

*Excerpts from*

**Measuring Metropolitan  
Newspaper Pullback  
and its Effects on  
Political Participation**

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**The entire dissertation can be found online at  
<http://conservancy.umn.edu/handle/11299/182213>**

### **Abstract**

For nearly half a century, mass media research has understood that news content that is conflict-oriented is more likely to appear in news outlets produced in structurally heterogeneous communities than in structurally homogeneous communities. For individuals living in homogeneous communities, their ability to find news about their own communities in regional-level media — especially metropolitan-based newspapers — has meant that they had access to conflict-oriented news. However, decades of financial pressures have weakened regional metros' ability to continue to distribute to and cover non-metropolitan communities, especially the structurally homogeneous communities most reliant on a regional source for conflict-oriented news. When metro newspapers pull back distribution and coverage of non-metro communities, residents are expected to display lower levels of political knowledge, and preliminary studies have suggested lower political participation as well. This dissertation uses computer-assisted content analysis and multilevel statistical modeling to add nuance to the understanding of structural pluralism and metropolitan coverage, as well as specifically support the assumption that news content about specific communities contributes to voter turnout in those communities.

## Chapter 6

### Discussion

This project examined two aspects of the relationship between metropolitan news coverage and communities. The first was to test different approaches to determining what types of community characteristics were predictors of coverage by the metro newspaper. The second aspect was measuring one presumed effect of community coverage: that it would lead to increased political participation in the form of voting in communities. Additionally, an investigation into whether different types of content — specifically hard news versus soft news — would change any of these relationships was produced. Two studies were conducted, one in Minnesota, and a confirmatory study in Oregon and Colorado. In the end, there is support that certain community characteristics lead to more coverage by a metro, and even clearer evidence that there is a positive relationship between metro newspaper coverage of specific communities and voting in those communities. Finally, it also appears that the type of content does matter in these relationships, with different patterns and effects for hard news content versus looking at all the content in the newspaper. However, the two-study design also makes one other aspect clear: Context matters. Different newspapers in different states with different overall characteristics exhibit different patterns in these relationships.

Generally speaking, Minnesota's population matches the educated, literate, civically engaged public journalists envision as their audience and democratic theory envisions as the electorate. In this sense, Colorado and Oregon are more complex locations, particularly when it comes to the ideal public for the relationship between journalism and democracy. As a whole state, Colorado's population looks similar to the overall population in Minnesota, but this masks between-community differences. In Colorado, communities are more sorted by demographic characteristics — wealthy communities and poor communities, educated communities and non-educated communities, and English-speaking communities and Spanish-speaking communities. These particular traits put wrinkles in assumptions. A population that has lower overall levels of education would be assumed to perhaps not have the capacity to fully participate in consuming complex news information and incorporating it into the political process. (This is not to say that these communities are uniformed or politically docile, but mass media may not be the method for them to acquire information.) Language complexity

could also be problematic, especially when the newspaper in question is written in English and the presumed audience speaks Spanish, or, on the reverse, the sources who have the information for news coverage speak Spanish and the journalists who would synthesize that information into news speak English. Oregon falls somewhere in between Minnesota's homogeneity and Colorado's heterogeneity. It also tends to fall in between the two when it comes to the models in this study. We see stronger and more effects in Minnesota, weaker and fewer effects in Colorado, and a state roughly between in Oregon.

This study looked at pluralism as a route to creating news, and universal effects across contexts were not found. Future studies may choose to include variables that control for population complexity and those that capture the limitations of the audience's access to the news product or the journalist's access to news sources. The sticky situation of what a community is and where it actually exists may also be complicating data in Colorado and Oregon. Both of the states have large, somewhat amorphous unincorporated communities, as well as large areas of land with low population density referred to as "places" by the population and the Census. This does not necessarily mean that references to those places are always consistent in news copy. Many are suburbs on the fringes of metropolitan areas, and could conceivably be lumped in with other areas in coverage. Fewer official institutions of government in these areas may also mean there's less news, given journalism's reliance on official sources (Tuchman, 1978). This situation creates a dilemma for analyses of this type: These places could be eliminated from analyses, thus perhaps providing a "cleaner" set of data, but their elimination would mean assumptions were being made about a state without including a significant portion of its population. . . . Finally, it should be noted that Minnesota does not lack issues with inequality, educational systems, or other elements that go into the prescriptions for an ideal democratic state, or with shifting conceptions of community, but in terms of finding an environment where the ingredients for good functioning of news and good functioning of journalism would be found, it is perhaps one of the more likely choices.

Minnesota also provided a clearer set of data for political participation. The length of the voting records available and the precision with which those precincts align with community boundaries meant that there was less assumed statistical noise in the Minnesota models. It is perhaps not surprising then that those models provide a clearer picture of the relationships involved in this study. . . . It is therefore possible,

particularly given the limited amount of voting data available in Colorado and Oregon, and some of the statistical noise created by their particular contexts, that modeling more communities in these states might lead to results more typical of Minnesota's without risking invalidating those results by swamping the model with data.

To return to what is apparent in this data and what is probably the most socially negative prediction about communities and news, money does matter in Minnesota, but perhaps not in a socially negative way. It is true that a rise in median household income in a community predicts more overall coverage of that community in the *Star Tribune*, but the same does not hold true for news-only content. From the perspective of non-metropolitan communities, this is somewhat good news. According to the ideas and work done regarding political participation and knowledge gap, individuals need information about issues and events that impact them. When individuals are aware of conflicts in their community, they are not only more informed voters, they are more likely to have the self-efficacy and confidence in the system to motivate them to vote (Moy et al., 2004; McLeod et al., 1996; Kwak et al., 2005; Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002; Schmitt-Beck & Mackenrodt, 2010; Galston, 2001). The expectation is the type of news that can support this mechanism is the conflict-oriented, public affairs-oriented content found in the news sections of the metropolitan newspaper. In Minnesota, there's no effect of income on the production of this type of news for communities, which means that while less affluent communities may be disappearing in general from the newspaper, they are still being covered in the way that counts the most for societal outcomes.

This is a finding supported in the other states, as well. Other than an almost negligible effect of income in Oregon, none of the states seem to direct news content to more affluent communities. In fact, all of the hypotheses about what types of communities will receive greater attention from the metro newspaper are not supported or more weakly supported when only news is considered. Population size matters in Minnesota and Oregon, age pluralism matters in Colorado, and distance in that state means that some of the communities farther out experience smaller effects on certain relationships than they might have expected had they been nearer. The all-content models show more of the patterns predicted by the hypotheses: Income, population, the presence of a daily newspaper and distance in Minnesota, pluralism and distance in Colorado, and the presence of a daily in Oregon. Most importantly, there is a negative effect of time

when it comes to all-content in Minnesota and Oregon that doesn't appear in the news content models. There can be no doubt that these newspapers were working with smaller staffs and budgets as the study time progressed. *The Oregonian* also cut back its distribution reach twice during the study. It would appear, though, that this affected the types of content traditionally less associated with the social impact of journalism on society and democracy. Even in Colorado, where the predicted variables had the least impact overall, those that were found in overall coverage mattered less when it came to the production of news-only community coverage. It appears that in this time of cutbacks, these news organizations put their efforts into preserving hard news coverage for communities. These newspapers produced less content overall, but levels of news community coverage stayed relatively stable throughout the process. There was some pullback for a few types of communities at the far edges of the regions, but, surprisingly, these news organizations continued to participate in their end of the social bargain.

This brings up an interesting new facet to ideas about pluralism and news production and the growth of news organizations. In Demers's (1991, 1994a, 1994b) work showing the relationships between community complexity and the growth of news organizations, the measures were largely managerial aspects of the news organizations, such as number of employees, how much education those employees had, ownership structure, profitability, and the attention to profits and revenue from different areas. The news quality measures were linked to these resource measures, either directly in assuming more and better-educated staff produced better products, or indirectly by surveying managerial staff or community members about the levels and types of coverage the newspaper provided. Assuming that production inputs and staffing levels lead to better journalistic quality, and that journalistic quality is tantamount to fulfilling the democratic needs of audiences is a typical belief in news organizations. As just one example, a book-length Federal Communication Commission report into the information needs of communities (Waldman, 2011) was based on the assumption that prior employment levels in traditional journalism were a proxy for adequate community coverage, and therefore, measuring reductions in journalistic staffs in different outlets would reveal where unmet information needs were growing.

The evidence in this project does not contradict that assumption, but it does provide nuance. Pluralism may very well be connected to the overall functioning of a metropolitan newspaper, but perhaps more to the side of its more entertaining and advertiser-friendly content. Some of the “soft news” sections, particularly those that descended from the “women’s pages” such as those devoted to “lifestyle,” home, or fashion, were concerted efforts to attract more advertisers to the newspaper (Yang, 1996). One of the foundational works in the relationship between communities and their news sources (Janowitz, 1967) concludes that growing complexity in communities leads to growing complexity in businesses, particularly retail, and that media in those communities create softer content to best serve those advertisers. Demers (1994a, 1994b) may be right about this relationship between pluralism and newspapers, in that community complexity leads to more market segments, which lead to more targeted businesses, which lead to more content that complements those businesses, perhaps driven by the “business-side” in newspapers, or the advertising and operations management. What may be underestimated in this theory are the strong normative beliefs about what is important in news production inherent in the “news-side” of newspapers, or the rank-and-file journalists, editors, and news management staff producing content. Throughout cutbacks, it appears decisions were made, likely from both sides, that when it came to expending resources to cover regional communities that the hard news coverage considered more important in normative journalistic beliefs would be privileged. Soft content was cut, while it appears that news content was less affected not only by time, but by considerations about what type of community was involved. In summary, there is some indication here that pluralism may require news media to serve as a site for information flow between groups, but that (hard) news may not need pluralism.

In terms of the types of communities of most concern in this study — those that are homogeneous, small, and distant-from-the metro — the drawback of all content except for news content by metro newspapers is . . . not as bad as it may initially sound. Soft news, particularly that which strengthens connections in communities like sports and obituaries, is likely important to the community. However, homogenous and/or small communities would not be assumed to be reliant on metropolitan news to provide this type of content. This type of coverage is emblematic of what is expected in locally produced small media located within these communities. If the metropolitan newspaper

continues to provide conflict-oriented public affairs coverage in the community, which is not likely appear in their own local sources, and the local sources continue to provide soft news that integrates the community, little would theoretically change for these communities.

In Colorado and Oregon, this might be assumed to be the case. None of the predictors proposed in these models really changes *The Oregonian's* production of news- only content about communities, although increasing age pluralism in Colorado is a fairly strong, significant source. This likely means that more coverage is going to communities with older residents, which isn't . . . as concerning as, for instance, steering content away from higher-poverty communities. The situation is different in Minnesota, where the metro daily pullback was first measured and proposed (Donohue et al., 1986). Population is a strong predictor . . . with smaller communities seeing less coverage (in the *Star-Tribune*) than they might expect based on other characteristics. . . .

Even when controlling for well-known contributors to voting, the number of times a community is mentioned in news content in all of the papers in this study has an influence on voting in that community. While just appearing in the newspaper has a positive influence in Minnesota, the effect is larger and apparent in all three states for inclusion in hard news content. This data supports the proposed mechanism of metropolitan media providing conflict-oriented news that informs individuals about issues within their environment, as well as fostering the belief that political participation is a way to influence these issues, which altogether forge the link between knowledge and becoming involved in the political process. The overall trend in *Star Tribune* coverage of communities — decreasing amounts as a function of distance — is mirrored in results modeling numbers of ballots cast. As towns get smaller and farther away, they cast fewer ballots than similar communities closer to the newsroom. What the Donohue et al. (1986) predicted for these communities going into the 1990s has occurred: Conflict-oriented metropolitan news coverage has diminished, presumably leading to a political knowledge gap in those communities that manifests in their participation at the polls.

Coverage has an even greater impact when it comes to hard news reporting and in off-cycle elections, when voter turnout is typically lower. This supports the overall knowledge gap-political participation hypothesis in a variety of ways. . . . While just

including communities in coverage leads to higher participation, consistent with work in community communication integration theories, coverage has more impact when it falls in the hard news category. (Also) news coverage is more important in years where national coverage is likely not as much of a factor. Off-cycle elections very rarely involve national-level issues and instead are made up of questions and elections that affect the state, county, and community. This aligns with the argument that non-metropolitan news consumers have multiple choices for national-level news, but are reliant on more local sources for information on local topics (Hindman & Beam, 2014). In communities without their own source of conflict-oriented news production, this would likely fall to the regional metropolitan newspaper, and in communities where the metro paper covers more hard news, more individuals turn up to vote.

Another unexpected result in modeling was the significant positive impact the presence of a local daily had on metropolitan coverage in Minnesota and Colorado. While this might seem reasonable from a structural pluralism standpoint — community complexity requires more news organizations producing more news to facilitate functioning — the relative weakness of pluralism predictors in the models seems to undercut this view. There is also the problem of the umbrella model of newspaper competition (Rosse, 1975; Lacy & Davenport, 1994), which holds that news organizations at different levels do not compete with each other for readers. This model was modified in this project to also explain content production, theorizing that different levels also produce different content, based on the assumed added pluralism of going up levels in the system. Metropolitan newspapers are a level above regional dailies, but in Minnesota and Oregon, those communities received significantly more metro coverage than similar communities without a daily. When it comes to coverage, the *Star Tribune* and *Oregonian* do not avoid those communities in coverage because they already have a daily, they are more attracted to them.

This result could mean a variety of things. First, it may be an indication, along with those previously discussed, that the models may need more data for clearer results. There were relatively few communities in the samples with daily newspapers and adding more may change coefficients in the model. This is somewhat unlikely given that effects were found, and those effects were quite large. This would seem to indicate they are not the result of noise in the data, but rather something distinct about these communities. A more

likely possibility is that these communities have increased pluralism, thus attracting more news coverage, but that the measure of this is not included in this data set. . . .

This finding also does not mean that the umbrella model theory of content production is necessarily wrong. If these communities with dailies are structurally pluralistic, the news organizations that cover them would likely be attracted to that content and also produce the same type of conflict-oriented reporting on them.

What is perhaps interesting in this relationship is that while news coverage by the metro in Minnesota and Oregon almost always has a positive effect on voting, the presence of a daily is only significant in one state under one condition: off-cycle voting in Minnesota when all-content is in the model. When news-only content from the *Star Tribune* is modeled, the effect of the daily disappears. This could possibly be a sign of the local dailies and the metro covering the same news in the same way, or intermedia agenda-setting (Roberts & McCombs, 1994), with one following the coverage of the other. In both cases, the news content needed to spur voting gets to the public, resulting in the same effect. The mechanism behind the influence of regional dailies on metro coverage and voting behaviors clearly deserves further investigation.

Overall, the findings in this study paint a rosier picture than was expected at its outset. While it is encouraging that the newspapers in this study were able to maintain levels of coverage mostly consistently across communities, it is important to note that in almost all cases this was in the midst of an overall decline in coverage. Even if metro newspapers remain “fair” in cutbacks, trying to minimize the impact for any one type of community or region, the entire region is still getting less coverage than it had in the past.

Following the conclusions of these models, if this trend continues, the lack of journalistic coverage in communities could contribute to declining numbers of voters. Given that the metropolitan newspaper has been one of most financially effected types of journalism in recent decades, this would seem to be the most likely conclusion.

This study would appear to be the first to include a way of measuring the differences in news content from other types of content when it comes to direct comparisons of communities in metro newspaper content over time. However, it cannot address other aspects of journalistic tone, framing, or quality. The measures in this study merely capture that a community was mentioned in content or in content placed in the areas traditionally reserved for harder news. What these stories were about, how well they

were written in a journalistically normative sense, whether they challenged or supported authority, and their complexity are not included. Given that this study looks at news production in a time of financial stress on the organizations in question, knowing who originated the community mentions is important. Information subsidies (also known as *press releases* and *media kits*) are information written in a journalistic style meant to mimic journalistic forms and typically provide information from the point of view of the creator, rather than the objective stance called for in journalistic practice. Information subsidies are more likely to be used by news organizations with budgetary restrictions who want to include news about an issue in their content, but not go to the expense of assigning journalists to gather information (Griffin & Dunwoody, 1995). In light of previous work, it could be expected that metros facing budget restrictions would be more likely to include information subsidies as content, and the methods in this study would not detect this difference. However, if this is happening it does not seem to undo the effects of news content on voting. Under the operational theory in this paper, individuals would still understand there is an issue in their area and go out to vote as part of the process of dealing with it. The real question with information subsidies would be whether this would influence how they choose to vote and how well they understand the issue at hand.

One possible confounding factor should be addressed: It is possible that events may be driving both news coverage and voting behaviors. Communities that experience controversial issues of debate or events that drive individuals to act may draw both the attention of journalists and motivate residents to go to the polls. This potential variable would be difficult to incorporate into cross-sectional longitudinal analysis designs, but could become possible as technology and methods continue to evolve. This limitation, as well as those already addressed, should be incorporated into future lines of research.

This project supports previous ideas in some ways and contradicts them in others. Because these are relatively new methods that more precisely measure concepts than was possible in the past, this precision could be expected to add complexity to established theoretical relationships. When Donohue et al. (1986) suggested that metropolitan newspapers were pulling back from non-metropolitan communities and that this would have an impact on civic life in those communities, it was not feasible to actually measure journalistic content across time. Large-scale comparisons of smaller communities have

been similarly limited by the sheer amount of data needed to provide results with the statistical power to show impacts across more than a handful of communities at one time. The search string method developed for this study to isolate references to specific communities worked consistently well across the states involved. Conceivably, it should be able to do the same for a variety of contexts in analyzing mentions of geographic communities in large corpuses of texts, although its lack of parsimony and its tailoring to journalistic writing conventions may limit it for wider use. Even so, it should always be kept in mind that this is an analysis of three states, using a newer method, and demands further replication and model extensions before these modifications of relationships should be accepted. The success of combining this method with multilevel statistical modeling in this project provides evidence that this path could be beneficial for measuring journalism's production and impacts in the future. In an age where journalism must increasingly justify its existence in terms of the role it plays in society, these methods may become increasingly important to quantifying the benefits society receives from journalistic output.