosting investments in editorial staff.

Donohue, Olien & Tichenor (1989) explore some of the structural constraints put on gatekeepers in their study of Minnesota community newspaper editors. Their study

compared the attitudes of newspaper editors at weekly and daily publications. One of the findings was that editors at larger daily publications were more likely to mention organizational constraints as part of their job, while editors at small, locally owned weekly publications did not mention organizational constraints at all. The study also found that editors at weekly newspapers were more likely to prioritize advertising, though it would be interesting to see how much attitudes toward advertising have changed in the past 30 years. This study sheds light on what news gatekeepers perceive to be pressures on their editorial decision making. Its flaws, however, lie in its control sample — its focus on editors in one particular state makes it difficult to reproduce, and it can be argued that weekly papers and dailies do not compare well in terms of workflow and budgetary constraints.

Plopper's (1991) content analysis of the *Arkansas Gazette* before and after its sale to Gannett in 1986 shows how shifting management goals could possibly change the newspaper's content. Before delving into research, Plopper noted that Gannett hired a new editor for the *Gazette*, Walker Lundy, a move the author believed was a contributing factor for the paper's new emphasis on "upbeat, local stories that attract reader interest" (p. 59). Looking at pages from the *Gazette* in 1985, a year before its sale, and in 1989, three years after its sale, Plopper (1991) found that the percentage of space devoted to local coverage increased, while national and international news decreased; and the daily proportion of space given to features nearly doubled.

Studying the relationship between ownership structure and management practices at newspapers reveals how the end results of organizational goals might manifest in daily news coverage. The editors hired by larger ownership companies might fit a different

mold than the editors hired by smaller companies, and their news coverage priorities will diverge. Companies that emphasize profit margins might also be more driven to manage publications in a way that minimizes costs, either by laying off staff or consolidating resources and sharing news content among newsrooms.

### **Current Regulations Are Not Strong Enough to Keep Individual Media Companies From Expanding Their Influence Over Economic and Political Discourse**

Media scholars have brought forward their concerns about the potential impact media ownership concentration can have on democracy. Studies on owners of increasingly large media companies suggest that individuals have become more influential in decision making and determining the editorial stance of publications (Arsenault & Castells, 2008; Bagdikian, 2004; Couture, 2013).

One of the biggest media companies in the world is Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation. Arsenault and Castells (2008) wrote an exhaustive case study that demonstrates the institutional conditions that have allowed media companies such as News Corporation to reach their level of influence. Arsenault and Castells (2008) hypothesize that owners of media conglomerates have extraordinary control as gatekeepers and agenda setters, and relaxed media ownership restrictions have exacerbated this effect. The researchers sought to analyze the relationship between media ownership and power in a society of political, social and economic networks. They found that Murdoch acts as a direct gatekeeper for NewsCorp, and he shifts the company's owned news outlets' coverage in a way that directly benefits its economic interests (Arsenault & Castells, 2008). This article serves as an extreme example of ownership

influence on editorial content, but it paints a broader picture for the potential impact media concentration can have on democratic processes.

In his study of the effects of media concentration, Couture (2013) outlines the history and current state of ownership concentration in New Brunswick's print media, specifically with regards to the editorial practices of Brunswick News Inc. Couture hypothesizes that the proliferation of the Irving group's holdings in print media as well as industrial sectors eviscerates competitiveness and severely handicaps New Brunswick residents' awareness of relevant provincial issues of public concern. He uses the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI) to quantify the progress New Brunswick's media concentration and provides a case study of the Brunswick News-owned *Telegraph-Journal's* anti-competitive behavior and editorial influence to qualitatively demonstrate evidence of the effects of print media's concentration. The application of the HHI demonstrated the severity of New Brunswick's print media concentration, and an overview of the *Telegraph-Journal's* notable omissions for various controversial issues, such as logging and pollution, showed the immense gatekeeping power BNI holds over information pertaining to provincial issues that impact Irving businesses. In addition, Couture analyzed how Canada's regulatory checks failed to quell BNI's influence. Antitrust laws were found mainly to address economic factors rather than those of diversity and influence, and when BNI was found guilty of running a monopoly, that charge was appealed and overturned (Couture 2013).

*The New Media Monopoly* is a critique on the modern state of corporate control over media enterprises. Bagdikian (2004) laments the concentration of media power by what he calls an "oligarchy" (p. 5) of media conglomerates and illustrates the various

ways business interests have pervaded and corrupted the media industry. He argues that corporate media have abandoned the American public and democratic ideals in favor of practices that perpetuate the status quo for the benefit of media elites. He uses historical methods and case studies to compile a vivid portrait of the conditions that led to the state of the mass media in the 21st century. His scathing criticism of media ownership consolidation has uncovered the monopolistic practices of media giants and shown the detrimental effects media concentration has had on quality and variety of content, editorial autonomy and other variables factoring into news operations (Bagdikian, 2004).

The purpose of Iosifidis' (2010) article is to criticize the units used to measure media diversity and pluralism. He argues that diversity is both an economic and social phenomenon, and he hypothesizes that because so many of the current metrics of media concentration focus are economic measures, they fail to effectively address the impacts of media mergers and expansion, in both analysis and policy. Iosifidis uses a qualitative comparative analysis to examine a variety of diversity measurements in the U.S. and Europe — the United Kingdom in particular — and evaluate how those measurements translate into policy and whether those policies address both economic and noneconomic plurality variables. He finds that deregulation of media markets has led to a higher consolidation of voices and that policy limits on audience share have largely failed to quell the influence of media conglomerates (Iosifidis, 2010). However, he posits that audience exposure does not necessarily translate into audience influence, so in order to truly evaluate media pluralism, there has to be a measurement of the degree to which concentration restricts information flow.

While Iosifidis (2010) draws up restriction of information flow as a criterion to address ownership concentration, Barnett (2009) seeks to understand whether regulations adequately work in favor of public interest. His study looks on the crisis in journalism funding and its impact on diversity of voices in the public sphere amid the Great Recession, focusing on European models in particular. He presents qualitative case studies of 1) the effectiveness of the 2003 Communications Act in addressing the business aspects confronting diversity and 2) initiatives and arguments around structural changes in ownership in the UK to promote diversity. Barnett found that the UK's efforts to regulate media ownership largely addressed economic variables but it failed to adequately define a test for the public interest. In studying various ownership models of media outlets, Barnett (2009) illustrates an inverse relationship between investment in long-term journalistic vision and pressure on publications to produce a profit for its private shareholders. This article encapsulates the current financial state of media and suggests effective models of ownership that allows news outlets to effectively perform its roles in the public interest and remain independent of editorial control.

The proliferation of newspaper chains' influence is reflected in the content, organizational motivation, and institutional framework that allows them to reach such expansive influence. As reflected in this literature, large newspaper chains' influence on editorial pages, managerial practices, and organizational goals add up to a noticeably different type of news publication than their independent or family-owned counterparts. A main criticism of chain-owned newspapers that is readily apparent, however, is their resulting acculturation. Bagdikian's (2004) case study of the Santa Fe *New Mexican* after its sale to Gannett reveals that a curtailment of local coverage and increase of syndicated

material brought on by pressure to increase profits robbed the paper of diversity of voices and identity. The shift in motives of newspaper organizations toward churning out higher profit margins has in essence devalued products that are meant to serve local communities.

### **Current Study**

In this research paper, I examined the relationship between newspaper chain size and frequency of original news coverage. I tested four hypotheses:

*H1: Newspapers owned by larger chains will have smaller proportions of original news stories on their front pages than newspapers owned by companies that own fewer properties.*

*H2: Chain size will have a smaller effect on the proportion of original news content in newspapers with larger Sunday circulation sizes.*

*H3: Newspaper chains with higher concentrations of ownership in a state will have a smaller proportion of original news stories compared to newspapers with lower statewide concentrations of ownership.*

*H4: States with higher average concentrations of ownership will have a smaller statewide proportion of original news content than states with lower average concentrations of ownership.*

## **Research Method**

For this study, I conducted a quantitative content analysis (QCA) of the front pages of two separate samples of U.S. newspapers. A QCA is appropriate for testing my hypotheses because news articles are the unit of analysis for determining the frequency of original news stories across different parent company sizes. While a QCA can be tricky in communications studies that require some qualitative interpretation to categorize language, the current research project specifically examines bylines — an area with relatively little to no room for interpretation (Rourke and Anderson, 2004). And when used in narrow contexts such as this, QCA, “is sound, the analysis leaves little room for counter interpretation, and the results of descriptive studies are valuable” (Rourke and Anderson, 2004, p. 15).

### **Samples and summary statistics**

Newspaper samples were taken from a list of publications that upload front pages to Newseum.org, an online repository that displays up-to-date front pages from more than 800 newspapers around the world, including more than 450 in the U.S. Front pages were accessed and downloaded as PDFs each day of the study period. For the purposes of this study, tabloid-style and non-English newspapers were excluded from analysis. All of the newspapers sampled were traditional broadsheet newspapers that included headlines, bylines and body text for news stories on the front page.

Two samples were used in this study. The first was a nationwide random sample of 121 broadsheet newspapers. This first sample was used to test the first two hypotheses about the general relationship of ownership size and proportion of original content. The second was an exhaustive sample of 142 newspapers taken from a random selection of 10



states that listed at least five newspapers in Newseum's repository. This second sample was used to test all four hypotheses. The states included in Sample 2 are as follows: Florida, Georgia, Massachusetts, Maryland, Kentucky, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Texas. Once samples had been selected, newspapers were categorized according to state, owner, group size, and Sunday circulation size. Owners and circulation sizes were recorded according to data from Editor & Publisher's *Newspaper Data Book* and the Media Intelligence Center, an online database curated by the Alliance for Audited Media. Each of these resources are standard reference materials in scholarly mass communications research. Group size was compiled according to information from each company's website.

**National sample (Sample 1).**

Sample 1 is comprised of 121 daily broadsheet newspapers from 40 different states randomly selected from a list of 459 newspapers. Random values were assigned to each newspaper from a list of 459 United States newspapers, and the first 125 were selected and then narrowed down to exclude tabloid and non-English newspapers. The average Sunday circulation for this sample was 44,356.08, with a maximum value of 332,296, minimum of 3,066, and a standard deviation of 54,039.54 (Table 1). Forty-one parent companies appeared in this sample, with varying levels of representation throughout (Table 2). The average group size was 54.92, with a maximum of 146, minimum of 1, and a standard deviation of 45.87. PDFs of the front pages for newspapers in this sample were each day downloaded over a seven-day period in January 2019.

<b>Table 1: Summary of group size and Sunday circulation in Sample 1</b>							
	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard deviation</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>Max</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Range</b>
<b>Group size</b>	120	54.92	45.87	32.00	146	1	145
<b>Sunday circulation</b>	118	44,356.08	54,039.54	22,973.00	332,296	3,066	329,230

A study that compared the quality of page design between newspapers produced from design hubs and newspapers that employed in-house design took a complete sample (N = 453) of U.S. front pages from Newseum.org (Haught and Morris, 2018). The researchers excluded non-broadsheet newspapers as part of their parameters. While Haught and Morris (2018) analyzed all newspapers on one day, this study took smaller samples and analyzed front-page stories over the course of several days. Spanning the period of this study over multiple days helped mitigate the effects of big news stories dominating national headlines on any given day. Week-long samples have been taken in previous comparative studies of newspaper content, and having the continuity of entire news weeks in this sample helps account for newspapers that have truncated publishing schedules (i.e., fewer than seven print editions in a week) and differing content types for weekends and weekdays (Plopper, 1991; Hallock, 2004; Sjøvaag, 2013).

<b>Table 2: Company appearances in Sample 1</b>	
<b>Company</b>	<b>Number of appearances in Sample 1</b>
Gannett	28
BH Media, Digital First Media	9
Advance Publications, Lee Enterprises	8
GateHouse, McClatchy	7
Tribune Publishing Co.	4
CNHI, Hearst, Paxton Media Group	3
Adams Publishing Group, Capital City Pre	2
Other (N = 25)	1

### Statewide sample (Sample 2).

Sample 2 was taken as a way to measure the influence of individual newspaper chains within individual states. A similar approach was taken by Hollifield (1999)<sup>1</sup> in a study that compared editorials in newspapers owned by Thomson with newspapers owned by other companies.<sup>1</sup> For the current research, front pages were gathered from 142 daily newspapers in 10 states. States with more than five newspapers in Newseum's repository were assigned a random number, and all the newspapers from each state were added to a sample until the total number of newspapers had surpassed 125. Sunday circulation data was available for 136 newspapers in this sample, of which the mean Sunday circulation was 61,613.26, with a standard deviation of 141,547.97. The largest Sunday circulation was 1,169,402, and the smallest was 3,066, a range of 1,166,336. The average group size was 63.51, with a maximum of 145, minimum of 1, range of 145, and a standard deviation of 51.65. PDFs of the front pages for newspapers in this sample were each day downloaded over a seven-day period from late January to early February 2019.

**Table 3: Summary of group size and Sunday circulation in Sample 2**

	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Median	Max	Min	Range
<b>Group size</b>	14	63.51	51.65	32.00	146	1	145
<b>Sunday circulation</b>	13 6	61,613.2 6	141,547.9 7	23,388.0 0	1,169,40 2	3,06 6	1,166,33 6

Front-page articles were the units of analysis in this study. For each front page, a tally was taken of the total number of news stories and the total number of original news stories. An article was only considered *original content* if its byline indicates it was

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<sup>1</sup> The study by Hollifield (1999) limited the scope of its sample to Indiana, Ohio, and Pennsylvania because those states had the highest number of Thomson holdings in the United States.

written by a member of the newspaper's staff. In cases where bylines did not make the author's affiliation immediately clear (e.g., the reporter is identified using a companywide email address), more information on the reporter was found either from the byline listed on the web version of that article or the reporter's profile. In the period of study for Sample 1, 2,699 news articles were analyzed from a total of 847 front pages; for Sample 2, 3,158 news articles were analyzed from a total of 994 front pages.

### **Independent variables**

*Group size* is defined as the number of daily newspapers under the purview of an individual company. Information on the owner of each newspaper and the number of newspapers owned by each chain was procured from a combination of the newspapers' websites, the companies' websites and the reference materials used to find each newspaper's circulation size, the Media Intelligence Center and the *Newspaper Data Book*.

*Concentration of ownership by a newspaper chain* ( $C_O$ ) is defined as the number of newspapers owned by a company in a state divided by the total number of newspapers sampled from that state. It is calculated by dividing the number of company-owned newspapers by the total number of newspapers in a state. This can be easily expressed as the following equation:

$$C_O = \frac{\text{Number of newspapers owned by company}}{\text{Total number of newspapers in state}}$$

The *average concentration of ownership* ( $C_A$ ) for a state is defined as the sum of each company's  $C_O$  divided by the number of parent companies  $n$  represented in that state.

$$C_A = \frac{CO1+CO2...+CO_n}{n}$$

**Dependent variables**

*Proportion of original news stories (P<sub>O</sub>)* is defined as the total number of original news stories divided by the total number of news stories in the sample.

**Control variables**

All newspapers in each sample were analyzed for the same time period. I also controlled for frequency of publication (only daily newspapers were included), type of publication (tabloids were excluded), and language of publication (all non-English newspapers were excluded).

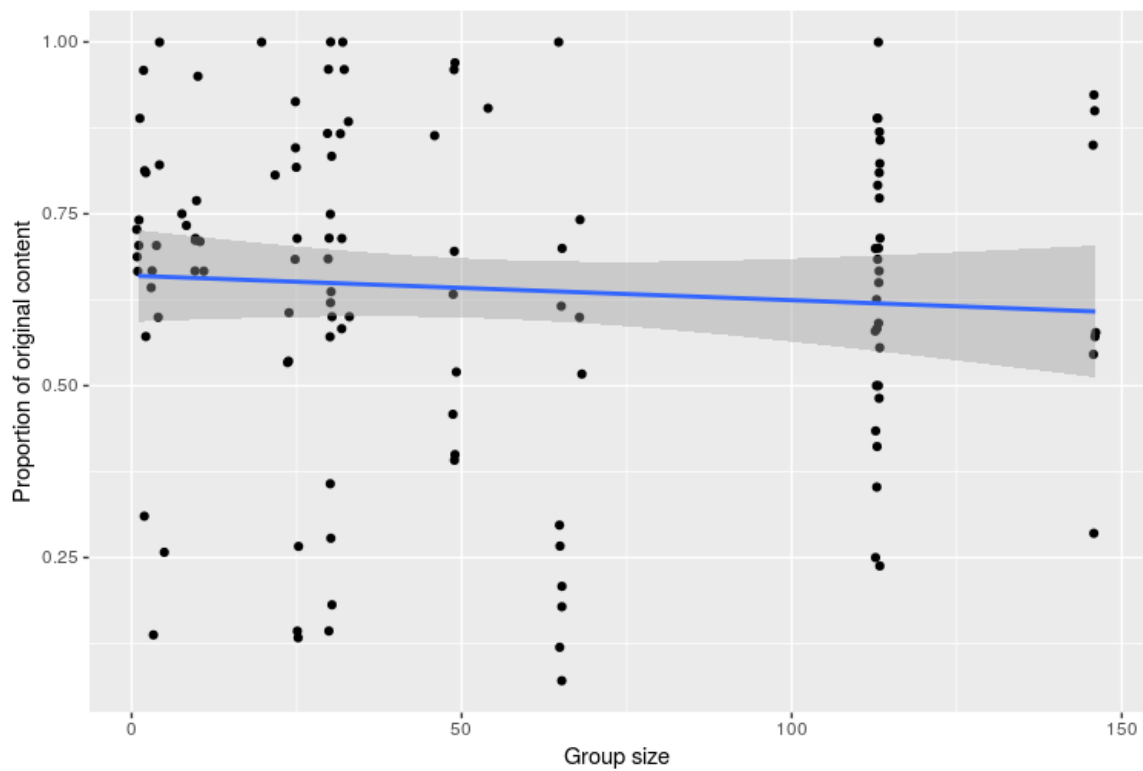
## Results

This study examines how differences in continuous independent variables might result in changes among continuous dependent variables, so linear regression models were used to test the significance of findings.. All analyses were conducted in R (R Core Team, 2018). Results were tested at the  $p < .05$  level of significance.

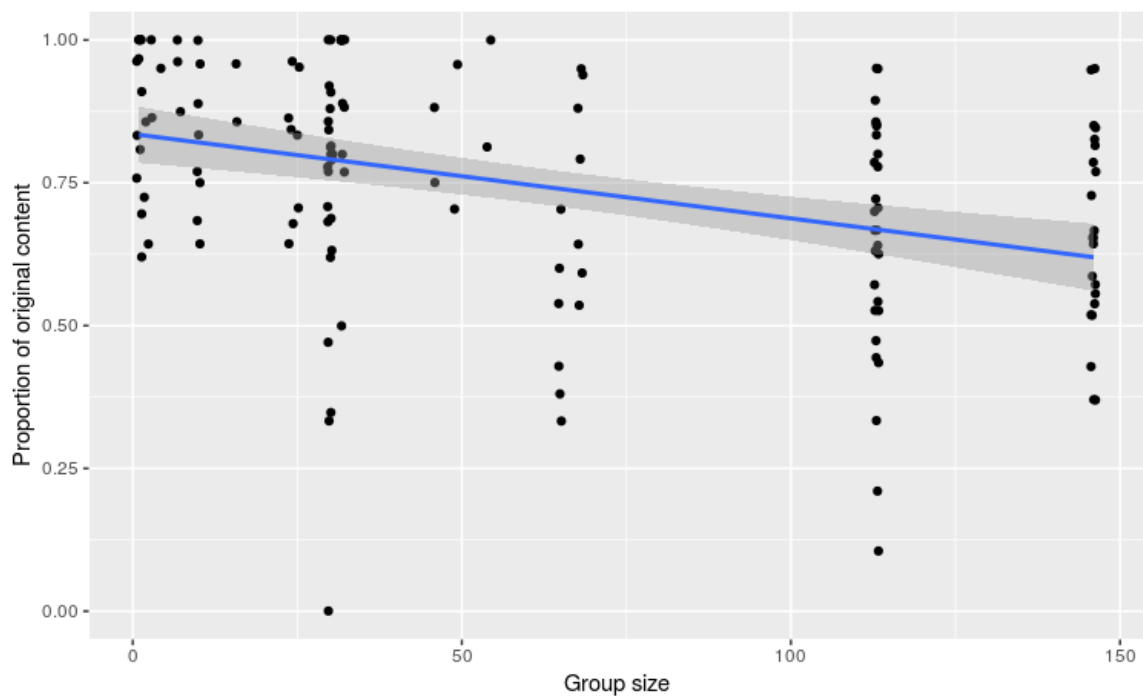
The first hypothesis posited that newspapers owned by larger chains will have smaller proportions of original news stories on their front pages than newspapers owned by companies that own fewer properties. The relationship between  $P_O$  and group size showed strong significance ( $p < .001$ ) in the statewide sample (Sample 2), but no significant relationship was found in the national sample (Sample 1). The model still showed a generally negative trend between group size and  $P_O$  in both datasets, which provides support for the first hypothesis — newspapers owned by larger chains are less likely to have original news content on their front pages than newspapers owned by smaller companies (Table 4).

<b>Table 4: Interaction between group size and <math>P_O</math></b>		
<b>Interaction</b>	<b>Estimate (std. error) [S1]</b>	<b>Estimate (std. error) [S2]</b>
$P_O \sim$ group size	-0.00036 (0.00048)	-0.0015 (0.00031)***
Multiple r-squared	0.0048	0.14

Group size vs. proportion of original content [Sample 1]



Group size vs. proportion of original content [Sample 2]



The second hypothesis posited that chain size will have a smaller effect on the proportion of original news content in newspapers with larger Sunday circulation sizes. In Sample 2, there was significant support ( $p < .05$ ) for the second hypothesis. The same model applied to Sample 1 did not result in a significant interaction. However, the distribution for Sunday circulation demonstrated a positive skew from the relatively small number of large metro newspapers as compared with the number of smaller rural newspapers. Taking the square root of Sunday circulation sizes created a more univariate distribution, albeit one that still displayed a moderate positive skew. The square root of Sunday circulation still showed a significant influence on the effect of group size on  $P_O$  in Sample 2 ( $p < .05$ ), but there was still no significant interaction for this model found in Sample 1. Regardless, the significant relationship that was consistently demonstrated in Sample 2 is evidence enough to reject the null hypothesis.

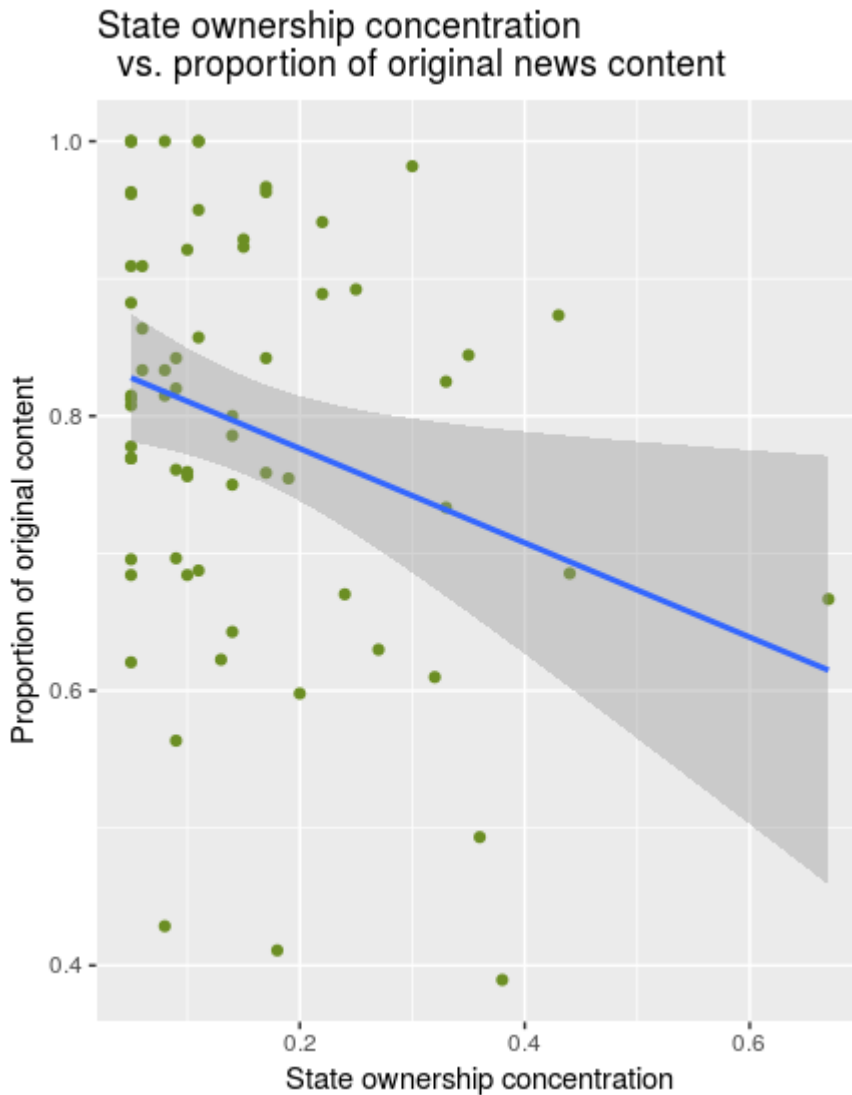
<b>Table 5: Interaction between <math>P_O</math>, group size, and <math>\text{sqrt}(\text{Sunday circulation})</math></b>		
<b>Interaction</b>	<b>Estimate (std. error) [S1]</b>	<b>Estimate (std. error) [S2]</b>
$P_O \sim \text{group size}$	-7.079e-04 (6.21e-04)	-1.86e-03 (3.92e-04)***
$P_O \sim \text{Sunday circulation}$	5.46e-07 (5.44e-07)	1.20e-07 (1.21e-07)
$P_O \sim \text{group size: Sunday circulation}$	7.72e-09 (8.55e-09)	1.76e-08 (7.061e-09)*
Multiple r-squared	0.05523	0.1898
$P_O \sim \text{group size}$	-1.28e-03 (1.011e-03)	-2.52e-03 (6.56e-04)***
$P_O \sim \text{sqrt}(\text{Sunday circulation})$	2.52e-04 (3.0030e-04)	9.83e-05 (1.23e-04)
$P_O \sim \text{group size: sqrt}(\text{Sunday Circulation})$	4.78e-06 (4.64e-06)	7.086e-06 (3.21e-06)*
Multiple r-squared	0.060	0.19

There is significant support for the third hypothesis ( $p < .05$ ), which predicted that newspaper chains with higher concentrations of ownership in individual states would



tend to display smaller proportions of original news content among the newspapers in those states (Table 6). Among the newspaper ownership companies that displayed the highest proportions of intrastate original content ( $P_O \geq 0.90$ ), only one company held more than two newspapers in the sample in that state. Parallel to that model — but not hypothesized — there is an extremely significant ( $p < .001$ ) negative relationship between the number of newspapers a company owns in a state and the proportion of original content among that company's newspapers.

<b>Table 6: Interaction between <math>P_{O-State}</math> and <math>C_O</math> in Sample 2</b>	
<b>Interaction</b>	<b>Estimate (std. error)</b>
$P_{O-State} \sim C_O$	-0.34 (0.15)*
Multiple r-squared	0.079



Without controlling for the number of newspapers in a state, this study does not lend support ( $p = .56$ ) to the fourth hypothesis, that higher average statewide concentrations of ownership ( $C_A$ ) are linked to smaller overall proportions of original news content for that state ( $P_{O-State}$ ). Larger concentrations of ownership were typically found in states with fewer newspapers overall, most likely because even two instances of the same company within a state with only six newspapers overall instantly creates an ownership concentration of 0.33. However, the relationship between these variables is

still not statistically significant ( $p = 0.17$ ) when the threshold for newspapers in a state is increased to 10.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to find out whether there is a relationship between the size of newspaper chains and the amount of original content found on newspaper front pages. The results generally indicate that newspapers owned by larger newspaper chains have lower proportions of original reporting on their front pages, and that effect carries over in states where individual chains have a high concentration of ownership. It was not shown that states with higher *average* concentrations of ownership have lower proportions of original content overall, which is to say that companies with overlapping footprints might not employ the same strategies with regards to staffing, news coverage, or production. Previous studies on chain ownership's effect on news content have largely focused on editorial similarities among newspapers within a chain and changes in editorial content after a newspaper has been bought by a chain (Akhavan-Majid, Rife & Gopinath, 1991; Plopper, 1991; Hollifield, 1999; Hallock, 2004; Sjøvaag, 2014). This study adds to a robust field of research by looking at a variable — original news coverage — that gives insight into how company size interacts with newsroom resources.

The outcomes observed here can be used as an illustration of the effects of corporate ownership on the volume of original content in daily newspapers. Print ownership companies have reacted to continuous years of falling revenue with staff cutbacks and lowered investment in newsrooms, and, unsurprisingly, the end result is a smaller output of original news among the newspapers owned by these large companies relative to newspapers under smaller, more locally-based companies (or those bought out by a sole investor). Chains that concentrated ownership in one geographic area were shown to have less diversity of content in those regions. A shift toward efficiency rather

than plurality in reporting means that overall, there are fewer journalists with their eyes on the same coverage area. When one newspaper chain shares the same content among all of its properties in a region, an uncertain amount of nuance and diversity is lost in that news ecosystem. The voices represented in one chain's syndicated piece are duplicated across every newspaper that relies on that bureau's coverage, and individual publications lose the power to craft narratives that include marginalized voices that are pertinent to their specific readership when they defer to whatever news content is syndicated across their news networks. Furthermore, cutting staff in the interest of increasing profit margins and clearing perceived redundancies in coverage means a diminished ability to hold those in power to account. It is nigh impossible for a newsroom with a skeleton crew of reporters to produce original, investigative journalism at the same volume as a newsroom where investment in content and staff is a top priority.

Over the course of this study, there were some alarming observations of newspapers from distinct cities becoming virtual clones of one another as a result of chains stretching shared resources across its publications. The newspapers of Southern California News Group (SCNG), a collection of newspapers owned by Digital First Media, stand out as victims of this practice.<sup>2</sup> These newspapers were clearly made from a template, often sharing the same layout and multiple news stories. In some cases, the flag was the only noticeable difference between front pages from two different newspapers. SCNG is an indicator of what happens when chains cut news staffs down to the bone and outsource production as a shortcut to efficiency. None of the SCNG newspapers observed

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<sup>2</sup> The nationwide sample included five newspapers from Southern California News Group.

had any semblance of local identity that set them apart from their sibling publications — occasionally a story would be published on the front page that was of specific interest to the city of publication, but that was more often the exception than the rule.

SCNG is an extreme example of consolidation on a large scale. A more common approach chains took to consolidate resources was to assign one newspaper as a sort of central hub for state government news — one newspaper's staff would report on activity in the capital and distribute the stories to other newspapers owned by the same chain. That strategy was evident among McClatchy newspapers in particular — the chain had centered statewide coverage around capitals in states such as California, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Washington state. McClatchy was not alone in this practice. Other examples observed over the course of this study included Digital First Media's use of the *Boston Herald*, BH Media's use of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, and Gannett's use of the *Tallahassee Democrat* for state news distribution in Massachusetts, Virginia, and Florida, respectively.

To be clear, owning a newspaper in a capital city does not necessarily indicate that other newspapers under the same ownership in that state will suffer from a lack of original content; it only suggests that that chain might decide to focus its state government reporting through one newspaper's staff. Some models share state coverage between two or more newspapers — Hearst splits Texas government reporting between the *Houston Chronicle* and the *San Antonio Express-News*, and McClatchy divides Kansas news coverage between the *Wichita Eagle* and the *Kansas City Star*. In many respects, it makes economic sense to handle statewide news coverage this way. State government reporting endeavors are usually taken on by metro newspapers with greater

resources, both in terms of staff numbers and travel costs. Having one big newspaper share its original statehouse reporting is likely a more desirable alternative for companies than having its smaller newspapers pull their state news stories from the Associated Press.

This study incorporated two different samples — one in which the newspapers were selected from a list of all newspapers and another that was built from all newspapers within a random sample of individual states. While all the hypotheses were measurable within the statewide sample, the national sample was meant to test the effect of chain size on original content absent of the possible effects of regional concentration of ownership. On the surface, there should not have been much difference between the two samples, but the results told a different story: Both samples were used to test the first two hypotheses, but there was only support for these hypotheses in the statewide sample.

There are three potential explanations for the discrepancy in results. First, the statewide sample (N = 142) was 17.4% larger than the national sample (N = 121). A larger sample gives the opportunity for a more diverse representation of circulation sizes and ownership types. Second, the states that comprised the statewide sample were required to have more than five newspapers to allow room for internal analysis. A higher number of daily newspapers within a state might suggest a more populous state in the first place. Out of the ten states included in that sample, half of them were in the upper quartile of population size (Texas, Florida, New York, Georgia, and North Carolina), and all but one, New Mexico, were above the median state population, according to 2018 estimates (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). The national sample includes representation from newspapers in states in the bottom quartile of population size — specifically in Idaho,

Hawaii, Maine, and Wyoming — a feature the statewide sample does not have. A third difference worth noting between the two samples is the amount of times certain chains appear in each sample (Table 7). In the national sample, which failed to reject the null hypotheses, there were only seven GateHouse newspapers; that is compared to 22 GateHouse newspapers in the statewide sample. GateHouse is the largest chain found in this study, and its aggregate mean proportion of original content between both samples ( $P_O = .67$ ) is below the aggregate mean ( $P_O = .70$ ) for all newspapers in both samples. Thus, a relatively small GateHouse representation in the national sample compared to the chain's actual size could have been an influencing factor.

### **Limitations and future directions**

While this study showed support for a hypothesized phenomenon, it had its limitations. First, the study design was limited to only measuring the content from newspaper front pages. The news on the front page is just a small portion of the total contents of a newspaper for obvious reasons — it excludes all inside news pages and all other sections, such as sports or business. The nature of the front page may also skew results one way or the other, depending on the newspaper's scope of coverage. A large regional newspaper — a highly influential voice and arbiter of newsworthiness in its coverage area — may be more inclined to include national news stories up front, whereas small local newspapers might place higher importance on local content and relegate state and national wire stories to its inside pages. Researchers with more resources who would want to explore a more exhaustive study of this sort might consider either ordering entire back issues from newspapers or analyzing newspapers' websites instead. Tabloid-style newspapers were excluded as a result of this study's design — they usually do not have



any byline information for front-page stories. If entire newspaper issues or websites were the subject of analysis, then tabloids such as the *New York Post* or the *Boston Herald* could have been studied. Additionally, early deadlines and space constraints affect what can be included in a print newspaper, but those factors do not apply to news websites, which give news outlets the ability to constantly cycle content and give room to an unlimited number of articles.

This study did not have a budget for expenditures, so using Newseum.org, a free service that only displays front pages, was an option that allowed for easy access to a wide variety of newspapers. A potential limitation of sampling newspapers from Newseum is that it is not a complete collection of daily newspapers — there are roughly 450 front pages from newspapers in the U.S. on any given day, but that is only about a third of the total number of daily newspapers in the country (*Editor & Publisher*, 2018).<sup>3</sup> Based on representation within samples, it seemed like certain large companies were more likely to upload front pages to Newseum than others. For instance, the two largest chains in this study — Gannett and GateHouse — varied significantly in their likelihood to upload front pages to Newseum.org. Gannett’s newspapers, no matter the size, are nearly universally uploaded to Newseum.org; on the other hand, several GateHouse newspapers are not shared on Newseum.org — two notable absentees that would have been included this study were the *Florida Times-Union* of Jacksonville, Florida, and the *Lubbock Avalanche-Journal* of Lubbock, Texas. According to Newseum.org, uploading front pages is entirely voluntary, and some newspapers may not have the technological

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<sup>3</sup> *Editor & Publisher’s* newspaper database listed 1,277 daily newspapers in the United States in 2018.

capability to transmit front pages in the required format (Newseum, 2019). This technological restriction might privilege larger publications with more resources and better access to up-to-date software and output settings.

This study only recorded data on news articles, thereby excluding photographs and infographics. The use of file photographs with newer articles and the lack of attribution commonly found in mugshots and teaser photographs were the main considerations when excluding photos from analysis. Future studies of this sort might consider including all pieces of content, as there were several instances where publications used a standalone feature image as the main element on the front page — even though these photographs dominated the front page and were often shot by staff photographers, they did not contribute to that newspaper’s original content total unless there was an accompanying article. But researchers who include photos in studies on original content would be advised to set firm parameters on which photos would qualify for analysis.

**Table 7: Ownership groups and average  $P_O$**

Owner	Group size	$P_O$ (overall)	Number of Observations		
			Total	National sample	Statewide sample
Capital City Press	3	0.39	2	2	0
Digital First Media	65	0.39	13	8	5
McClatchy	30	0.54	19	7	12
Advance Publications	25	0.64	11	8	3
Gannett	113	0.64	57	28	29
GateHouse	146	0.67	29	7	22
Lee Enterprises	49	0.67	10	8	2
A.H. Belo Corporation	2	0.68	2	0	2
WEHCO Media	10	0.70	2	1	1
Hearst	24	0.71	8	3	5

CNHI	68	0.72	10	3	7
Forum Communications	33	0.74	2	2	9
Times Publishing Co.	1	0.77	2	1	1
Index-Journal Co.	1	0.78	2	1	1
Adams Publishing Group	32	0.79	4	2	2
Tribune Publishing Co.	10	0.80	9	4	5
BH Media	30	0.80	19	8	11
Cox Media Group	4	0.83	2	1	1
Ogden Newspapers	46	0.83	3	1	2
Evening Post Industries	10	0.84	3	1	2
Paxton Media Group	32	0.87	11	3	8
Landmark Community Newspapers	54	0.91	3	1	2
Southern Newspapers	16	0.91	2	0	2
Oahu Publications Inc.	4	0.91	2	2	0
Southern Community Newspapers	7	0.94	2	0	2

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